Theology for the End of the World

Theology for the End of the World

Marika Rose

scm press

Contents

Acknowledgements

It's impossible to know, let alone to measure, all the ways what I've written here depends on others. I can no more repay what I owe than I can reckon up where my thoughts end and others' begin. This is not an accounting of debt, then, so much as a poor attempt to express my gratitude to a very incomplete list of the people who made the thinking and writing that went into making this book joyful, despite it all.

The book wouldn't have existed without Greenbelt and the friendships, connections, opportunities and encouragement I've enjoyed over a decade or so of involvement with the festival. I'm grateful to everyone at Greenbelt who has supported, encouraged and advocated for me, and especially to Paul Northup, Martin Wroe, Andy Turner, Mary Acland, Kate Bottley, Ruth Amos and Molly Boot. Much of the book has existed as Greenbelt talks at some point, and it would not take the shape that it does without the questions and challenges of various Greenbelt audiences over the years, not to mention those who kept me company late into the night in the Jesus Arms.

I've hashed out much of the thinking here in conversations with others. Anthony Paul Smith's care and apocalyptic piety are woven through everything I've written in this book. I'm also grateful to Sami and Ellie Namih and Janet and Pete Overfield in Hull; Kate Tomas, Hannah Boast and Tom Hunt in Birmingham; and to Alison and Tom Merritt Smith, James and Claire Lewis, David Forrest, Sam Morris, Wayne Maughan and Alex Ross in Newcastle. I couldn't have been kicked out of church in better company. I'm grateful for Jim Higginson's support, wisdom and encouragement across both years and geography. I began writing the book during the pandemic and

Introduction:
The End of the World

Begin what?

The only thing in the world
worth beginning:
The End of the world of course.[1]

I can imagine as an apocalyptic – let it go down. I have no
spiritual investment in the world as it is.[2]

When I first sat down to write this book, Australia was burn-
ing. Over the summer of 2019–20, 17 million hectares burned;
over 3,000 houses were destroyed, 33 people died, and over a
billion animals and hundreds of billions of insects were killed.[3]
The loss was vast and incomprehensible; at some point I found
myself looking away when updates appeared on my social
media timelines. A few months later, rumours of a new illness
gradually turned into a global pandemic and then riots and
protests erupted around the world in the wake of the killing

<hr>

1 Aimé Césaire, 2001, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*,
Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (tr. and ed.), Middletown, CT:
Wesleyan University Press, p. 22. Used by permission.

2 Jacob Taubes, 2003, *The Political Theology of Paul*, David Ramotko
(tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 103.

3 Parliament of Australia, 2020, '2019–2020 Australian bushfires
– frequently asked questions: A quick guide', 12 March, *Parliament of Aus-
tralia*, www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/
Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/Quick_Guides/AustralianBush
fires (accessed 07.03.2023).

of George Floyd by a police officer. Another police killing of a young woman named Sarah Everard prompted protests in the UK, and I watched as police first beat protestors and then began to drag them through the courts. Over the last few years, the news of terrible disasters caused by unprecedented weather events has unfolded alongside the rise of far-right acts of violence and increasingly grim and repressive legislation across the western world designed to make political protest all but impossible, targeting pregnant and trans people, and fortifying national borders.

It has become fashionable to say that we live in apocalyptic times, but that's not quite right. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek work *apokalupsis*, which means 'revelation' or 'unveiling'. But in the apocalyptic literature of the Jewish and Christian traditions, from which we primarily get our understanding of apocalypse, this moment of revelation or unveiling doesn't simply help us to see the world more clearly – it is (as the Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes argues) *revolutionary*.[4] What apocalyptic literature tends to suggest is that this moment of revealing – of seeing the world as it actually is – is radically transformative. Things cannot continue as they are. But what's perhaps most awful about this particular historical moment is that the opposite seems to be true. However much we come to see the real nature of the world we inhabit, the structures of violence on which our lives are built – the wilful commitment to ecological destruction which drives our most powerful corporations, the corruption of our governments, the instability and injustice of financial markets, the foundational role of slavery in our laws and institutions, the stupidity of an economic system that relies on forcing people back to workplaces in the middle of a deadly pandemic – no revelation, however stark or horrible, seems enough to effect real change in the world we inhabit. Surely, we keep thinking, things can't carry on like this, getting worse and worse for ever; surely something has to change. Yet here we still are. Perhaps it would be more accur-

---

4 Jacob Taubes, 2003, *Occidental Eschatology*, David Ramotko (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 10.

ate to describe this period of history not as apocalyptic but as a time of crisis, a time in which – as Antonio Gramsci wrote of his own times – 'the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.'[5]

But this is also the time of superheroes. As the oceans rise, the ice caps melt, and incomprehensible violence is unleashed every day at borders, detention centres, protest marches and in war zones, our collective cultural attention has focused increasingly on stories of people endowed with superhuman powers, struggling to hold off the end of the world. It seems as though our entire culture is gradually being sucked into a single extended superhero universe, remakes piled upon remakes. What does this narrowing of creative imagination tell us about the world we inhabit and its impending end?

The Nazi jurist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt once described the role of the state in terms taken from the letter to the Thessalonians. In the letter, the author (traditionally understood to be Paul), writing in an apocalyptic tone, says that 'the day of the Lord' is not yet here, and will not arrive until 'the lawless one is revealed'. Although currently present in the world, the author says, this lawless one is currently being held in check by 'the one who withholds' – in Greek, the *katechōn*.[6] For Schmitt, this role of holding back the end reveals the proper role of the state: not to create a perfect society but to hold back the chaos of lawlessness, which later Christian tradition came to identify with the Antichrist.[7] As Adam Kotsko argues, something like this idea has shaped western thinking about the role of politics since at least as far back as Augustine who – against contemporary readings of Thessalonians which saw the Roman Empire as the Antichrist – argued instead that the Roman Empire should be understood as the *katechōn*, the restrainer, holding back the forces of chaos and lawlessness,

---

5 Loose translation by Slavoj Žižek, 'What is the Left to do?', *Counterpunch*, https://web.archive.org/web/20101019031133/https://www.counterpunch.org/zizek10152010.html (accessed 07.03.2022).

6 1 Thessalonians 2.1–12.

7 Adam Kotsko, 2017, *The Prince of This World*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 145–7.

and so holding off the end of the world. It shows up again in the more recent, far-right idea of the police as the 'thin blue line' that stands between us and the breakdown of society; and it's what fundamentally shapes the narratives of superhero films. In these stories, the role of the superhero is never to put right all the wrongs of the world and to usher in a new, utopian society where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up. Instead, the superhero comes into play when something or someone causes a crisis that threatens the existing order of things. One thing that's striking about superhero films (not unlike cop shows) is how much damage is done in the name of saving the world. Vehicles are smashed, people are tortured, tower blocks topple, entire cities are more or less razed to the ground – all in the name of saving the world. Saving the world from what? The villains arrayed against contemporary superheroes are motivated by a desire to prevent ecological destruction (Thanos, the *Avengers* films), overthrow white supremacy (Killmonger, *Black Panther*), or challenge plutocracy (the Joker, *The Dark Knight*); viewed from a slightly different perspective we might see them instead as messianic figures.

According to Fredric Jameson, 'Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.'[8] What the recent spate of superhero films suggests, I think, is that we cannot imagine the end of capitalism as anything other than the end of the world – a catastrophe so terrible that any price is worth paying in order to prevent it. We can see a similar tendency in the wildly over-the-top responses to the very moderate programmes of social democratic reform put forward by Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the USA. Although neither figure was offering any really dramatic political transformation, let alone the end of capitalism as a whole, the media and political establishments reacted as though to an existential threat, as if what was being put forward (a

---

8 Fredric Jameson, 2006, 'First Impressions', *London Review of Books* 27.17, 7 September, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n17/fredric-jameson/first-impressions (accessed 07.03.2022).

slightly higher minimum wage, a guaranteed right for renters to keep pets) really would mean the end of the world.

The figure of barely contained chaos, simmering below the surface of a precariously maintained order, is fundamentally conservative and authoritarian. We can't significantly change the world, it suggests, in case we unleash the terrifying forces of darkness which are threatening to overwhelm us. All we can do is grit our teeth, buckle down and try to hold off the disaster. For Schmitt, the belief in the importance of a *katechōn*, the idea that challenging the authority and the necessary violence of the state would lead to absolute chaos, seems to have played a central role in his decision to throw his support behind Adolf Hitler. As Kotsko writes, 'desperation to stave off the worst at any cost turned out to be the path toward the very worst'.[9]

Schmitt's turn to the violent forces of fascism in a desperate attempt to hold back the end of all things is a particularly modern version of a tendency that goes back at least as far as the early days of Christianity. In the book of Romans, Paul exhorts his readers to submit to 'the governing authorities' which, he argues, have been put in place by God.[10] By the time of St Augustine, the fourth-century philosopher, bishop and theologian, this idea that the current order of the world had been put in place by God was elaborated into a detailed theological system. For Augustine and many later Christian thinkers, God had created the world with a certain built-in order and structure. To resist this order was to resist God, and to risk unleashing the forces of evil and chaos. For Augustine, the essence of evil was the refusal to recognize and submit to the proper ordering of things. This, Augustine argued, decisively shaping theological debates and western societies for centuries to come, was the essence of the Fall, of the rebellion of both human beings and angels against God which introduced death and disorder into the perfection of God's original creation.[11] Yet for Augustine,

9 Adam Kotsko, 2018, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 28.
10 Romans 13.1–2.
11 I'm indebted here to Amaryah Armstrong's argument in 'Christian Order and Racial Order: What Cedric Robinson can teach us today',

while this proper ordering of the world was intrinsically good, designed to guide us to perfect happiness in God, the consequence of human fallenness was that the originally good world, designed to make us perfectly happy, became characterized instead by violence and suffering. To stray from the proper order, to be born into the disorder that came to characterize all human life in the wake of Adam's original disobedience, was to experience great suffering, both as a natural consequence of our sin and as a punishment from God. Wars, Augustine argued, were not only inevitable but necessary to hold back the barbarian hordes pressing at the borders of the empire; even within the supposed safety of cities, human beings were so prone to deceit that torture was a sadly necessary part of the judicial process, and even the members of your own household could not be trusted.[12] As we'll consider in more detail over the course of the book, this emphasis on a social order ordained by God and maintained by violence has arguably constituted the mainstream of the western Christian tradition over the last two millennia. Arguments about the necessity of violence for maintaining order have formed the core of both Christian and secular western arguments for gender and class inequality, for racism and colonialism, and for the need (however regrettable) for institutions such as police, prisons and borders, which use violence to create and maintain this order.

One way of thinking about this tendency to justify the violence that makes and maintains the world is as *theodicy*. Theodicy is the technical term for any attempt to make sense of suffering in the light of Christian theological claims about God. If God is (as Christians have tended to argue) both all-powerful and entirely good, then how do we make sense of the reality of suffering? As Anthony Paul Smith points out, the term theodicy 'literally means the justification of God'; and if the goal of theodicy is to justify the God who ordered the world, then theodicy also

The Bias, 3 June 2020, https://christiansocialism.com/cedric-robinson-racial-order-christianity-socialism/ (accessed 24.03.2023).

12 Augustine, 1998, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, R. W. Dyson (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 858–62.

functions to justify the world.[13] In this sense, Kotsko argues, we can see a parallel between the theological problem of theodicy (how can we continue to maintain that God deserves our worship in the face of the suffering we encounter in creation?) and the political problem of legitimacy (why should we accept this particular system of government given the suffering we see around us?).[14]

When we talk about the end of the world, I'm suggesting, we're usually not talking about the absolute destruction of life on earth but about the end of the existing order of things: the systems of meaning we have put in place to make sense of our lives and to structure our interactions with the world. As finite human beings we cannot grasp the full complexity of the reality we inhabit, and so we simplify and divide in order to understand and control. We put up fences, mark out borders, divide things into categories, and pay attention to certain things and not to others. We make decisions about what is and is not important; about who should and should not get to exercise certain kinds of power. As Thomas Lynch suggests, and as we'll explore in more depth over the rest of this book, some of the key lines along which we divide reality in order to form the world that we currently inhabit are nature (the dividing line between human beings and everything else), capital (the use of money to measure everything against a single scale of value), gender and race.[15] Each of these lines of division and distinction is created and maintained by violence. The categories and divisions themselves enact a kind of symbolic violence, cutting across the rich complexity of life to create order and make sense. But we also use different kinds of violence to ensure that human life conforms to these divisions. On an individual level, we use violent words and actions to punish people who transgress those boundaries. At a societal level, we create systems

---

13 Anthony Paul Smith, 2020, 'Provincializing Theodicy', *Contending Modernities*, 29 September, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/decoloniality/provincializing-theodicy/ (accessed 03.03.2023).

14 Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, pp. 30–1.

15 Thomas Lynch, 2019, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 17–26.

that are structurally violent, causing death both indirectly (by organizing the world so that people cannot access the resources they need to survive, from health care to housing to the ability to migrate) and directly (via state institutions such as the army and the police, or by increasingly prominent private security forces – it's probably no coincidence that the rise of privat-ized agencies of violence has occurred along with the rise of the superhero film).[16] If we want to understand why the world continues not to end, then we have to recognize the role that these forces of violence play in creating and maintaining it; and the role of both secular and Christian theodicies in convincing us that this violence is both necessary and justified if we want to hold off – to restrain – the end of the world.

But trying to save the world isn't the only option available to us. Both the violence of the world and the desire to hold off its end at all costs are deeply embedded in the histories, institu-tions, philosophies and theologies that have been handed down to us. But traditions are always messier and more complicated than any single narrative we might try to fit them into, and what we inherit from those who have made and maintained the world before us also contains possibilities for its unmaking. A central focus of this book is the way that Christianity has, over the centuries, shaped the deep structures of the world as it exists today and encouraged our investment in it. But as Christianity began to take form in first-century Palestine it was influenced not only by communities and traditions that feared the end of the world as the ultimate catastrophe, but also by those that eagerly awaited the apocalypse. Apocalyptic literature took shape in the context of the Israelites' experience of exile and colonization, and their longing for an end to injustice. Taubes argues that apocalypticism is essentially characterized by a sense of alienation and exile – a feeling that this world is not

---

16 I'm drawing here on Slavoj Žižek's typology of violence, as set out in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008). For more detailed discussion of the types of violence which create and maintain the world, see also Lynch, *Apocalyptic Theology*, and Marika Rose, 2009, *A Theology of Failure: Žižek Against Christian Innocence*, New York: Fordham University Press, ch. 5.

our home, that we do not belong here – and by a sense that the world is not ordered by God but opposed to God. 'The world', he writes, 'is that which stands in opposition to God, and God is that which stands in opposition to the world … God will annihilate the world and then appear in his might.'[17] This kind of apocalypticism has not been the most influential strand of Christian tradition. It is not the tendency that most frequently appears in Christian texts; especially not in the ones that have survived, which have tended to be written by relatively wealthy and powerful people saying things that are more or less acceptable to the ruling powers of the various ages in which Christian theology has been articulated. But, nonetheless, it does keep showing up.

A particularly dramatic flourishing of apocalypticism took place over the latter part of the medieval period in Europe, during the massive social and economic upheavals out of which the modern world was born. Against mainstream medieval Christian theology, which tended to see the world as more or less static and unchanging, the twelfth-century Franciscan Joachim of Fiore argued that history was divided into three epochs: the age of the Father (as recorded in the Hebrew Bible), the age of the Son (from the time of Christ until Joachim's time), and the rapidly approaching age of the Spirit, in which the world as he and his contemporaries knew it would pass away and be replaced by a new and utopian dispensation. In Joachim's wake, a multiplicity of religious movements took up this apocalyptic theme. The Spiritual Franciscans horrified church authorities by preaching a gospel of radical poverty and declaring St Francis (better known these days for his kindness to animals) to be the 'angel of the apocalypse'.[18] Thomas Müntzer led an uprising of German peasants, under the proto-communist slogan taken from Acts 4.32, *omnia sunt communia* – 'all things in common' or, as it's popularly become, 'everything for everyone'. Anabaptists briefly took over the city of Müntzer, declaring a new Christian commonwealth where all were equal and everything

17 Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, p. 10.
18 David Keck, 1998, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 52.

would be held in common.[19] It is out of this apocalyptic moment in European history that the modern world began to take shape via a series of revolutionary transformations. Yet what occurred was not so much the end of systems and structures of violence which gave that world shape as their transmutation into new but no less violent forms. Apocalypticism opened up possibilities for new and radical imaginings of the end of the world, and provided both intellectual and spiritual resources for movements and uprisings which transformed the modern world. Yet many of these apocalyptic tendencies ended in failure, or in repeating the very violence of the world they sought to end. At the heart of this book is the question of what it might mean to commit ourselves to ending the world, despite the many and manifold failures of previous attempts to do so.

When we find ourselves longing for the end of the world, and of the violence which constitutes it, it is easy to think that that desire itself means that we are no longer part of the world we want to end. But however much we hate the world we find ourselves in, however much we long for its destruction, we have to grapple with the fact that we are a part of the very thing we are trying to destroy. If we don't understand how we have been formed by the very systems and structures we struggle against, we will end up reproducing them. This book has two goals, then: first, to try to understand some of the key contours of the world we inhabit, and in particular to trace the role that Christianity has played in forming them. Second, to ask the question: what might it mean to take sides with those who have sought not to justify or to preserve the world but to end it? What might a theology for the end of the world look like?

---

19 For a fun fictional account of these and other radical strands of the turbulent years of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, I'd recommend Luther Blisset's *Q* (London: Arrow Books, 2000). The classic historical account of this period of apocalyptic upheaval is Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millennials and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Random House, 2011), though for Brown the risks associated with trying to end the world (exemplified, for him, in the failures of Soviet communism) outweigh the costs of continuing to live with the ordinary violence that sustains it.

As is probably already clear, I am not trying to argue that Christianity is intrinsically or essentially apocalyptic. I'm not interested in trying to find a 'good version' of Christianity, one that we can absolve of the horrors of Christian history by claiming that the many terrible things that people have done in the name of the Christian God were not *really* Christian. Nor am I suggesting that working towards an apocalyptic Christianity that sets itself against the world is the only way to get ourselves out of the mess that we find ourselves in. I'm definitely not trying to convince you that only Christianity can save us; if anything, the cumulative history of Christianity so far seems to suggest the opposite. But Christianity played a significant role in getting us here; it is part of what Christianity is – in many ways just what is at hand, what we have to work with. Maybe we can find something interesting to do with it.[20]

The goal of this book is to try to trace some of the contours of the world; to try to understand what the world is; to grapple with some of the traps that we fall into when we're trying to escape it; and to think about what use we might make of Christianity in the process. It's the product of my attempts to think through these questions for myself, as well as of the conversations, difficulties and disagreements I've had with others along the way. As you might pick up as you read, like many others who've been formed by Christianity, I'm tempted to fit everything into a single big story which makes sense of everything and promises a straightforward way out. In an attempt to resist this tendency in myself, and in order to try not to set myself up as someone who'll give you all of the answers, I've decided not to turn the bits and pieces that follow into a single argument. Instead what you'll find is a series of reflections and stories about the ways that Christianity has shaped and continues to form the world we inhabit now, along with some thoughts about what resources we might find within Christianity for the project of taking sides with God against the world.

---

20 I'm indebted here and throughout the book to Anthony Paul Smith's (2013) account of non-philosophy and non-theology in *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

The first couple of chapters, 'The World Doesn't Need Saving, But Destroying' and 'Theology Can't be Saved', talk about the ways that Christianity – as a narrative of salvation – encourages us to see ourselves as agents of salvation or as part of an overall story of salvation in ways that contribute to, rather than resist, the violence of the world. The next couple of chapters, 'The Holy Family' and '"We Have To Talk…": Family Breakdown' look at the role that families, marriage and sex play both in shaping Christianity and making and remaking the world. 'How Christianity Invented Race' tells a story about the emergence of racial distinction out of the Christian distinction between saved and unsaved, and 'Mammon' traces some connections between those two supposedly incommensurable divinities, God and money. 'God is Useless' asks what's the point of doing anything at all if the world is either going to continue or come to an end, and 'Enslaved by Freedom' suggests that we can't understand the value that both Christianity and secular modernity have placed on 'freedom' without understanding their respective histories in relation to slavery. The conclusion, 'Theology for the End of the World', tries to draw all these threads together, but not too neatly, and suggests what it might mean to try to end the world without any expectation of saving or being saved in the process.

1

The World Doesn't Need Saving, But Destroying

Christianity has a very long history, and a lot of it is terrible. It's tempting to deal with this history by disavowing it, by suggesting that *real* Christians wouldn't do the kinds of things that actually-existing-Christians have done. If medieval Christians had *really* understood the message of Jesus, they would never have set off to wage holy war against the Muslim inhabitants of Jerusalem. If seventeenth-century Christians in America had *really* understood the gospel then they would have realized that Christianity is incompatible with slaveholding. There are lots of different versions of this narrative. Maybe the problem with Christians is that we've turned Christianity into a religion when it should really be about a relationship with Jesus; or that we've created a set of rules and regulations when the heart of the gospel is about grace. We might try to disentangle ourselves from Christianity's shameful history by saying that we're not really Christians, we're followers of Jesus; or that we're bad Christians but good human beings; or that we're orthodox heretics who won't settle for the easy answers that the rest of the church offers. But the problem is that if we don't understand our past, we won't understand how it forms us, and we'll carry on making the same mistakes Christians have been making ever since Christianity existed. What might it look like, then, not to run away from our history, or to try to escape it, but to face up to it?

From Russia with hate

Let me start by telling you three stories. The first story is about the 2014 Winter Olympics, which took place in Sochi, Russia. Much like the more recent FIFA World Cup, which took place in Qatar in 2022, controversy erupted around the decision to host this major global sporting event in a country with a very poor record on LGBT+ rights. Not long before the Winter Olympics took place, Vladimir Putin passed a law banning 'non-traditional sexual propaganda to minors', which is to say that there was a ban on anything that could be construed as pro-LGBT+ propaganda.[1] It wasn't very clear exactly what was being banned, or how thoroughly it was being banned; there was some ambiguity over whether wearing a rainbow lapel pin would count as propaganda to minors, and the Russian government said different things at different times about whether non-Russian citizens would be arrested for breaking the law. But there was a huge outcry in the UK and the USA. Celebrities wrote op-eds. Stephen Fry wrote an open letter. Western gay rights activists loudly argued that we should boycott Russian vodka, or even the Olympics as a whole. Lots of people I knew, including lots of Christians, shared articles on Facebook and Twitter, and talked angrily about how terrible it was that Russia was doing such awful things to their LGBT+ population.

There's no question that LGBT+ people in Russia face terrible violence both from the state and from far-right and religious organizations. But there were some problems with the way that westerners reacted to this situation. Western reports of what was going on were full of inaccuracies. They failed to understand what the new law said and what it actually meant. Scott Long, founder of the LGBT+ rights programme at Human Rights Watch, wrote about the issues with images of 'gay

---

[1] Erika Lynn Abigail Kreeger, 2013, 'Gay Imperialism and Olympic Oppression Part 1: Russian Sexual Politics and the East/West Divide', *Static* (blog), 8 August, https://stnfrdstatic.wordpress.com/2013/08/08/gay-imperialism-and-olympic-oppression-part-1-russian-sexual-politics-and-the-eastwest-divide/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

torture' videos which had been circulating.[2] Many people circulated horrific videos of people who had been tortured by Russian vigilante groups, linking these events to the new law. But, Long wrote, mostly people didn't bother checking where those videos came from or what they actually showed. It didn't occur to them that it might not be OK to spread videos that showed the faces of the people who were being tortured so that they were easily identifiable. In addition, people circulating the videos repeatedly claimed that what was going on was that people were being tortured because they were gay, when in fact things were more complicated than that. One of the groups whose videos were circulated targeted not gay people but paedophiles. If you take a group that thinks all gay people are paedophiles, and you circulate their video, saying that it's about Russia's persecution of gay people, then one of the things you're doing in that process, Long suggests, is lending weight to the narrative that all gay people are also paedophiles. Similarly, these same vigilante groups didn't start out by targeting people they thought were paedophiles; they started out by attacking immigrants, foreigners, people of colour and Muslims. And yet, again, next to none of the outrage in the West was directed at the racism of these groups, or indeed of Putin's Russian more generally.

Another problem with the outrage over Russia was that almost all of the criticisms came from westerners. Hardly anyone mentioned that there are already groups in Russia working for LGBT+ rights; even fewer people quoted any of those organizations. Sometimes western activists asked people to do the direct opposite of what Russian activists were asking for, like the boycotts of vodka and the Olympics.

You know what else hardly anyone mentioned? The fact that Britain has a terrible record for dealing with LGBT+ people. The fact that we regularly send LGBT+ asylum seekers back to countries where their lives are in danger, or refuse to believe

---

2 Scott Long, 2013, 'Truths behind the gay torture images from Russia', *a paper bird* (blog), 11 August, https://web.archive.org/web/20130815181352/http://paper-bird.net/2013/08/11/truths-behind-the-gay-torture-images-from-russia/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

what they say about their sexuality, or lock them up in detention centres and deport them when they try to expose the terrifying rates of sexual abuse by guards that takes place in those centres. Hardly anyone mentioned that when London hosted the Olympics in 2012, the British government used it as an opportunity to evict people from their homes, arrest people before the event even started because they might cause trouble, and sell off public space to private companies.

Writing about the events around the Olympics, Erika Lynn Abigail Kreeger argued that it's important to understand the history of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality in Russia.[3] In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Muscovy, same-sex sexual acts were disapproved of, but were legal and more or less tolerated. But when Western Europeans started to come to Muscovy, they began to write home about how shameful it was that same-sex sex was tolerated, describing it as a sign that Muscovy was primitive and barbarous. So when Peter the Great came to power he made a great effort to 'westernize', and part of that westernization was the introduction of laws making 'sodomy' illegal. When the Russian communist revolution happened, these laws were swept away, although later on both homosexuality and abortion were banned because of worries about the declining Russian birth rate.

These laws were liberalized again in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in part because American and European organizations funded Russian LGBT+ campaigning groups. But around 2000, this funding ran out. Russian political, religious and social culture became increasingly conservative, and opposition to gay rights became a sign of Russia's rejection of western values. One Russian who was quoted at the time by Buzzfeed, of all places, said this:

> You stupid idiots kill people all over the world, Iraq, libya, afganistan, syria etc [sic]. You interfere internal politics of many countries. And now you stupid idiots try to teach us how to live? Go fuck yourself and your president and leave us

---

3 Kreeger, 'Gay Imperialism Part 1'

to decide OURSELVES on how to live and rule OUR country. Just understand that you opinion mean nothing here.[4]

Here's the thing: Russia's attitudes to LGBT+ people has always been bound up with its attitudes to the West. The western world has, for centuries, tried to force Russia to conform to their ideas about what a 'civilized' society should look like; a few centuries ago that meant disapproval of homosexuality, and now it means gay rights. But our basic attitude is still the same.

A term that gets at some of what's going on here is 'homo-nationalism'. Homonationalism is a word coined by Jasbir Puar to describe the process by which western countries appropriate the language of gay rights as a part of their claim to be better than other countries, which are seen as less civilized.[5] Even though queer people are still discriminated against both in our laws and our cultures, the language of gay rights, along with the language of freedom and democracy, becomes part of the language of western superiority and imperialism. Because we are so tolerant and so socially advanced and sophisticated, the story goes, we are justified in intervening in the affairs of other countries which are less tolerant. Even if that intolerance is directly connected to the history of western imperialism and oppression; even if the origins of that society's rejection of gay rights can be directly traced back to western homophobia, somehow we claim that our recently discovered and very imperfectly realized commitment to gay rights gives us the right to interfere in other country's political systems. In 2013 David Cameron said that he wanted the UK to 'export' gay marriage around the world; and in the letter that Stephen Fry wrote about Russia and the Sochi Olympics, he contrasted Russia with the 'civilized world' and described David Cameron as a man who knows the

---

4 Erika Lynn Abigail Kreeger, 2013, 'Gay Imperialism and Olympic Oppression Part 2: Boycotting Boycotts of Russia', *Static* (blog), 9 August, https://stnfrdstatic.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/gay-imperialism-and-olympic-oppression-part-2-boycotting-boycotts-of-russia/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

5 Jasbir Puar, 2007, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

difference between right and wrong.[6] It was never quite clear how this global gay marriage trade that David Cameron was so eager to get in on fitted with the global arms trade which the UK has so vigorously supported. But it seems there are some important questions we should be asking about why it is that of all the countries in the world with terrible records not only on gay rights but on human rights more generally it was Russia, rather than Britain's political allies, that became the focus of media attention.

Sometimes it's easy to think that we are doing something new and good when we campaign to stop bad things happening in the world. But we don't always realize that, for all our good intentions, we're not breaking with the past, we're just repeating it.

The rescue industry

My second story is about sex work in Cambodia, and it's mostly based on what Melissa Gira Grant has written about in her 2014 book, *Playing the Whore*.[7] In the book, she tells the story of a *New York Times* writer called Nicholas Kristof, who went on a trip to Cambodia, where he was hosted by the Somaly Mam Foundation, an anti-trafficking NGO headed by a Cambodian woman with harrowing stories of her own experiences of abuse, torture and enslavement. Together they set out to rescue Cambodian sex workers. Kristof told stories of setting out in armoured cars 'bristling' with AK-47s to rescue

---

6 David Cameron, 2013, 'Prime Minister thanks campaigners and workers for helping bring about equal marriage legislation', *Gov.uk* website, 24 July, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-thanks-campaigners-and-workers-for-helping-to-bring-about-equal-marriage-legislation (accessed 07.03.2023); Stephen Fry, 2014, 'An Open Letter to David Cameron and the IOC', *StephenFry.com*, 7 August, www.stephenfry.com/2013/08/an-open-letter-to-david-cameron-and-the-ioc/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

7 Melissa Gira, 2014, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, London: Verso.

young girls from heartbreaking conditions. He live-tweeted a policeraid of some Cambodian brothels. On one trip he even bought two girls from a brothel and took them back to the villages they came from. The stories were grim but familiar to anyone who has read accounts of charitable attempts to rescue women from sexual slavery.[8]

But Gira Grant also tells the story of her own visit to Cambodia, and it's very different. She didn't go with a big NGO – she went because she is a sex-worker's rights advocate, and she was invited over by a group of Cambodian sex workers. She didn't go to rescue anyone, and she didn't take the police with her: she went to listen. And what those women had to say didn't fit the narratives that are so familiar to us in the West. She found that sex workers who were rescued by the police and by well-meaning NGOs were sent to 'rehabilitation centres' where they were detained for months without charge. They were crammed into spaces that were too small for them, sometimes as many as 30 or 40 in a single cell, and many reported being beaten and sexually assaulted by the guards. Some of those who had HIV were denied access to antiretrovirals. Cambodian human rights groups reported that several women were beaten to death. The raids that led to these awful human rights abuses were the Cambodian government's response to the conditions of receiving aid money from the US government, which requires countries receiving their money to demonstrate their commitment to eradicating prostitution.[9]

Not long after Melissa Gira Grant's book was published this year, it turned out that Somaly Mam, the Cambodian woman who had become an international figure because of the work she did to save women from sex work, was a fraud. She had lied about her own experiences and had convinced some of the girls her charity worked with to lie about theirs. The Cambodian press had been reporting on these issues for several years until finally the story made it to the western media, and eventually Somaly Mam was forced to resign. Nick Kristof said that, even

8 Gira, *Playing the Whore*, pp. 101–4.
9 Gira, *Playing the Whore*, pp. 104–10.

though it was sad to discover that not everything he'd reported was true, at least they'd rescued some women; surely that counted for something?

The sociologist Laura María Agustín has a name for the sort of organization that Somaly Mam ran – and that a lot of Christians are involved with. She calls it the 'Rescue Industry', and she defines it like this: 'The Rescue Industry is an ever-larger social sector dedicated to helping and saving prostitutes, sex workers, and fallen women. By defining women as victims, Rescuers find their own identity and meaning in life.'[10]

Agustín argues that the people involved in the Rescue Industry aren't really interested in what the people they work with want; she says that in the USA as well as Cambodia, well-intentioned people often fail to help the people they are working with because they are so sure that women involved in sex work are helpless victims who need saving, that they won't listen to what those women actually say about what they need and want, about what will help them. She says that 'although much of this [work] goes on under a feminist banner, colonialist matern-alism describes it better'.[11]

In the same way that western outrage at Russian attitudes to sexuality isn't new, the rescue industry isn't new either. The historian Antoinette Burton has written about the crucial role of 'the figure of the prostitute' in Victorian colonial feminism. She argues that Victorian feminists – including the pioneering Christian feminist Josephine Butler – made a big fuss about the suffering of sex workers in the countries that had been colon-ized by Britain because the idea that women were naturally empathetic meant that they could claim to have a unique insight into the suffering of these women; and because by doing this, those Victorian feminists could demand the right to be involved with politics. Who else could speak for these poor, damaged

---

10 Laura María Agustín, *The Naked Anthropologist*, www.laura agustin.com/category/rescue-industry-2 (accessed 07.03.2023).

11 Laura Maria Agustin, 2013, 'The sex worker stigma: How the law perpetuates our hatred (and fear) of prostitutes', *Salon*, 17 August, www. salon.com/2013/08/17/the_whore_stigma_how_the_law_perpetuates_ our_hatred_and_fear_of_prostitutes_partner/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

women? It certainly never seemed to occur to them that those women might be able to speak for themselves.[12]

Invisible children

The third story I want to tell is about Joseph Kony and a Christian charity called Invisible Children. To recap for those of you who don't remember the Kony2012 video which went viral a little while ago, Joseph Kony was a Ugandan warlord who led an organization called the Lord's Resistance Army, which committed all sorts of terrible crimes against Ugandans, and was particularly known for its tendency to kidnap children and force them to join it as soldiers. In 2012, a Christian charity called Invisible Children made a video saying that 2012 was the year to finally stop Joseph Kony. The video talked about how awful Kony was, and said that the reason he hadn't been stopped was that most of the world had never heard of him. The way to stop him was to make as many people as possible aware of his existence, by putting up posters and wearing branded bracelets, and by emailing US politicians to convince them to send troops to Uganda to help the Ugandan army find and capture Kony.

The video went viral, but it wasn't very long until there was a backlash, mostly from Ugandans, who pointed out that – surprise! – things were a bit more complicated than the video had made them seem. What the video didn't talk about was the way that in the mid-1990s the Ugandan government had forced thousands of people out of their homes into camps that were supposed to protect them from Joseph Kony. There were reports that the government had murdered people and burned their villages, first to force people into the camps and then to make them stay. By 2005 there were 1.8 million people living in these camps, and the poor conditions there were killing as many people as the Lord's Resistance Army ever had. The attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement were scuppered first

12 Antoinette Burton, 1994, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture: 1865–1915*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

by the Ugandan government and second by the refusal of the International Criminal Court – who feature pretty heavily in the Kony2012 video – to offer an amnesty to Kony.

During the controversy that followed the Kony2012 video, the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole wrote a series of tweets about it, which also went viral. I think they're worth repeating in full:

- From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growth industry in the US is the White Saviour Industrial Complex.
- The white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.
- The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.
- This world exists simply to satisfy the needs – including, importantly, the sentimental needs – of white people and Oprah.
- The White Saviour Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.
- Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.
- I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.

The White Saviour Industrial Complex

I chose these three stories because they're all issues that I have seen Christians get very passionate about, especially Christians who care about social justice and making the world better. I'm guessing that there's a good chance that at some point you will have been involved in a campaign like this. I know I have.

Many of us realize that the Christianity we have grown up with, experienced or inherited doesn't always care about the right things, and often ends up hurting people. And many of us have started to care about social justice, about LGBT+ rights, about sex trafficking and sex work, about the Global South and global inequality. I am not saying that we should stop caring about these things, that we should stop wanting to make the world better. But I do think that we're in danger of repeating exactly the logic of Christian colonialism that we think we're undermining.

We often find ourselves weighed down by Christian history, struggling to know what to do to right the wrongs of the world, including those that have been caused by Christianity. Caring about the world can feel like a burden, and often in Christian contexts we're encouraged to be burdened by the weight of all the things that are wrong with the world. But this sense of responsibility is sometimes part of the very problem we're trying to solve. The Victorian Christian Rudyard Kipling wrote, famously, about the 'White Man's Burden', in a poem which starts like this:

> Take up the White Man's burden,
> Send forth the best ye breed
> Go bind your sons to exile,
> to serve your captives' need;
> To wait in heavy harness,
> On fluttered folk and wild–
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
> Half-devil and half-child.[13]

The 'White Man's burden' basically means that, as far as Kipling is concerned, white British people have a duty to go and solve the world's problems. It's not an easy task, he suggests. Trying to civilize uncivilized nations is hard work, and the people you civilize – half devils and half children – probably won't thank you for it. But we have to do the work anyway: only we can

---

13 www.poetry.com/poem/33606/the-white-man's-burden (accessed 07.03.2023).

solve famine and sickness; only we can save these poor people from their misery.

This poem is famous because it captures the attitude that characterized the British Empire. We didn't go and take over huge swathes of the world because we wanted to massacre whole groups of people, steal their land and plunder their resources, at least not officially. We went because – we said – it was our calling, our duty, because we thought that those people needed us, that they weren't capable of self-determination. We didn't go to enslave; we went to set people free.

I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that colonialism was bad; that its assumptions were racist, its practices brutal and its consequences ongoing and terrible. You probably don't need me to tell you that many of the worst things that the British Empire did were done in the name of Christianity and Christian values. But what worries me is this: I read that poem and I recognize myself in it; I recognize the contemporary church in it. And it seems to me that we're in danger of repeating the mistakes of the past, of using the language of social justice and 'having a heart' for the poor and wanting to make the world better to dress up attitudes that are just as naive, just as racist, just as colonialist, just as sexist as those of the Christianity of the past that we think we are leaving behind.

So what should we do instead? I have three suggestions. First, I think we need to realize that we are complicit in the broken-ness of the world not despite the fact that we're Christians but *because* we're Christians. Christianity is one of the names for our sin. Second, I think we need to realize that there is nothing we can do about it. And third, we need to realize that, for many of us, the gospel isn't good news but bad news. So: we have sinned, we can't save ourselves, and the gospel isn't such good news after all. I hope you're excited!

Christianity is part of the problem

Christianity is one of the names for our sin. Classical theology has often described sin as human beings' attempt to put themselves in the place of God. But here's the thing: for most of the history of Christianity, that's exactly what the Christian church has done. Very early on, Christians started to understand God in terms taken from the Roman Empire: God was seen as the Lord and King of everything that existed, and the church came to understand itself in terms of imperial bureaucracy, administrating God's rule on earth. Early on, this meant that Christianity was (seen as) politically radical and dangerous, because Christians set up the rule of God in direct opposition to the rule of the Emperor.

But then Christianity and the empire became the same thing, and ideas about God that had been threatening and subversive became ways of legitimizing the existing order of things. By equating God's rule with Christendom it became possible to conquer other countries by military force in the name of their salvation. What happened in the Enlightenment only made things worse in lots of ways: both philosophy and theology shifted from an understanding of the world as existing primarily in relation to God to an understanding of the world as existing primarily in relation to the individual, and to a very particular sort of individual: the wealthy, white, educated, heterosexual man. The roles that had traditionally been associated with God, and by proxy with the church and the empire, of ruling the world and bringing it into submission, became increasingly confused with the roles of human beings. When people talk about white saviours, people like us who think that we have the power and responsibility to save the world from itself by whatever means necessary, who see the world as the stage on which we get to play out our fantasies of being like God, they're talking in part about these ways of thinking that we have inherited from Christianity.

When we worry about the bad things that people have done in the name of Christianity, and when we want to be Christians in a way that's less damaging, there are two main ways we try

to get out of the mess that we're in, to shake off the burden of the past.

The first is to talk as though all of the bad things that Christianity has done were later developments, and that if we want to get back to a version of Christianity that makes the world better and not worse, we just need to get rid of all that later stuff and go back to what Jesus really said, or to what the early church did, or to some other point before everything went wrong. But here's the thing: however much we regret what has happened in Christianity, however much we wish that the bad things didn't happen, they did happen; and they continue to shape us.

When we sing hymns about how the blood of Jesus washes us white as snow, we can't pretend that it doesn't matter that those same Bible verses were used to justify slavery, because (slave-owning Christians said) whiteness is better than blackness. When we talk about mission and conversion, we can't pretend that it doesn't matter that those same ideas were used to justify colonialism and genocide, because somewhere along the way Christianity became Christendom and spreading the gospel came to mean extending our empires and destroying other people's communities and cultures. Even if there was a point where the church was perfect and untainted by racism, sexism and colonialism, we can't get back there.

The second approach that we sometimes take is to try to leave our past behind. We describe ourselves as post-evangelicals, because we have left evangelicalism behind us; or as progressives, because we have progressed past certain aspects of Christianity that we no longer think are necessary or helpful; or we are emergent because we are a new thing emerging from the dark ages of a Christian past. And it's not that nothing new ever happens in Christianity; it's not that there aren't some things about the church I would really love to leave behind; it's not that I think that nothing ever gets better. My worry is this: sometimes what we do when we think we are moving forward is fail to learn the lessons of the past, and we fail to understand how it still forms us.

To be a Christian is, inescapably, to inherit the complicated legacy of the bad things that Christianity means, as well as the

good things. And the closer we are to the model of the God-like individual that western culture has come to see as the most perfect of all human beings, the more likely it is that we are formed by the dangerous and damaging aspects of Christian culture. To be white, to be male, to be straight, to be cis, to be able bodied, to be educated, to be wealthy, is to be formed by a culture that wants us to think that the world exists for us, for our benefit, by a culture that will treat us as the closest thing to God, whether we want it to or not. And however good our intentions, we can't escape that. Christianity is, for many of us, the name of our entanglement in sin.

We can't do anything

So what can we do? In Malcolm X's autobiography, he tells the story of an encounter with a young woman. He says:

> I never will forget one little blonde co-ed after I had spoken at her New England college. She must have caught the next plane behind that one I took to New York. She found the Muslim restaurant in Harlem. I just happened to be there when she came in. Her clothes, her carriage, her accent, all showed Deep South white breeding and money. At that college, I told how … the guilt of American whites included their knowledge that in hating Negroes, they were hating, they were rejecting, they were denying, their own blood.
>
> Anyway, I'd never seen anyone I ever spoke to before more affected than this little white college girl. She demanded, right up in my face, 'Don't you believe there are any good white people?' I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I told her, 'People's deeds I believe in, Miss – not their words.' 'What can I do?' she exclaimed. I told her, 'Nothing.' She burst out crying, and ran out and up Lenox Avenue and caught a taxi.[14]

When I read that story, what it most reminded me of was the

---

14 Alex Haley and Malcolm X, 1965, *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York: Ballantine Books, p. 286.

story in the gospel where a rich young ruler comes up to Jesus and asks what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must keep the commandments, and the young man says, I have kept all the commandments, what else must I do? And Jesus says to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' And Matthew says, 'When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.'[15]

Often, one of the hardest things for us to hear as Christians is that we can't do anything. What if all our good intentions, all our money, all our privilege, all of the tears we cry over the terrible things that happen in the world are not worth anything? It is painful to approach those who are suffering, those who are oppressed, and to offer our help, and be told that our help is not welcome, it's not wanted. But too often when well-meaning Christians want to help, we blunder into a situation so desperate to feel we are the good guys, we are innocent, that we are worse than useless.

When we kick up a fuss about gay rights in Russia, there is a very good chance that we make things worse, because the more that Putin is attacked by rich white westerners, the more he gets to look like the defender of Russia against western imperialism. And the easier it is for David Cameron to look like he's the good guy who really cares about gay people, at the same time as imposing increasingly punitive conditions on LGBT+ people who come to the UK seeking asylum or pursuing brutal cuts to local government, social housing and health care, all of which are vitally important for LGBT+ people.

When we push for government action on sex trafficking and prostitution, we make it easier for states like Cambodia to arrest and imprison sex workers, and we make it easier for the British government to tighten border controls, because fears about sex trafficking have always played into anti-immigration agendas. And we enable governments both here and abroad to make policy on the basis of the assumption that sex workers

---

15 Matthew 19.16–22.

are powerless victims, and so make it easier for their voices and their organizing to be sidelined and ignored.

When we worry about arresting Joseph Kony we encourage western governments to send troops and military equipment to Uganda, and to make sure that an army that has committed plenty of atrocities on its own is even better equipped than it was before; and we continue to believe that it is countries like Uganda that are dysfunctional, violent and in need of our attention and concern. And so we are surprised when we learn that the police in the American town of Ferguson responded to the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by putting the whole town under martial law and teargassing peaceful protestors.

What should we do, then? One answer that I think we need to hear is this: nothing. We need, somehow, to lay to rest our own sense of entitlement, the deeply ingrained belief that because something makes us feel sad or guilty or ashamed, it is therefore up to us to put it right, the assumption that our good intentions are enough. We need to realize that one of the worst things that our culture teaches us is that the world depends on us, that everything that happens in the world is really about us. We are not gods. The world is not the stage on which we are to play out our dramas of salvation. Other people do not exist to be the objects of our charity, our mercy, our kindness.

The gospel is bad news

Because here's the thing: the gospel is good news, but it isn't just good news, especially for us. Mary in the Magnificat says that God casts down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly, that he fills the starving with good things and sends the rich away empty. Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. He says that the poor and the hungry, and those who mourn are blessed; but woe to we who are rich, for we have already received our comfort; woe to we who are well fed, for we will go hungry; woe to we who laugh now, for we will mourn and weep.

Too often we want to skip what's difficult in the words of Jesus and go straight to the bit where we get to be innocent, where we get new life and freedom. Sometimes that's for good reasons. Too often the church has preached blessings to those who are already rich and has delivered woe to those who are poor; too often we have encouraged the well fed to feast on food that has been stolen from the poor. Too often judgement has been passed on those who are already marginalized and excluded. For some people the gospel really should be about liberation. For those who are imprisoned, the gospel means liberation. For those who are oppressed, the gospel means freedom. But what we need to realize is that some of us aren't imprisoned. Some of us are exactly the people whose private property prisons exist to protect. We're the jailers.

Some of us aren't oppressed; we are the ones in whose name other people are oppressed. We're the oppressors. And for us the words of Jesus which promise us life are also hard words because to get to that life we first have to go through death.

I want to end this chapter with something that the black liberation theologian James Cone said in an essay on Christianity and Black Power, which has been making me uncomfortable ever since I first read it. He's talking about the struggle for racial justice specifically, but I think it has wider implications too. This is what he says:

> The liberal is one who sees 'both sides' of the issue and shies away from extremism in any form. He wants to change the heart of the racist without ceasing to be his friend; he wants progress without conflict. Therefore, when he sees blacks engaging in civil disobedience … he is disturbed. Black people know who the enemy is, and they are forcing the liberal to take sides. But the liberal wants to be a friend, that is, enjoy the rights and privileges pertaining to whiteness and also work for the 'Negro.' He wants change without risk, victory without blood.
>
> The liberal white man is a strange creature; he verbalizes the right things. He intellectualizes on the racial problem

beautifully. He roundly denounces racists, conservatives, and the moderately liberal …

But he is still white to the very core of his being. What he fails to realize is that there is no place for him in this war of survival. Blacks do not want his patronizing, condescending words of sympathy. They do not need his concern, his 'love,' his money. It is that which dehumanizes; tt is that which enslaves. Freedom is what happens to a man on the inside; it is what happens to a man's being … A man is free when he accepts the responsibility for his own acts and knows that they involve not merely himself but all men. No one can 'give' or 'help get' freedom in that sense.

In this picture the liberal can find no place. His favourite question when backed against the wall is 'What can I do?' One is tempted to reply, as Malcolm X did, to the white girl who asked the same question, 'Nothing.' What the liberal really means is, 'What can I do and still receive the same privileges as other whites and – this is the key – be liked by Negroes?' Indeed the only answer is 'Nothing.'

However, there are places in the Black Power picture for 'radicals,' that is, for men, white or black, who are prepared to risk life for freedom. There are places for the John Browns, men who hate evil and refuse to tolerate it anywhere.[16]

What would it look like for us to let go of all the privileges that are conferred on us as the direct correlate of the violence done to other people? What would it look like to let go of the desire to be saviours for people who neither need nor want our help? What would it look like to be a radical who is prepared to risk life for freedom? What would it look like to let go of the whiteness, the maleness, the heterosexuality, the middle class-ness which allows us to feel as if the world revolves around us? What would it mean to put down the white Christian's burden that weighs us down and deals death to those around us? I don't know. But I think that those are the questions we need to be asking.

16 James H. Cone, 2018, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Mary-knoll, NY: Orbis Books.

2

Theology Can't Be Saved[1]

I would never have become a theologian in the first place if it weren't for C. S. Lewis. Growing up in charismatic churches, I'd always taken for granted that Christianity was important, but until I discovered Lewis I don't think I'd ever realized that it could also be *interesting*. I've come to find him increasingly difficult to read as I've slowly parted ways with him on more and more topics, but I also know that those intense hours I spent reading his books as a teenager and regurgitating his ideas for my long-suffering friends in youth group mean I'll never entirely escape his influence. For better or for worse, those ideas have become part of me. Even the ones I've left behind have shaped the trajectory that my life has taken and made me a different person from the one I would have been if I hadn't read him.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis addresses one of the obvious problems with the claim that Christianity is true and all other understandings of the world are (in so far as they disagree with Christianity) false: that if we look at the world around us, not to mention the history of Christianity, it doesn't seem like there's any direct correlation between being a Christian and being a nice or a good person. But Lewis says this isn't a fair way to make the judgement: people start from very different sets of experiences and backgrounds, so we can't simply compare them to each other. Instead, he says, 'If Christianity is true then it ought to follow (a) That any Christian will be nicer than the same person would be if he were not a Christian. (b) That any man who becomes a Christian will be nicer than he was

---

1 This chapter is loosely based on my book, 2019, *A Theology of Failure: Žižek Against Christian Innocence*, New York: Fordham University Press.

before.'[2] This makes a lot of sense as an argument; the problem is that it isn't true. It's not just that Christianity doesn't always seem to do much to make people kinder or better than they otherwise would be. It's that Christianity seems to make it possible for otherwise seemingly nice people to do awful things and be incredibly cruel to each other. That's been true throughout the history of Christianity, where theology played a key role in the horrors of the Crusades, colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade – and it's also been my experience of the church communities I've belonged to. I know so many people who've been deeply harmed by their experience of Christianity and of Christians; whose relationship to their bodies, their sexuality, their desires, their work, their families and their friendships have been damaged. What's even trickier when I think about my experiences of church is that it's not only true that Christianity makes people worse, or helps people justify unkindness. It's also the case that the things I have valued about church – the care, the depth of relationships, the commitment to loving one another – seem to be inextricably tied up with the harms I have experienced, witnessed and committed: the judgement, the lack of compassion, the sexism, homophobia and racism.

This book is essentially about grappling with the possibility that what we love and/or find compelling about Christianity is tied up with what makes Christianity a problem. Whether we're Christians or not, we all live in a world that has been deeply shaped by Christianity. The way we think about sex, work, love, race, money, freedom and the institutions and structures which shape our lives are all in part the products of Christianity and of Christians.

One of the powerful stories that Christianity has told throughout its history is that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the answer to what ails us; that Christianity offers us the promise of healing for our hurts, forgiveness for our sins, and satisfaction for our deepest desires. We are broken, we are incomplete, we are imperfect; and what we find in Christianity,

---

2 C. S. Lewis, 2001, *Mere Christianity*, New York: HarperCollins, p. 210.

the story goes, is the promise of being made whole, complete and perfect. We might look for what satisfies us in other things – in sex, in love, in family, in art, in the natural world – but ultimately only God can satisfy our yearning. As St Augustine says to God, 'You made us with yourself as our goal, and our heart is restless until it rests in you';[3] or, as we used to sing in Sunday school, 'Life without Jesus is like a donut/Cos there's a hole in the middle of your heart.'[4] But what are we supposed to do when Christianity fails to make good on this promise?

The hole in the middle of our hearts

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan says that this problem isn't unique to Christianity; it's a fundamental experience for all human beings, which arises from our basic experience of coming into existence. There was a time when we did not exist at all; but we did not come into being all at once. The processes of conception, gestation, birth and the emergence of our consciousness are slow and complicated. All kinds of influences from the world around us and the people who give us life and care are at work as we slowly develop into distinct human beings. In order to become conscious of our existence as particular individuals, Lacan says, we have to realize that we are different from the world around us. There is a point, a boundary, where our body ends and others begin. Although the people around us respond to our needs and desires by coming when we cry, feeding us when we are hungry, and holding us when we are sad or angry or afraid, those people are more than mere extensions of our bodies. They have lives and desires distinct from our own. To become conscious, to become a person, is to become aware of ourselves as both limited and dependent. As that happens, Lacan suggests, we experience this process as

---

3 Augustine, *Confessions*, 2017, Sarah Ruden (ed.), New York: Modern Library, ebook version.

4 The Donut Man, 'The Donut Hole: Jesus Shows us God's Love', www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHiM1cWt2D8&t=210s (accessed 08.03.2023).

a loss. Before we knew ourselves as separate beings, it seems, we were perfectly in harmony with the world and the people around us. Before we knew the distinction between ourselves and others, it seemed as though we were one with everything. Before we knew what it was to be hungry, sad, tired or scared, it seems to us that there was a time when all our needs were met, when we had everything we needed, when we could do whatever we wanted.

To be a person, then, is to experience ourselves as incomplete, as lacking, and to spend our lives grappling with that incompleteness and lack – this is the nature of desire. For Lacan, this is the origin of the story that Christians tell about the hole in our heart that only Jesus can fill. But unlike Augustine or the Donut Man, Lacan doesn't think that the solution to our incompleteness is to find something to make us whole. It's our incompleteness that makes us human, that enables us to exist at all. To be whole would be to have everything we need in ourselves, to be perfectly in control, to erase the distinction between ourselves and the world around us. To be whole would be to exist in a state indistinguishable from death. Dead people are not conscious of where they end and the world around them begins; dead people are not dependent on other people around them for their existence; dead people do not want or need things, don't get hungry or tired, don't get scared or lonely. The idea that wholeness is the same as happiness is a fantasy, Lacan suggests, and as long as we're chasing after that fantasy we'll never be able to be honest with ourselves about who we are and what the world around us is like. Where Augustine thinks that the solution to our innermost longing is to find the right object for our desire, Lacan thinks that the task of human existence is, instead, to find different ways to relate to that desire. That's why I think he can help us to think about what it might look like to be honest with ourselves about Christianity.

For Lacan, there are four ways we can relate to the hole in our hearts.[5] Three of them are ways of holding on to the belief

5 For a fuller and more thoroughly referenced version of this discussion of Lacan and the four discourses, see chapter 6 of my *Theology of Failure*. The key texts in which Lacan's four discourses are set out

that there is someone or something out there that can make us complete, and one of them moves precariously beyond the fantasy of wholeness into a model of engaging the world that lets us be honest both about who we are and about the things – including God – that we love. Let's look at each of them in turn and think about what they might look like in terms of how different people have made sense of the problems within the Christian tradition.[6] Lacan calls these four approaches 'the four discourses', because they're stories we tell ourselves and each other about our own dissatisfaction.

The master's discourse

The master's discourse says that the solution to the problem of our incompleteness is to obey the authority of the person who knows the answers, who represents the law. There is a missing piece which can fill the donut hole, and there is a person or institution who can tell you how to find it. The cause of the problems we face, of our dissatisfaction, is our failure to be obedient, to submit to authority; the solution is to return to the

are *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Alain Miller (ed.), Russell Grigg (tr.) (London: W. W. Norton, 2007), and *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972–1973*, Jacques Alain Miller (ed.), Bruce Fink (tr.) (London: W. W. Norton, 1998). For my understanding of Lacan's four discourses I'm particularly indebted to Thomas Lynch, 'Making the Quarter Turn: Liberation Theology after Lacan', in *Theology after Lacan*, Creston Davis and Marcus Pound (eds) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), pp. 211–31.

6 While many of Lacan's points of reference are Christian and I am here applying his schema to Christian theological questions, Lacan's thought emerges out of a context which (as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has argued in, 2014, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, Peter Skafish (ed. and tr.), Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Press) is deeply shaped by non-Christian and non-western modes of thought, and can be put to work in non-Christian contexts – see, for example, Rajbir Singh Judge, 'The Invisible Hand of the Indic', *Cultural Critique* 110 (2021), pp. 75–109.

right way from which we have wandered. In the context of the family, this looks like parents who try to keep their children in line 'because I say so'. In the context of politics it looks like the strong leader who promises to restore order, to punish wrong-doing, and to return to traditional values. In the context of the church it looks like papal infallibility, doctrinal statements and church hierarchies (formal or informal).

There are, you'll be shocked to hear, some problems with this solution to incompleteness and imperfection. The first problem is that there is no infallible authority we can turn to. Church leaders embezzle money, are unfaithful to their partners and abuse the people in their care; they fuck up. The great theologians disagree with each other; they make arguments based on understandings of the world we no longer share; and they advocate misogyny, slavery and torture. Even if the Bible were infallible to start with, we don't have access to perfect copies of the original texts – we have to translate them from languages we understand only partially, and we can't help reading them without bringing to that reading all of our own expectations and assumptions. The idea that there is someone out there who has the right answers, who can lay claim to absolute authority, is a fantasy.

The second thing that this discourse conceals, Lacan says, is that it's not just that people fall short of this vision of a world where everyone plays by the rules and obeys authority. Certain kinds of transgression are built into the system, and the people caught up in the master's discourse *enjoy* them. Sometimes this is about the pleasure that we take in getting away with things we know are wrong. If you, like me, grew up around evangelical Christian ideas about sex, then you too might know the particular and intense pleasures that can come with 'going too far' when you're not supposed to. We know that the politicians who advocate harsh law-and-order approaches to sex work and drugs, or who preach family values, are often found to be paying for sex workers, doing drugs or cheating on their wives. People who enter the authoritarian world of the army or join secret university societies submit themselves to humiliating ritu-als, porcine or otherwise. And sometimes this unacknowledged

pleasure takes another form: the satisfaction we take in hating the people whom we blame for the fact that things still aren't perfect. We might buy into the idea that hard work is a virtue, and to deal with the fact that our job sucks takes a kind of twisted pleasure in working ourselves up into a frenzy about benefit scroungers who are getting away with the laziness we wish we could enjoy. We might convince ourselves that Christianity demands that we give up on our deepest needs and desires in order to do our duty, and take out our resentment and spite on queer people or feminists instead. It is scary to think that there is no single right way to live, no authoritative source that can tell us what we should do, and instead to have to figure out what it is that we actually want. It can be easier to cling on to a vision of perfection than it is to face up to the complexities of the world that we inhabit and the faith that has shaped us.

The university discourse

Where the master's discourse says that we already know the answer to the problems and we just need to submit to the right authorities, texts or doctrines, the university discourse says that the reason we haven't solved our problems is because we don't yet know enough and what's needed is more knowledge. There's a way to fill the donut hole out there somewhere, but more research is needed. As the name suggests, Lacan thinks that this is a discourse that's often found in universities, but it shows up in other areas of life too. The university discourse has tended to characterize much mainstream politics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For many people in this period, the fall of the Soviet Union meant that the big ideological struggle between communism and capitalism that shaped the twentieth century was over. Instead, we had arrived at 'the end of history', at a world where we all finally agreed that liberal democracy was the best way to organize our societies, and all that was really left for politicians was the task of figuring out the most efficient way to enact liberal democratic

principles.[7] We can also see the university discourse at work in the current obsession with data gathering, which sometimes suggests that the problems we see in the world around us would all be solvable if only we *knew more*. And we can also see this discourse at work in the kind of institutional (church or otherwise) response to conflict, which thinks that the underlying problems can be solved by more consultations, more measurements, more training, more reports or more theology.

Again, there are two problems with this way of solving problems. First, the university discourse isn't able to recognize what's actually driving the demand for more knowledge. In the university discourse, the drive to gather knowledge does not come from a desire to know the world as it really is, but from an inability or unwillingness to confront reality. If we think that conflicts within the church over gender and sexuality can be solved by listening exercises, reports or other forms of information gathering, we'll never be able to face up to the fact that what's really going on is a struggle between incompatible visions of what is good for human beings. I once spent some time working for a cooperative development agency, helping charitable organizations to find better ways to measure their 'social impact'. At the time I thought that what I was doing was helping them to learn how to be better at what they were doing and to prove their value to funding bodies. But in retrospect it's clear that – as is also happening in the university sector I now work in – what was actually going on was a drive to turn everything into numbers so that everything could be quantified in terms of money, so that even more aspects of human life could be sucked into the relentless capitalist drive to increase production and profit and to make money the single measure of value.

The second problem with the university discourse is that it's incredibly alienating. If you've ever got frustrated with filling out feedback forms, endless league tables, or performance monitoring at work, you've seen the university discourse at

---

7 Francis Fukuyama, 1989, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest* 16, pp. 3–18.

work and you've probably hated it. Bureaucracy makes us bored and cynical, but it also keeps us so busy that we don't have time to fight it, and so cynical and frustrated that instead of figuring out how to resist its demands we just disconnect and go through the motions. If we can't face up to the things we already know about the world, more knowledge isn't going to save us. If we can't confront the truth that many people know exactly what harm they're causing to others around them and carry on anyway, we'll never get to the root of the problem.

The hysteric's discourse

'Hysteria' was a nineteenth-century diagnosis for women who were seen as being too emotional. The hysteric's discourse, for Lacan, is the discourse of protest: the stance adopted by people who loudly object to the way things are, who refuse to calmly accept the world in its current form: can't you see that this donut has a hole in it? In the hysteric's discourse, we know that something is wrong, and we're furious about it. We kick up a fuss, we make our dissatisfaction known, and we insist that the people around us recognize that things are not as they should be. For Lacan, it's often with the hysteric's discourse that real change begins to be possible. But on its own, it's still not enough.

There are, again, two problems with the hysteric's discourse. The first problem, Lacan says, is that although the hysteric insists on pointing out incompleteness, hypocrisy and imperfection, when we participate in the hysteric's discourse we do so because we still believe in the possibility of wholeness, and we still think that if we just kick up enough of a fuss, someone in authority will listen to us and put things right. When we've grown up in a world that puts a small number of people in charge of our governments, churches, families and other institutions, it's hard to let go of our belief in power, of our desire for someone to hear our complaints and come along to put things right, and of our belief that there is someone higher up who will do just that, as long as we make our complaints

via the proper channels or in the right language. It's a seductive fantasy, and one I find myself repeatedly drawn into, but it's ultimately a false promise. If the problem is that we give some people disproportionate power to shape our lives, then appealing to those same people to put things right isn't going to solve anything. If we're bullied by our bosses or harassed by our landlords, then the systems which give those bosses power to abuse us in the first place can't also address the underlying issue. If church leaders commit sexual violence or steal money from their congregations then the structures of church hierarchy won't fix the problem. If politicians wage illegal wars, sanction the killing of ordinary citizens or enable the destruction of the environment then taking to the streets to make our dissatisfaction known isn't enough. Sometimes institutions close ranks ruthlessly against the people causing problems, and sometimes they take on critiques just enough to make it look as if they're responding to our complaints without fundamentally transforming the inequalities that produced the complaints in the first place. We've seen how easily capitalism has absorbed some of the language and aesthetics of feminism, anti-racism and queer liberation, even allowing a more diverse set of people to access positions of power without really addressing the deep inequalities that allow sexism, racism and homophobia to persist. Worse still: to engage critically with an institution often means that our time and our energy go into trying to improve that institution, to make it better; and this time and investment often means that we strengthen the very institutions we are trying to critique. We can see this very clearly in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, where protests after police violence resulted not in the diminishing of police powers but an increase in the amount of resources given to the police, often in the name of reform: more money for body cameras, diversity training and community outreach campaigns. Protest is important; but it's not enough.

The analyst's discourse

If we want to achieve real transformation, Lacan says, we have to engage in the difficult work of moving past the hysteric's discourse and into the analyst's discourse. In the analyst's discourse we learn to let go of the desire for wholeness and instead begin to take pleasure in incompleteness, in the fact that we can neither fully know the world we inhabit nor perfectly control our lives. Lacan calls this the analyst's discourse because he thinks that the goal of psychoanalysis is to help the person being analysed to realize that their analyst is not the person who can tell them the truth about their lives, or help them to achieve wholeness, and instead to relate to the analyst as someone who can force them to confront their own incompleteness, to realize that it's the hole that makes the donut. The analyst's discourse, for Lacan, is where we learn to relate to the people around us not as if they exist solely for our own satisfaction, but as people who have their own needs and desires independently of us, who are more than just their relationship to us. This is where, for Lacan, we do the difficult work of struggling to come to know ourselves and the people around us, to confront the messy and complicated reality of the people, groups and institutions who make up the world we live in. To really love someone, Lacan says, we need to realize that no person, no church, no institution is going to make us whole, because nothing that exists is whole. It is to give up on the fantasy of perfection and instead engage with the messy, frustrating, difficult task of learning how to care for one another with no guarantee that the knowledge we have is true, that the decisions we make are correct, or that there is anyone or anything which guarantees that we will succeed. To learn to love ourselves is to make peace with the fact that we are not and cannot be perfectly in control of our own lives or desires. To love other people is to do the difficult work of trying to see the people we love in all their imperfections and failures. To love the church, to love Jesus, is to recognize that we don't have access to a perfect form of Christianity which magically escapes complicity in all of the terrible things that Christians have done throughout history, and to realize that

what we love about the church, about Christianity, about Jesus, is tangled up with the bad things.

Christians have so many different stories about what went wrong with Christianity. Many have suggested that the problem arose right at the beginning, when the Gospel authors put their own interpretations on what Jesus said and did. If only we could get back to the real Jesus behind those texts, we suggest, then we'd be OK. Some of us like to blame St Paul for introducing sexism, homophobia or slavery imagery to Christianity; and others suggest that the problem was the early church's slow drifting away from the truth, adding traditions and hierarchies and deviations to the original message of Jesus. Others of us blame Augustine or Martin Luther or whichever contemporary church leaders we don't like. But as long as we're invested in this idea that there is a perfect form of Christianity which we could get to if only we read the Bible or tradition right, or organized our church communities better, we'll never be able to see Christianity as it really is – the sum total of a long, complicated and very messy history of people trying to figure out what it means to be a Christian. If we think that there's a good version that we can work out, we'll never really come to terms with the way that the actually existing bad versions of Christianity continue to shape how we see ourselves, the church and the world around us. But equally, if we decide that the problem is not the content of people's beliefs but the intensity with which they hold on to their beliefs, such that the solution to all of this uncertainty is just to believe a little less, a bit more vaguely, then we'll never do the difficult work of facing up to what it is that we're believing in, and seeing how the things that appear easy and nice and harmless about Christianity are often part of the same set of systems and structures that are brutal and dangerous and violent. So what would it look like to try to face up to the reality of what Christianity is and how it shapes us? We'll be returning to this question over and over again, in slightly different ways and from slightly different angles, over the rest of this book, but I'm going to end this chapter with a sketch of some of the key developments that have shaped the Christianity that has been passed down to us from the early

church via a motley collection of Christians, weirdos, saints, theologians, monks, nuns, bishops, with no small amount of help from other people who tend to get left out of the official histories – heretics, pagans, philosophers, Jews, Muslims, witches, scientists and so on.

A short and extremely incomplete history of Christianity

One of the most important influences on early Christianity was Platonism, which says, roughly, that God exists as an absolute, eternal principle who combines all the qualities of goodness: beauty, truth, infinity, omniscience, omnipotence. The world as we experience it is nothing more than a pale imitation of God, like shadows projected on to the back of a cave. We see things in the world that are a bit true, a bit good, a bit beautiful. But they're all true and beautiful and good only in so far as they get those qualities from God, and they're not meant to be enjoyed for themselves so much as they're meant to point us beyond themselves, to the God who made them. Because God is spiritual rather than material, and universal rather than particular, the more physical these things are, the more particular they are, and the less good they are. Plato's *Symposium* suggests that our discovery of truth often starts when we fall in love with a beautiful face. But after a while we realize that a beautiful face isn't the be all and end all; what's even more important is that a person is beautiful on the inside (this, for Plato, is why it's better to love beautiful boys than beautiful girls, as they have more beautiful minds). Eventually, we come to realize that actually lots of people are beautiful on the inside, and that loving this one particular person is important because it helps us to see beyond them, to the beauty of abstract ideas. What makes this person beautiful on the inside is the way that they point us to the beauty of truth, of goodness, of beauty itself; and eventually we come to love what Platonism calls the One and what Christianity calls God. By a process of abstraction, we slowly work out what real beauty is by moving further

44

away from particular, material things, and towards abstract, immaterial principles.

On this basis, what emerges in Christianity by the medieval period is a belief in 'the great chain of being', the idea that everything in the world can be arranged in order of how close it is to God, so the things that are at the top of the hierarchy (angels or people) are most like God and the things that are at the bottom of the hierarchy (rocks or mud) are least like God. This hierarchy doesn't just put human beings in their place in relation to other beings, it also creates hierarchies within humankind, seeing some people as more like God than others. Women come to be seen as more bodily and less spiritual than men, because men are seen as active like ideas where women are passive and malleable like clay; men are concerned with abstract ideas while women are concerned with their bodies, and particularly with all the icky physicality associated with getting pregnant and giving birth; men are interested in the public sphere and politics, while women are homemakers; men rule, while women are ruled; and so on and so on. And it's not just women who are screwed over by this way of thinking about the world. There's a persistent tendency to see a very particular sort of person as somehow the most universally representative of everything that's most divine about humanity, and that person tends to be someone who has enough of their physical needs taken care of that their whole existence isn't caught up in worrying about where they will eat or sleep and who has the resources to spend a lot of time thinking, because thinking is intellectual and so better than doing, which is material. So the ideal person, the person who is most like God, is almost always somebody who is rich, probably someone who owns property, someone who is educated, someone who is able bodied, and so on. As we'll see in a later chapter, eventually this ideal version of the human being also becomes white. The person who is most universal is basically the person who is at the top of whatever hierarchy is in place in any particular society at any particular time, because hierarchies are seen to reflect the natural order, which in turn is seen as reflecting God.

So this way of thinking about God means that particular

binaries are set up. Power is better than powerlessness. Abstract ideas are better than material realities. Priests are better than lay people. Christianity is better than paganism, and Christian cultures are better than non-Christian cultures.

But although this model becomes incredibly influential on Christian ways of seeing and understanding the world, Christianity has always been messy and complicated, containing different ideas which pull Christians in different and contradictory directions. These tensions and contradictions are often what drive conflict within Christianity, but they're also where some of the more interesting and radical possibilities of Christianity emerge. We see these conflicts at work in a number of key areas of Christian doctrine. For example, Christianity almost always claims that God created the world and made it good, so that even the most material aspects of the created world tell us something about what God is like. On the one hand, there's a sense that the created world is a distraction from God, and that the pleasures and beauty of the material world are in competition with God – if we really love God then we'll love God so much that we don't care about food, music or sex. But on the other hand, there's a sense that the world was made by God and so reflects God – loving food, music or sex can help us to come to know God more fully, can point us in the right direction.

Similarly, the doctrine of the Fall means that, for the most part, Christians believe that something has gone very wrong with the world. When Adam and Eve sinned – whatever that means – the perfect world that God made was knocked off kilter, so that the whole world is in some sense broken or screwed up. On the one hand, this can make it all the more important to hold on to the social hierarchies that structure our world. Government might be bad, but if people are deeply broken then maybe it's necessary to hold off our descent into absolute chaos. But the Christian belief in sin can also produce some very powerful apocalyptic critiques of existing society – if we are all fallen, then there's a sense in which all of the systems of the world, all the political and ecclesiastical and cultural structures we live in, are imperfect and can be challenged and maybe even overthrown.

Another place we find this kind of frustrating but productive tension is in the Christian language of the kingdom of God, which says that it is both possible and necessary to imagine a better world, a world in which everything is turned upside down so that the weak are made strong and the strong are made weak. But to talk about the kingdom of God is still to talk about a kingdom – and while this language of God as a mighty ruler, a just king or even a powerful slave owner was potentially subversive when Christians were a tiny minority within the Roman Empire, once Christianity became the ruling power it became very easy to see Christianity as something that legitimized the power and authority of existing kings, emperors and slave owners. Throughout the history of Christianity we see this conflict play out in different ways: sometimes Christianity takes the side of liberation or revolution, sometimes it advocates retreating from this doomed and hopeless world, and sometimes it struggles to lay claim to the power of empire.

Christianity has always been many different things to many different people, and we'll be considering further what this has looked like in terms of how Christians have thought about questions like politics, money, sex, work and power. But to understand where we find ourselves right now, we also have to recognize the particular historical configuration we're in. One key thing that happened in the history of Christianity in the western world was the emergence of 'the secular' – a set of ideas and ways of organizing society that meant that, for all sorts of complicated reasons, and in some complicated ways, the church started to seem less central to public life, and God started to seem less crucial for human knowledge. From roughly the fifteenth century onwards, the church began to lose both its political power and its philosophical authority. Now, it's really crucial here to notice that this wasn't something that happened everywhere in the world, but specifically something that took place in the Christian world, within Christianity. Even the idea of 'religion' as such is a Christian idea, a Christian category.[8]

---

8 If this seems like a strange claim, we'll be returning to it in more detail in Chapter 6.

But what happened in the emergence of the secular, the idea that western societies had moved on from or progressed beyond religion and Christianity, was that a lot of the ideas that used to be Christian didn't disappear but were instead transformed into new, apparently non-religious forms. Instead of the idea of a God who is perfectly rational, just and universal, we started to think that the world should be ruled by *people* who are perfectly rational, just and universal. Just as earlier on our ideas of what God was like were shaped by the way that power was structured in society, so in secularism our ideas of *the human* are shaped by the way that power is structured in society. It's not a coincidence that the people who invented modern science – this discourse that's supposed to be neutral, rational and universal – spent a lot of time trying to work out, scientifically, why women or black people or poor people or gay people or criminals were objectively inferior. But even though this new secular world was still very much a product of Christianity, the existing church suddenly found itself losing much of the power that it once had, and so Christians had to start making sense of that.

The second thing that happened was the twentieth century. With the emergence of the modern world, Christian hopes for redemption were transmuted into the secular belief in the possibility of perfecting the world. Although the modern age has been characterized by unimaginable violence, as the emergence of capitalism coincided with the horrors of colonialism, the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade and the intense violence of ecological destruction, for many secular western people this new age represented the dawning of new hope for humanity: the whole world could be explored and conquered; disease could be cured; hunger could be solved. Even for those more willing to recognize the problems with this new quest to save the world, there was still the hope that a global revolution might usher in a new era of communist utopia. But in the middle of all that optimism came a series of disasters in which the devastation the West had long been visiting on other parts of the world came home. The First World War wiped out almost a whole generation of young men in Europe; the

48

Holocaust saw the racial violence of modern science turned in on Europe itself; and the fall of the communist Soviet Union, which had seemed at first like the possibility of a better sort of society, ultimately failed very dramatically to live up to that promise. Even though these catastrophes took place in a world that in some ways was becoming less Christian, they still posed pretty serious challenges for Christianity, not only because they raised the question of how a good God in charge of the world could have let this happen but also because the churches were so badly complicit in so many of the worst atrocities.

What happened in the wake of all of these disasters was the emergence of philosophical accounts of the world that tried to come to terms with what went wrong. At least as far back as Nietzsche, philosophers have been trying to work out what philosophy looks like when you no longer think that God is necessary for making sense of the world. More recently, they have started to worry about the way that even supposedly secular thought still relies on some theological ideas, like the belief in a big story that draws together the whole history of the world, or the idea that we have access to some universal truth about what it means to be human. Philosophy started to emphasize difference, otherness and diversity, and we saw the emergence of all sorts of attempts to talk about the ways in which western philosophy's idea of universal human nature excludes people from being fully human, and about the way that the scientific idea of dominating nature leads to the exploitation not only of the natural world but also of women, slaves and colonized peoples.

This was, roughly, the context of most twentieth-century theology in the Western world. Here, the church isn't dead but it's shrinking, Christendom isn't exactly over but the churches' political influence has declined. Christian theology has been faced with a world in which people increasingly find some of its claims implausible: it's no longer obvious why God is necessary for science, for philosophy, for government, for being a good person. Yet the world we inhabit remains, in large part, a world that Christianity has made. Christian ideas, practices and institutions live on, sometimes in mutated ways, and however

we feel about that – I'm certainly not suggesting it's straight-forwardly a good thing – if we want to understand the world around us, we have to grapple with the role that Christianity, churches and Christians played in shaping it. Whether you're reading this book because you love the church and want it to be better or because you hate the world that Christianity has helped make and want to end it (and why not both!), this is where we begin: in the middle of a big historical tangle. The good news is that theology can't be saved: what becomes possible when we accept that?

3

The Holy Family[1]

The very first chapter of the very first book of the New Testament opens with a genealogy, one of those long lists of fathers begetting sons that we all skip over because it's difficult to care about Nahshon, the father of Salmon, or Jotham, the father of Athaz. Genealogies have always seemed to me like history with all the life drained out of it; but the genealogy in Matthew 1 is a bit different and a bit more interesting. It's neatly and mathematically arranged: four sets of four fathers, sixteen in total. But in the middle of all the old dead men are five women whose stories make them all scandalous in different ways. Tamar dressed up as a sex worker to get pregnant by her father-in-law; Rahab, an actual sex worker, hid Israelite spies in her house and so managed to escape the destruction of Jericho; Ruth left behind her family and homeland to travel to Israel with the woman she loved and risked her reputation to seduce a relative; Bathsheba was spotted by a king who slept with her, got her pregnant and murdered her husband; and finally Mary, who needed an angel to intervene to save her reputation after she got pregnant as an unmarried woman. It's not that often that women get to play a lead role in the Bible, so it's interesting that these five show up right at the beginning of the Christian Gospels. To be Christian, Matthew suggests, is to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Nahshon, the father of Salmon, and Jotham, the father of Athaz. But it's also to worship the God of five women of questionable reputation: the God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. What

---

1 This chapter is based on my article, 2019, 'Holy Mothers of God: Sex work, inheritance and the women of Jesus' genealogy', *Theology & Sexuality* 25.1–2, pp. 1–20.

can the stories of these five women – five mothers of the church – tell us about what it means to be a member of the Christian family?

Tamar (Genesis 38)

Tamar is the daughter-in-law of Judah, whom you might remember from the time when Joseph's brothers got so annoyed with him telling them his dreams about how they would all end up bowing down to him that they decided to murder him.[2] Judah was the brother who convinced the others that instead of killing Joseph they should just sell him into slavery. He doesn't seem to have been an especially nice man (this will become a theme) or a particularly loving parent – he names his first son Er, then stops bothering and lets his wife name the others: Onan (famous for the solo sex act which was later named after him) and Shelah. Er grows up and gets married to Tamar, but God deems him wicked, for unspecified reasons, and kills him. The custom at the time is that if one man gets married but dies before he has children, the next brother will marry his widow, and their first child together will be counted as the son of the dead man, making sure that there's someone to carry on his name and also inherit his property. This job falls to Onan, who is happy to sleep with Tamar but less keen on getting her pregnant – perhaps because he doesn't want to lose out on his inheritance – so he 'spills his seed on the ground'. God isn't very happy about this, so Onan gets smited too: two brothers down and one to go. At this point in the story Judah seems to get a bit worried about all these sons of his dying off. Thanks to the author of Genesis, *we* know that they died because they were wicked, but presumably that information isn't available to Judah, and it seems that he (not unreasonably) surmises that their deaths had something to do with their marriages to Tamar. So instead of asking Shelah to do his duty and make Tamar his bride, he sends Tamar home to her father's house.

---

2 Genesis 37.

Things don't look great for Tamar. Marriage and children are really the only good options for women like her; and as a twice-widowed woman her prospects aren't amazing. So it's interesting that it's at this point in the story, when Tamar is at her most vulnerable, that the story shifts to her – again, this is going to be a theme. Tamar doesn't have a husband, a child or any property of her own. But she hears that Judah is going to be travelling up to Timnah to shear his sheep, and so she dresses up, puts on a veil (which seems, in this story at least, to indicate that a woman is a sex worker) and goes to sit where she knows that Judah will see her. In exchange for her sexual services, Judah offers her a sheep, and because he doesn't have a sheep on him at that particular moment in time, he hands over his signet, cord and staff as a promise that he will eventually pay up. Somehow or other, the transaction is carried off without Judah recognizing Tamar and, several days later, Judah sends his friend the Adullamite over to Timnah with a sheep in order to pay his debt and get his stuff back. But it turns out that the woman he slept with was not a local sex worker after all. Judah decides that it's less embarrassing at this point just to give up on getting back his signet, cord and staff, and so the matter rests, until three months later, when Judah finds out that Tamar is pregnant.

Now, Judah is also widowed at this point in the story, and he doesn't seem to have any particular scruples about his own visit to the woman he thought was a sex worker. He was certainly happy to tell his friend the Adullamite about his escapades. But when Judah finds out that Tamar has also been sleeping around he shows no mercy and demands that she be burned. Fortunately, clever Tamar has prepared for this moment. She sends a message to her father-in-law, along with his signet, cord and staff, saying, 'It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.' Judah acknowledges defeat, saying that Tamar is 'more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah'.

Tamar has survived, but her survival is not straightforwardly a victory. She forces Judah to acknowledge his responsibility for the situation, and to acknowledge that the twins she bears are his. But Judah doesn't suffer the disgrace or the violent

death he tried to force on Tamar, and in fact gets exactly what he wanted all along: sons and heirs to carry on his line. What happens to Tamar? She disappears into the background; once Judah has recognized his children, the text stops using Tamar's name and reports the birth of 'her' sons instead. Tamar is brave and clever. She risks her life. But for what? So she can carry on playing the role that the wicked, violent men around her wanted her to play all along: ensuring that there are sons to carry on the line.

Rahab (Joshua 2.1–24; 6.15–25)

Some scholars have argued that the story of Rahab started off as an innuendo-laden bawdy tale about the time some Israelites went to 'stay' with a Canaanite sex worker. Rahab's name comes from the Hebrew *rhb*, which means opening, widening, stretching out, and seems to be more or less a way of saying that she is a slut. The book of Judges is obsessed with boundaries, the law and the ethnic purity of the people of Israel. As for much Christian theology, sexual purity comes to be a stand-in for faithfulness to God: foreigners, and especially foreign women, represent corruption, degradation and miscegenation. But despite all of this, in the version of the story that has been passed down to us, Rahab emerges as the hero – more faithful to God than the Israelite spies, and more in control of her situation than any of the individual men around her.

Sent out by Joshua to 'view the land' in preparation for the people of God to take possession of it, two Israelite spies appear to head straight for Rahab's house. We could read this as an act of disobedience or – given the Hebrew Bible's tendency to use women's bodies as metaphors for the land, particularly in the context of conquest – as an innuendo. Somehow news of their visit gets to the king who sends a message to Rahab, asking her to hand over the foreign spies. But Rahab decides instead to protect the men, taking them up on to the roof of her house and hiding them under some flax she has laid out to dry up there. When the immediate danger has passed, Rahab goes to tell the

men that she knows that God has given the land of Canaan to the Israelites, that the people of Canaan heard stories of the mighty acts God did to save them from slavery in Egypt, and that they are scared. Declaring her faith in the God of Israel, she asks the men to promise her that she will be spared from the violence to come, along with her parents, her brothers and sisters and their families. Although in the book of Deuteronomy the people of Israel are firmly instructed not to make any agreements with the people of the land,[3] the spies agree to Rahab's demand, so she helps them to escape down a rope out of her window. As they are dangling from the rope, Rahab gives them further instructions about how to stay safe, and they reciprocate by telling her to identify her house by tying a crimson cord in the window. When the people of Israel come to conquer Canaan, Joshua instructs them that the whole city and everything in it are to be destroyed – all except Rahab and her household. After the trumpets have blown and the walls of Jericho come tumbling down, all of the city's inhabitants, men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys, are slaughtered – all except Rahab. Her family, the story concludes, 'has lived in Israel ever since' – which may or may not be intended to explain the persistence of sex work within ancient Israel.

The story of one family's survival in the midst of mass death and violence might be familiar to us from disaster movies, but it's not exactly feel-good, especially when we consider the story's implication that Rahab – mother of Jesus, mother of the church – chooses to betray her town to an incoming army set on genocide. The vision of settler colonialism set out in the book of Joshua may not have been a historical reality in the Ancient Near East setting from which it originated, but it was made real in the conquest of the Americas by European Christians citing biblical precedent for their attempt to conquer the land and wipe out its indigenous inhabitants and cultures.[4] The conquest of Canaan is the dark aftermath of the story of the liberation of

---

3 Deuteronomy 7.2.

4 Robert Warrior, 1989, 'Canaanites, cowboys and Indians: Deliverance, conquest, and liberation theology', *Christianity & Crisis* 49.12, pp. 261–5.

the enslaved people of Israel from Egypt, which has been central to much of liberation theology. Postcolonial scholars have argued that confronting this reality makes Rahab less heroic and holy than she has often been seen by biblical scholars; but the narrative's hints at a lewder version of Rahab's story in the background of the tale suggest that, for different reasons, the text's original authors may have shared some ambivalence about her role in the story.

Avaren Ipsen's book *Sex Working and the Bible* reports the findings of a series of Bible studies Ipsen ran with sex workers involved with the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP) in Berkeley, California, in 2004.[5] In contrast to more traditional readings of the story, which suggest that it's Rahab's faith in the God of Israel which leads her to betray the people of her city, the SWOP readers were more inclined to see her decision in terms of survival. Rahab betrayed her people, they suggested, because she was doing what she needed to in order to ensure that her family survive. One of the unusual aspects of Rahab's story is that, in a world where women were commonly understood to be the property of men, members of other people's households, Rahab's family are described in relation to her, not to a man. We know that Rahab was bargaining not only for her own survival but for that of her parents, her siblings and their families. There is no mention of a husband or a child (Matthew has to invent some in order to fit her into his genealogy), and in contrast to Tamar who stops being named once her adventures outside the normal wifely role are over, Rahab remains the head of her own distinct lineage: 'Her family has lived in Israel ever since' (Josh. 6.25). The SWOP readers argued that this experience of being the one to provide for, protect and care for others is familiar to a lot of sex workers. They also pointed out that Rahab's betrayal of her people makes more sense if we consider the fact that many sex workers are excluded and rejected by the societies they live in: 'how can they be her people if they look down upon her, or she was "less-than" because of the means by which she had to take care of her family. Those were not

_____

5 Avaren Ipsen, 2009, *Sex Working and the Bible*, London: Equinox.

56

her people.'[6] The text does not only use stigmatizing language to describe Rahab, it also depicts her as marginal in relation to the people of Jericho. Her house is not in the centre of town but built into the city wall. When the king hears talk of some spies in the city he sends a message to Rahab to ask what she knows, an experience that the SWOP readers recognized from their own experiences of police abuse and violence.

Rahab navigates skilfully through a dangerous situation and ensures the survival of her family. But the world she inhabits is a violent and dangerous one, in which there does not seem to be anyone taking care of Rahab except herself. Rahab is more capable, more in control of her destiny, than Tamar – and, as we will see, more in control of her life than any of the women in Jesus' genealogy. It's interesting that it is the fact that she's a sex worker that makes this possible. Rahab has her own source of income, sufficient to provide for herself and the rest of her family. She doesn't have to convince the world that she is a virtuous woman, and this in itself gives her a kind of freedom that Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary do not have. This is a story of survival more than of liberation; but that's not nothing.

Ruth (Ruth 1—4)

The Bechdel test – first set out in the graphic novelist Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* – is a metric for measuring how women are represented in a text or other cultural artefact. To pass the Bechdel test, a text must feature (a) at least two women, (b) with names, (c) who talk to each other, (d) about something other than a man. The opening of the book of Ruth is the only biblical passage that passes the Bechdel test; but only because all the men are dead. The story opens with the Israelite Elimelech, his wife Naomi and his two sons migrating to Moab because there is a famine in the land of Judah. Elimelech dies; the sons marry Moabite women and then they die too, leaving Naomi with her two daughters, Orpah and

---

6 Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, p. 74.

Ruth. When Naomi hears that the famine is over and decides to return to Judah, Orpah decides to stay, but Ruth insists on leaving with Naomi. The Hebrew Bible is full of stories about Israelite men leaving their home to go and live in foreign lands, frequently to find foreign wives, and often to get into trouble of one sort or another. This is almost the only biblical story where a foreign woman travels into Israel without an Israelite husband.[7] The biblical text doesn't tell us why Ruth decides to travel with Naomi instead of staying with her family where she grew up. Perhaps this is a queer love story – Ruth's speech to Naomi has become a standard text at Jewish and Christian lesbian weddings:

> 'Where you go, I will go;
>   where you lodge, I will lodge;
> your people shall be my people,
>   and your God my God.' (Ruth 1.16)

Maybe Ruth decides to go with Naomi because they love or desire each other. Perhaps Ruth's family are abusive, or just difficult, and she wants to get away from them. It could be that she loves her family and hopes that in Judah she will find enough wealth to send some back to them. She might have a thing for Israelite men and wants to find a new husband in Judah. Perhaps she's just bored of Moab; maybe she has heard exciting things about the land of Israel and wants to see the world and have new experiences. Laura María Agustín points out that when we talk about travel and migration today, we tend to assume that men travel as expats or as tourists – out of curiosity, a desire to explore new places and experience the world – and women travel as migrants – out of necessity, to find work, or marriage.[8] How we read the text probably tells us as much about ourselves as it does about Ruth.

---

7 Unless I'm missing something, the only other example of this phenomenon is the story of the Queen of Sheba's state visit to King Solomon in 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9.

8 Laura Maria Agustin, 2007, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, New York: Zed Books, pp. 11–14.

My favourite way to read Ruth's story is alongside the story told by the sex worker activists of the Empower Foundation in Thailand about their journeys:

> I carry my bag of clothes and all the hopes of my family on my back. I carry this with pride; it's a precious bundle not a burden. As for the border, for the most part, it does not exist. There is no line drawn on the forest floor. There is no line in the swirling river. I simply put my foot where thousands of other women have stepped before me. My step is excited, weary, hopeful, fearful and defiant. Behind me lies the world I know. It's the world of my grandmothers and their grand-mothers. Ahead is the world of my sisters who have gone before me, to build the dreams that keep our families alive. This step is Burma. This step is Thailand. That is the border.
>
> If this was a story of a man setting out on an adventure to find a treasure and slay a dragon to make his family rich and safe, he would be the hero. But I am not a man. I am a woman, and so the story changes. I cannot be the family provider. I cannot be setting out on an adventure. I am not brave and daring. I am not resourceful and strong. Instead I am called illegal, disease spreader, prostitute, criminal or trafficking victim.
>
> Why is the world so afraid to have young, working class, non-English speaking and predominantly non-white women moving around?[9]

However we read the story, Ruth travels with Naomi to the land of Judah, where, like lots of newly arrived travellers, she struggles to find her feet. Like many contemporary migrants to western countries, it seems that one of her main options is backbreaking agricultural work. Ruth sets to work gleaning in the fields, gathering up the stalks left behind by those doing the main work of harvesting. She just so happens to end up gleaning

---

9 Empower Foundation, 2012, 'Hit and Run: Sex Worker's Research on Anti-trafficking in Thailand', www.empowerfoundation.org/sexy_file/Hit%20and%20Run%20%20RATSW%20Eng%20online.pdf (accessed 14.03.2023).

in the field of Boaz, Naomi's relative, and Boaz decides to offer her some protection from 'the young men'. It seems that even back then precarious workers – especially foreigners – were vulnerable to sexual harassment. Boaz seems to be impressed by Ruth, and the work that she is doing to take care of Naomi. When Naomi finds out what has happened, she hatches a plan, sending Ruth down to the threshing floor to wait until Boaz has fallen asleep and then 'uncover his feet and lie down'. For some reason 'feet' seems to be a Hebrew euphemism for 'penis', so it's possible that the goal here is to convince Boaz that he has drunkenly had sex with Ruth and therefore owes her something; or perhaps to actually seduce him. Once again, the text leaves a lot to our imaginations. But it's clear that Ruth is risking a lot when she does this. When Boaz wakes up in the middle of the night and agrees to do his duty as a relative and marry her, he makes sure to send her away while it's still dark: 'It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.'

The next day, Boaz goes to the gate of the city, where the old men sit and chat and make decisions. The conversation is about two things: who will buy a piece of land that Elimelech (remember him?) left behind when he died, and who will marry Ruth to make sure that Elimelech's line doesn't die out. The other likely candidate for Ruth's hand declines the opportunity because, he says, 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance', so he hands over a sandal to Boaz to signify that he is handing over both the land and the woman. The people of the city bless Boaz by saying, 'may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah'. So Boaz and Ruth get married and Ruth has a son. But when the women of the city gather round to celebrate the birth, they don't congratulate Ruth but Naomi: Ruth has been more to her 'than seven sons'; 'a son has been born', not to Ruth but 'to Naomi'. The book of Ruth ends with another genealogy, but even though we've just seen the women acknowledging that the kinship between women is important, this line of begats is all men. Like Tamar, Ruth disappears into the background once she's provided a son; unlike Rahab, it is not her family that continues in Israel to this day, but Boaz's.

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11 — 12)

Of the five women Matthew mentions in his genealogy, Bath-sheba is the only one who is not mentioned by name; instead, she is just 'she of Uriah'. Fittingly so, because of all the women Bathsheba is the most passive, and the most utterly at the mercy of the men around her. Bathsheba's story begins with King David – beloved of God, and much beloved of male church leaders who see his weaknesses as inspiringly relatable. Bathsheba is taking a bath when David catches sight of her. The history of interpretation of this passage is replete with slut-shaming. Obviously in deciding to take a bath, men write, Bathsheba was embarking upon a deliberate campaign of seduction. But that's not what the story says. The story says that it happened that David went for a walk on the roof of his house; it happened that he saw Bathsheba bathing; it happened that she was beautiful. So he sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her; then she returned to her house, then she was pregnant. This reads to me less like a clever seduction by a wily woman and more like a rape scene. When the other women act, they are named; and when others act around the women – on them and for them – they are described as 'she' and 'her'. The story says of Bathsheba that 'she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."'

David does not call for Bathsheba to speak to her, to ask her what she wants. He sends for her husband, Uriah, to come back from the battlefield; and when Uriah comes, David sets out to get him drunk and then tries to send him home to sleep with his wife, presumably so that Bathsheba's pregnancy might appear legitimate. But Uriah insists on sleeping on the couch, so David sends him back to battle with a note for the general, asking that Uriah be sent to the middle of the fighting. The general does as the king asks and Uriah is killed in battle. When Bathsheba – here, 'the wife of Uriah' – hears that her husband is dead, she makes lamentation for him, and when this is over 'David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.' Bathsheba is at the heart of the story

but is barely present in it; things happen to her but she does not make things happen.

Now, the story tells us, God is displeased with what David has done and so he sends the prophet Nathan to tell David a story about a poor man who had a sheep that he loved very much, and a rich man who killed the sheep. I think that Bathsheba is meant, here, to be the sheep that is killed for the rich man's dinner, though maybe she is the poor man and her husband the sheep. When Nathan explains the meaning of the parable to David, he does not name Bathsheba; instead he talks about what David has done to Uriah the Hittite and his wife. David says, 'I have sinned against the LORD', but he does not name Bathsheba either. Nathan tells David that because of what he has done, because God is angry, 'the child that is born to you' – Bathsheba's child, though the story does not say this here – 'shall die'. David prays and fasts so that the child will not die, but the child dies, and David gets up and washes himself and returns to normal so quickly that his servants are confused. Then he consoles his wife Bathsheba – here she gets her name back, briefly, just for a moment, until David goes to her and lays with her and she bears a son, whom God loved.

The story does not say whether God loved Bathsheba. She does nothing wrong. She barely does anything at all. She does not sell her sexual services; she does not seduce her father-in-law; she does not go down to the threshing-floor at night; she does not choose to leave her family behind her. She does not really do anything, except tell David that she is pregnant, and to mourn for her dead husband and her dead son.

Mary (Matthew 1.16–25)

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba get added into the genealogy via their husbands and sons – Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar; Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab (this seems to be Matthew's own invention); Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth; David the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba, perennially slipping back into namelessness). But

Mary is more complicated. Right at the end of the genealogy, we get Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. Joseph isn't the father and interestingly Mary isn't exactly a mother here, just the one 'of whom' Jesus was born.

When Mary was engaged to Joseph but before they lived together, Matthew tells us, 'she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit'. Found by whom? It is not clear. Joseph is a righteous man, so instead of threatening to have her burned as a whore, as Jacob did to Tamar, he decides 'to dismiss her quietly'. Maybe she'll go to stay with a relative in another village and come back once the baby is born; maybe she'll be stuck for ever in her father's house like Tamar worked so hard not to be; maybe she'll set herself up as a sex worker like Rahab did; maybe she'll try to get someone drunk enough to sleep with her and think the baby is his, like David tried with Uriah; maybe she'll seduce someone at night on the threshing-floor like Ruth did. But before any of these eventualities play out, before Mary has to *do* anything, God intervenes: an angel appears to Joseph and tells him that the baby is from the Holy Spirit and will save his people from their sins.

Mary is not the most daring or adventurous of the genealogical women: in Matthew's version she does even less than Bathsheba did. She doesn't even speak, not even to say, 'I am pregnant': 'she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit'. But her presence in the genealogy is in some ways the most threatening to the whole concept of genealogy. How can you pass on property from father to son if it turns out that sons don't always need fathers? This is one of the reasons why patriarchal societies have tended to treat men and women very differently when it comes to sexuality. If Tamar was (as Judah thought) a stranger, then it would not have mattered if she'd had his child: that would have been her problem. But if men can't be sure who their wives are pregnant by, then there's no way to know that their sons and heirs really belong to them. We have seen in these stories the violence that results from this contradictory emphasis on men's right to sleep with whomever they want and the necessity of women's purity.

What is Matthew saying, with this long list of men and women? Commentators like to talk about the fact that the women are all of questionable virtue; as though Judah didn't go to visit a sex worker and then threaten to burn his daughter-in-law to death for sleeping around; as though David didn't rape Bathsheba and murder her husband; as though the Israelites Rahab saved didn't slaughter every other inhabitant of her city, even the cows. We could see the genealogy as being quietly revolutionary: these women might look at first glimpse like they're impure and unholy, but when we see with God's eye what really happened we can see that they are really the righteous ones. But what does it mean to talk about righteousness here? Some kind of purity of heart? Was Tamar's heart pure when she decided to trick her father-in-law into getting her pregnant so she could return to respectability by providing a son for the man who wanted to kill her and whose other sons were so wicked that God decided to smite them? Was Rahab's heart pure when she sold out the city she lived in to mass murderers in order to protect her family? Would Ruth's heart be more or less pure if we knew for sure that she and Naomi were in love – or just fucking – or if she was simply bored to death of life in Moab? What would it mean to see Bathsheba and Mary as pure when they sit around doing nothing as God, angels and men act around and upon them?

We don't know what was in the hearts of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary: all we know is what they did. But we can catch glimpses of why they might have acted in the ways that they did if we're willing to consider the possibility that their moral and ethical decisions might have been produced in part by the contexts that they lived in and the options available to them. We know that Tamar was sent back to her father's house, and the story strongly suggests that her decisions were motivated by the desire to ensure that she could have children and retain the status and relative freedom that came with that. We know that she chose a brief stint as a sex worker over life in her father's house, and we know that decision was risky because only her cleverness in securing proof of Judah's paternity saved her from his death threats. We know that Rahab was aware of

the possibility that the Israelites would destroy her city, and we know that it was only because she chose to help the Israelite spies instead of obeying the orders of the king of Jericho that she and her family escaped slaughter. It seems like gleaning was a difficult way to make a living, and that women gleaning were sometimes (often?) harassed by men; and it seems as if Ruth risked public disgrace in order to secure a husband for herself (and Naomi). We know that kings of Israel could arrange to have people killed when they got in the way, and so it doesn't seem likely that Bathsheba could have refused to go to David when he called her. And we know that engaged women who turned out to be pregnant were at risk of losing their fiancés.

We like to believe, in the twenty-first century, that love, sex, marriage and family are about desire and pleasure and fulfil-ment. That might be true for some of us, but it's still a long way from being the reality for many – maybe most – people. It's especially unlikely to be the case for women and for others whose gender expression and/or sexual behaviour do not fit neatly into the model of heterosexual marriage and patriarchal inheritance. As we see in the stories of Jesus' women ancestors, sex has historically been a crucial way for women to access the resources they need to survive; the status they need to be safe in unjust and unequal societies; and a way to negotiate with dangerous and violent men. For women in patriarchal societies, who are often cut off from access to money, (well-paid) work and education, sex is sometimes the only resource available, or the best resource available. This is still true today. People (espe-cially women) get trapped in abusive relationships because they can't afford to leave, can't afford to lose their visa, are scared of what their partners will do to them. People do sex work to pay their bills or in exchange for travel across borders, for health care, for a place to stay, to make enough money to send to their families, or to fund their education.[10] People start relationships, sleep with people and get married because they want children or status or money.

10 See, for example, Molly Smith and Juno Mac, 2020, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, London: Verso.

The philosopher Carol Pateman points out that both contemporary politics and contemporary sexual ethics often appeal to the idea of consent: of free and equal parties entering into an agreement. To be a citizen is to enter into a social contract – to agree to give up certain rights and freedoms in order to get certain benefits. To get a job is to enter into an employment contract, where a worker agrees to spend a certain amount of time working and the employer agrees to hand over a certain amount of money. To get married is to enter into a contract with our spouse, to share our property and our lives. This idea of free agreements between equals sounds great in theory, but Pateman points out that it doesn't really seem to match up to reality.[11] Our society is one that is deeply divided by vast inequalities of power, status and wealth, that undermine the possibility that we might meet one another on the basis of freedom and equality. We can't separate out questions of sex from questions of property. Property relations have changed a lot since the Bible was written, but we still live in a world in which some people are so wealthy that they can more or less do what they want; and in which many more people are so poor that they will take terrible risks in order to survive. More than that: we live in a world in which some people are wealthy because others are poor; in which some people are made poor, and kept poor, in order that others can continue to be rich. The violence that Jesus' women ancestors had to navigate was the result of a society that valued men's ability to pass on property to their sons and heirs above the well-being of the mothers of those sons. In 2017 the British activist group SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) wrote a statement responding to some feminists' attempts to introduce the Nordic Model in the UK. This is a legal model that aims to end sex work by criminalizing sex workers' clients, with the goal of reducing demand. They wrote:

> If campaigners are concerned that poverty takes away people's choices, we suggest that a real solution would be to tackle

---

11 Carol Pateman, 1980, 'Women and Consent', *Political Theory* 8.2, pp. 149–68.

poverty, not to criminalise what is often the final option that people have for surviving poverty … Poverty is objectifying, demeaning and coercive. A society that accepts poverty, or finds poverty inevitable does not respect women. Poverty is a form of violence, a violence that disproportionately affects marginalised people. Poverty cannot be made safe.[12]

If we want to understand the way that these inequalities are perpetuated, then we also need to recognize the role that families play in perpetuating them. As we'll discuss more in the next chapter, families have taken lots of different forms different periods of history, but they have always reflected (and shaped) the way that work, wealth and power are distributed in the societies that bring them into being. A defining feature of my generation is the distinction between those of us whose parents were rich enough to help us get on the property ladder and those of us who face the near-impossible task of saving up for a deposit alone. Parents fight hard for their right to pass on wealth to their children in the form of inheritance; to get their children into the best schools; to protect their own, whatever the cost to others. In a world where more and more of us are in insecure employment, facing uncertain futures, it's tempting to do what we can to protect ourselves and those closest to us, whatever the cost to everyone else. That's the basic temptation of patriarchal societies, as well as of the 'fourteen words', the favoured slogan of white supremacists: 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.'

But it doesn't have to be like this. Silvia Federici writes about a story told by the anthropologist Eleanor Leacock, who wrote about Jesuit missionaries who, in the seventeenth century, were sent to preach the gospel to the nomadic Montagnais-Naskapi people. Their mission had the enthusiastic support of the French government, who thought that conversion to Christianity would

12 SWARM, 2017, *SWOU Statement on Poverty, Sex Work and the Swedish Model: 'Poverty is Objectifying, Demeaning and Coercive'*, 19 March, www.swarmcollective.org/blog/statement-on-poverty-sex-work-and-the-swedish-model-poverty-is-objectifying-demeaning-and-coercive1 (accessed 14.03.2023).

make them better trading partners. The Jesuits were horrified to discover that 'the Naskapi had no conception of private property, of authority, of male superiority, and they even refused to punish their children'. Leacock reports a conversation between the French Jesuit Lejeune, and one of the Naskapi men:

> I told him it was not honourable for a woman to love anyone else except her husband, and that this evil [promiscuity] being among them, he himself was not sure that his son, who was present, was his son. He replied, 'Thou has no sense. You French people love only your children; but we love all the children of our tribe.' Lejeune, unable to comprehend this attitude, says that he 'began to laugh seeing that he philosophized in a horse and mule fashion.'[13]

Why did this way of thinking about family, children and inheritance seem so impossible to the Jesuits, and why is it so difficult for many of us to imagine even now? Matthew's genealogy suggests an answer, or part of one. To be a Christian is to inherit the tradition that has been created and passed down to us by all of these people; and more than that, to be a Christian is to understand our identity in terms of genealogy and inheritance. To be a Christian is to see ourselves as part of a family, as the bride of Christ, as a member of that long line of begats. What's interesting and horrifying about Matthew's genealogy is that all of the risks that the five women take, all of the dangers they are exposed to, all of their cunning, their bargaining, their acquiescence and their bravery, all of it ultimately works to continue the very practices of family and property that put them at risk in the first place.

Christian ideals of marriage and sexual purity have changed dramatically over the thousands of years of Christian history, but texts like Matthew's genealogy have ensured that images of marriage, sex and family have consistently been central to

---

13 Eleanor Leacock, 1981, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected articles on women cross-culturally*, New York: Monthly Review Press, cited in Silvia Federici, 2004, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, p. 111.

the way that Christians have thought about what it means to be a Christian. The cherished ideals of purity, chastity and holiness have been built on the disavowed, dangerous work of women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary, on the unacknowledged risks, dangerous liaisons and transgressive encounters from which we are all born. The world we live in now is built on the backs of sex workers, illegal migrants, unwilling brides, scorned mistresses and violated women. The church we belong to has built its power, wealth and reputation on the names of the men and women who have perpetuated that violence, covered it up and silenced those who tried to speak out.[14]

Two key moments in the history of the sex worker rights movement took place in churches. Arguably the founding moment of the movement internationally was the 1975 occupation of Saint-Nizier church in Lyon. There, local sex-working women occupied the church to protest the way that they were being treated by the police. Writing about the incident, Molly Smith remarks, 'When the French police threatened to take custody of the sex workers' children, the protestors were joined in the church by local non-working women, who dared the police to try to discern who was a prostitute and who was not.' Smith takes this moment to offer a 'rebuke' to those – including many feminists and many Christians, including many readers of the stories of the women in Matthew's Gospel – who have tended to divide people who sell sex 'into "worthy" or "unworthy", deserving of safety or deserving of violence'.[15]

---

14 Another name for women who threaten the reproduction of patriarchal power and property is 'witch'; for an exploration of how late medieval ideas about witchcraft might help us think about the role of philosophy and religion in contemporary universities, see Marika Rose and Anthony Paul Smith, 2019, 'Hexing the Discipline: Against the reproduction of continental philosophy of religion', *Palgrave Communications* 5.2, pp. 1–10.

15 Molly Smith, 2015, 'The Problem with the "Swedish Model" for Sex Work Laws', *The New Republic*, 8 June, https://newrepublic.com/article/121981/northern-ireland-sex-work-law-based-wrong-model (accessed 14.03.2023).

Seven years after the events in Saint-Nizier, in 1982, the English Collective of Prostitutes occupied Holy Cross Church in King's Cross, London. Like the women of Lyon, they were there to protest police harassment – police were targeting sex workers, especially women of colour, refusing them bail, and having their children taken away by social services. One of the protestors said, 'We have to remember that there's an economic crisis … when women are … living independently of men, out of the thumb of the pimps, that's when the police attack them.' Not all of the parishioners were happy about the situation. As one said, 'It's not nice when you go to Mass to say your prayers quietly and you've got prostitutes in the way.' But the vicar of the church was, at least to start with, more supportive, saying, 'The girls have a point to make … too much concentration in my mind is directed to the girls themselves and not to the evils of society which cause them to be here in the first place.' Men from the nearby Gay's the Word bookshop, perhaps understanding what it was like to be harassed by police, brought them hot food.[16]

What would it mean to recognize that our inheritance as Christians is not so much that which makes us good but that which implicates us in the messy realities of a world built on the double violence of patriarchy and property? What would it mean to acknowledge that the holiness which makes the church a sanctuary for some has meant death, danger and dispossession for others?

What does it mean to be a Christian? To worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Judah, Onan, Er, the Israelite spies, Boaz, David, Joseph; the God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary.

---

16 Frankie Miren, 2020, 'The English Collective of Prostitutes: Occupation of Holy Cross Church', British Library website, 20 October, www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/english-collective-of-prostitutes-occupation-of-holy-cross-church# (accessed 14.03.2023).

4

'We Have To Talk …':
Family Breakdown

Christians are weird about a lot of things, but especially so when it comes to marriage, sex and the family. Some of our most intense battles about what it means to be a Christian take place around questions of the family. I don't think it's a coincidence that for many of the people I know who've given up on Christianity entirely, it's the deeply damaging attitudes towards sex and sexuality they've encountered in their church communities that have been the final straw. Why is that? In order to answer that question, we first have to spend a bit of time thinking about what we're actually talking about when we talk about the family, and then thinking a bit about how the role of the family has shifted and changed over the course of Christianity's history.

Family, household, economy

Listening to conservative Christians talk, you'd think that the Bible was extremely specific about the fact that God's plan for human beings was heterosexual monogamous marriage. I used to believe that, and I used to be deeply convinced that this belief was founded on a careful and faithful reading of Scripture. What's weird to me now is that it seems very obvious that most of what I held to be true was based on – at best – an extremely partial reading of the Bible. There are all kinds of sayings and stories that suggest that 'the biblical view of marriage' is much messier and complicated than the churches I grew up in were willing to acknowledge.

We tend to assume that the family is really just about our relationships with the people we are bound to by birth or by marriage, about our parents, children, siblings and other relatives. When Christians talk about 'family values' we tend to mean things that are to do with marriage and sexuality and children. But families – and marriage – have always been about more than that. The nuclear family model which has come to dominate contemporary western understandings takes the married heterosexual couple and their children to be the norm, and sees the home as the place where the nuclear family lives, a place of safety to return to from the dangerous wilds of work or school. But this model of marriage and the family is a historical anomaly. If we want to think about what families have meant throughout history, Christian and otherwise, it's perhaps more helpful to focus on the household as the primary unit.[1] 'Household' is helpful because, unlike family, it has historically referred to a wider set of relationships and practices. Households can include not only couples and their children and a single house but also extended families, servants, enslaved people, animals, compounds, tools and machines for producing goods for consumption or sale. Marriage has been central to the formation and ongoing existence of many different types of households, but just as households have looked very different in very different periods of history, so too marriage has taken on many and various forms. So what are marriage, the family and the household *for*? Let's take a brief tour through some of the key periods and places that have shaped Christian understandings of marriage, looking at the way that certain key aspects of marriage, the family and the household have shifted and changed: inheritance, property, work and peoplehood.

One of the main roles that the family plays in the Hebrew Bible is to enable the creation and the passing on of inheritance – whether that's physical inheritance like land or more abstract types of inheritance like blessings, curses, reputation or

---

[1] This focus on household rather than family is one I take in part from Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, 2021, 'Introduction', in *Transgender Marxism*, London: Pluto, pp. 1–32, and in part from conversations with Tapji Garba.

honour. The earlier texts in the Hebrew Bible don't have much to say about an afterlife, but they do imagine people living on through their descendants, and so they tend to see inheritance as central to the family. Because inheritance is so important, one of the key functions of marriage is to make sure that a man has heirs so that he can pass on his wealth. Because the societies of the Hebrew Bible were patriarchal, inheritance was not for everyone but specifically for fathers and sons. No word for 'marriage' ever appears in the Hebrew Bible; instead women are 'taken', 'given' or 'brought' by their male relatives. Nor are there words that straightforwardly translate as 'husband' and 'wife'. What we would call a husband is either a woman's man or her 'lord'/'owner' (*baal*); instead of wives, the Hebrew speaks of men's women, or of women as ones lorded over or owned.[2] Women are expected to leave their father's household to become members of their lord's household and are expected to be sexually faithful to him in order that any children they have will be counted as his. The practice of levirate marriage – where a brother takes his dead brother's wife as his own (see Chapter 3, 'The Holy Family', for the way this plays out for Tamar and Ruth) – is partly about ensuring that even the dead are guaranteed an ongoing inheritance and a legacy. Women who are unable to have children (and the Hebrew Bible was written in a world where infertility was understood to be a problem with women rather than men) find themselves in a difficult and stigmatized situation. Sometimes they deal with this by treating other women badly in order to restore their own status. Abraham's wife Sarah invites her husband to sleep with her enslaved servant, Hagar, only to behave so badly to Hagar after she conceives that Hagar decides it's better to risk death in the desert for herself and her son than to remain in the household of her mistress.

Both family and the household are also about property. Land seems to belong to (the heads of) households, and the

2 Ken Stone, 2014, 'Marriage and Sexual Relations in the World of the Hebrew Bible', in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, online edition.

land of Israel is to be divided up between the 12 tribes of Israel (descended from the 12 sons of Jacob) as Moses leads them out of slavery in Egypt and into the promised land. Households are made up of family members – a male head of a household, some wives, children, older and younger widows, possibly some sons' wives – but not just of family members. The ten commandments offer us a neat list of what goes to make up a household: you shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour. Women are valuable in part because, by exchanging women, the men of the Hebrew Bible are able to form alliances; their usefulness for this purpose is reflected in the bride price or dowry which is often paid for them.[3] It's not quite that women are just property – at least not in the sense we understand it today (more on that later). Women throughout the Hebrew Bible act, influence and shape what happens within their households and beyond. But men 'give' and 'take' women, and women don't get to return the favour.[4] The closest we come to a real exception to this rule is Rahab, the Canaanite sex worker who appears to be the head of her own household and the founder of her own line of inheritance.

Because families are about property, they are also about work. The sharp distinction we sometimes try to make or maintain between work life and home life did not exist for the people of the Hebrew Bible. The household was where family life happened, and much of family life was the work of keeping the family going by growing crops, herding livestock, cooking, cleaning and hunting. When Proverbs envisions a woman of worth (for biblical Hebrew, 'woman' and 'wife' are the same word), it imagines her as an effective manager as well as a hard

---

3 This practice of exchanging women in order to build strategic alliances between people is so common around the world and throughout history that the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests it is the foundation of both all human societies and all human languages. Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1967, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

4 Stone, 'Marriage and Sexual Relations'.

and productive worker. A woman of worth plants vineyards, makes food, tells the other women of the household what to do, makes sure everyone in her household is wearing fine clothes, sells fine cloth for a tidy profit, and manages on top of it all to be kind, wise and funny.[5] Marriage is about enlarging a household's inheritance, property and productivity.

Finally, the family and the household are important because they act as a microcosm of and a metaphor for both national and religious identity, and for both political and divine power. The Israelites are defined as a people by their shared descent from Abraham – that is, by their shared inheritance of the law of God which is handed down from fathers to sons. The world of the Hebrew Bible is a world of what Carol Pateman calls 'paternal patriarchy' – a world in which men have power and in which fatherhood is the key model for that power.[6] As Carol Delaney argues, this paternal model of patriarchy has deep biblical roots and can be seen clearly in the story of Abraham, whose submission to the paternal authority of God is the basis of his own authority: 'Abraham becomes the father of faith because he submitted to God's will. God's will, then, flows through the father and becomes identical with him.'[7] Sons submit to their fathers; subjects submit to the king, understood as the father of the nation; and to God, understood as the father of the world. Because men are understood as lords both of their women and of their sons, both sonship and the relationships between men and women are key images for the way that the people of Israel are expected to relate to God. The relationship between God and the people is often described in terms of the relationship between a man and his woman. The ten commandments demand that the people of Israel worship only God, faithfully, from generation to generation, and prohibit sins of infidelity to the household – adultery, theft or coveting your neighbour's

---

5 Proverbs 31.

6 Carol Pateman, 2018, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 27.

7 Carol Delaney, 'Abraham and the Seeds of Patriarchy', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, p. 148.

possessions. If worship is understood as a form of fidelity to God – monotheism as a kind of monogamy – then disobeying God is in turn understood as adultery. As in so many biblical stories about men and their women, it is not the patriarch but the patriarch's bride who is punished. As the Jewish scholar Rachel Adler argues, if we want to hold on to the biblical metaphor that compares the covenant between God and his people to the covenant between a man and his woman, we have to grapple with the violence of this metaphor. The prophetic books that use this image describe the relationship between God and the people of Israel as one in which 'an adulterous and abandoning wife is threatened and battered by an enraged and violent husband' and 'the texts justified the battering; they agreed that the battering was both appropriate and deserved'.[8] This violence extends beyond God's relationship to the people of Israel into the Israelites' relationship with others around them. Because other peoples and other gods are seen as dangerous temptations to infidelity, the people of Israel are on a number of occasions encouraged to wipe them out. What's interesting here, though, is that it's this comparison which lays bare the gap between the ideals of family and household which the Hebrew Bible sets out and the reality. Much of the biblical story of the people of Israel is spent in one form of exile or another – enslaved in Egypt, longing for liberation; wandering in the desert, dreaming of the promised land; or in exile in Babylon, mourning for their lost homeland. Even the brief period of biblical narrative where the people of Israel are able to live and to rule in the land of Israel is one in which it becomes clear that, however powerful the vision of a household gathered together in service of God, existing households at every scale consistently fail to live up to this ideal. It's no coincidence that the infidelity of even God's most beloved rulers, David and Solomon, is exemplified by their failure to keep their households and their sexual desires in check – going after foreign women and falling into the temptation

---

8 Rachel Adler, 1998, 'The Battered Wife of God: Violence, Law and the Feminist Critique of the Prophets', *Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies* 7, p. 171.

of false worship as a result of these liaisons, murdering close friends in order to satisfy their lust.

At a number of key points throughout the Hebrew Bible, we find the idea that in being called to become the family or household of God, the descendants of Abraham are being offered a deeply ambivalent inheritance. The beginning of Genesis 12 says:

> Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

When Moses gathers together the people of Israel as they prepare to leave the desert and enter the land of Canaan, he says to them:

> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.[9]

Life and death; blessings and curses. That double promise characterizes the life of the people of God as well as the life of individual households throughout the Hebrew Bible. The household is where life, possessions and blessings can be found; but it is also where death, dispossession and curses can be found. Households are where we first learn to love and be loved, to give and to receive, to take care of others and to care for those

---

9 Deuteronomy 30.19–20.

around us. But they are also where some of the worst violence that human beings commit against each other takes place.

Some of the families in the Hebrew Bible kill each other because they're desperate to lay hold of money, power and property. Sometimes they refuse to take care of each other because all that they care about is their own legacy. Sometimes they use the fact that they exist as a family as an excuse for mistreating the people outside their family. Often, mundanely, they treat other human beings as little more than household objects or livestock. Throughout the Hebrew Bible it is taken for granted that both the household and the people of God as a whole are to be ordered around lordship and submission. While family and household relationships undergo radical transformations in the centuries between the societies in which the Hebrew Bible was written and the contemporary world, some things remain true: both family and household continue to be centrally important to inheritance, property, work; and it is within the family and household that people first come to learn to understand and accept the broader systems of power, collective identity and right behaviour which structure society as a whole. For all the mutations and transformations that the family undergoes as it is passed down from generation to gener-ation, what we inherit consists of both blessings and curses.

Family in the New Testament

For all the Hebrew Bible's focus on inheritance, property, work and peoplehood, the story of God calling Abraham begins as a demand that Abraham uproot himself from his connection to precisely these things – to abandon the family household he was born into in order to become the founder of a new family, a new household of God. Genesis 12 offers blessings to Abraham and his descendants, but it also calls him to 'go', to leave behind his country, his kindred and his father's house.[10] In both Jewish

10 As Jacob Taubes puts it, 'The revelation of God wrenches the race of Abraham from its homeland, its birthplace and ancestral home.'

and Islamic traditions, Abraham's abandonment of his father's household is also a rejection of his father's religion and work – both *Genesis Rabbah* and the Qur'an say that Abraham's father sold idols and that one of Abraham's responses to God calling him to be the founder of a new people was to smash those idols.[11]

In the centuries immediately before Jesus was born, a new form of disruption unsettled the Israelite's understanding of themselves as the people, the household, of God. After military conquest resulted in many Israelites being taken into exile by conquering imperial powers – an exile which the prophets understand as the result of their infidelity to God – eventually returning to their lost land only to be conquered again, this time made subjects in their own land, Jewish thinking took an increasingly apocalyptic turn. Instead of a harmonious ideal in which God's orderly rule of the people of Israel was reflected in the king's orderly rule of the nation and the father's orderly rule of the household, increasingly the Israelites came to see the rule of God as directly in conflict with the organization of the world they inhabited. Emerging from this tradition, early Christian teaching was in turn disruptive and iconoclastic, especially when it came to families: to inheritance, property, work and peoplehood.

Jesus in particular has some extremely harsh things to say about the family. In Matthew 10.34–39, he says this:

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
> For I have come to turn a man against his father,
> and a daughter against her mother,
> and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
> and one's foes will be members of one's own household.
> Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the

---

Jacob Taubes, 2003, *Occidental Eschatology*, David Ramotko (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 17.

11 Genesis Rabbah 38, Qur'an 21:51–70.

cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

And then just in case we thought he didn't really mean it, or that maybe he was exaggerating, a couple of chapters later (Matthew 12.46–50), while Jesus is talking to a crowd, someone comes to tell him that his mum and his brothers have turned up and want to have a word with him. And he says this:

'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

What's happening here sounds like a pretty direct challenge to the family and the household. It certainly doesn't fit comfortably with some contemporary Christians' claims that Christianity necessarily implies adherence to 'traditional family values'. But what Jesus is offering is not the abolition of the family in favour of something totally new, but the creation of a different kind of family – a family organized around himself. Something similar is true of Paul's writings. While he concedes that 'it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion', he does not seem especially keen on marriage or the family.[12] But the language of family and household is everywhere in Paul's writings. It might be better to avoid marrying, if at all possible, but only, for Paul, in order that we can more wholeheartedly devote ourselves to building the church, which is both the bride of Christ and the household of God.

This New Testament challenge to existing forms of family and household in the name of another family, another household, has implications for early Christian ideas about inheritance. On the one hand, Jesus repeatedly claims to be the rightful inheritor of promises God made to Abraham. He has come, he says, not to abolish the law – handed down from fathers to sons –

12 1 Corinthians 7.9.

but to fulfil it. He tells those who come to question him that he has come to them from God, the father of Abraham; that his opponents are not the heirs of God but of the devil.[13] For Paul, Jesus and his followers are the true sons and heirs of the promises God made to Abraham, in contrast to those who reject Jesus who are like Isaac, the child of Abraham's slave woman, who does not inherit those promises.[14] But faithfulness to Jesus also requires a willingness to give up one's inheritance. Talking to a young man who wants to know what he has to do to get eternal life, Jesus tells him that it's very simple: all he has to do is to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. Matthew says that the young man 'went away grieving, for he had many possessions', and Jesus turns to his disciples and says: 'everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake, will receive a hundred-fold, and will inherit eternal life.'[15]

To be a true inheritor of God's promises to the Israelites seems to have meant, for Jesus and his early followers, to inherit a legacy that is primarily spiritual rather than material. True sons of God, it seems, must choose spiritual wealth over material wealth – you cannot worship God and Mammon; you will be blessed, spiritually rich, if you are materially poor, but woe to you if you are materially rich. The kingdom of heaven is not of this earth. The call to follow Jesus is a call to abandon one's family and to recognize that what property you have belongs not to your household but to the household of God. Acts 5 records the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sold some property and gave some – but not all – of the proceeds to the apostles. For the sin of choosing their own household over the household of God, they were struck dead by God. In Matthew 21 Jesus says that 'tax collectors and prostitutes' will enter the kingdom of God ahead of religious leaders. And what do tax collectors and sex workers have in common except that both are hated because they interrupt the handing down of wealth from father to son? In Jesus' kindness to those who are excluded

---

13 John 8.31–59.
14 Galatians 4.
15 Matthew 19.16–30.

from society we can see a similar reworking of ideas about property and inheritance. Jesus is kind to women who spend all their money on perfume to pour over his feet in a very public and erotic manner; he intervenes to prevent a woman caught in adultery from being stoned to death; he heals demon-possessed people living in caves. Women who commit adultery, who are ritually unclean (and likely infertile), disabled people, eunuchs – all of whom are unable to contribute to the life, wealth and reproduction of the household – are welcomed in. As the historian Orlando Patterson argues, the role of enslaved people in the household provides many of Christianity's foundational metaphors. To become a Christian is to be redeemed and justified (both metaphors for being released from slavery), to be reconciled with God (just as the person freed from slavery is reconciled with the community of which they become a full member on being freed), to be adopted (just as a person is freed from slavery by being adopted into the household to which they belong). Patterson argues that these slavery metaphors tend in both conservative and liberating directions. On the one hand, Patterson says, Paul sometimes talks as though the way to escape being enslaved to sin is to become instead enslaved to God – to move from membership of one household to another. On the other hand, Paul sometimes suggests that by dying Jesus put an end to the condition of slavery as such, so that there are no more enslaved people but only sons within the household.[16]

With this revaluation of family, inheritance and property comes likewise a revaluation of work. Where the book of Proverbs values the woman who works hard to manage her household, Jesus says that Mary, who listens to his words, has chosen the better path than Martha, who is busy with many tasks.[17] But it is not so much that work is being devalued here as reoriented – work should be directed not at the maintenance and prosperity of the earthly household, but at the flourishing of the heavenly household. What is demanded is not that we stop working, like the lazy enslaved person who buried his

16 Orlando Patterson, 1982, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 70–2.

17 Luke 10.38–42.

talents in the ground while his master went away, but that we invest our time and energy in the kingdom of God instead.[18] We cannot worship both God and Mammon because we cannot commit to working for God while we are also labouring for other households. Paul describes himself as a servant of Christ, working hard for the kingdom and expecting that this work earns him the right to be maintained by the rest of God's house-hold: 'Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?'[19]

Where, for much of the Hebrew Bible, the family and the household are important because they're seen as a kind of miniature version of the household of God and the people of God, for both Jesus and Paul this similarity between the God's household and individual households seems to be a problem. This is partly because both Paul and Jesus, in slightly different ways, are proclaiming a gospel of new things, a break with the old. But it's not a total break. Tempting though it is to argue that Jesus is a radical family abolitionist (not least because of how much it annoys people), it's more complicated than that. For Jesus and for Paul, to follow the God proclaimed by Jesus is not to give up on family entirely but to give up our exist-ing families in order to become part of a new family. There are various reasons for this. It's partly because, as Christianity develops, it starts to draw the line dividing the inside of the household from the outside in new ways. It's no longer just descendants of Abraham and their families who belong to the household of God, it's also Gentiles – people who are being adopted into God's household, grafted into the family tree. And it's partly because early Christians seem to be anticipating some sort of imminent catastrophe – some kind of judgement that will put an end to families and households as we know them in order to inaugurate a new era and a new kind of family – so we'd better devote all our time and energy to this new kind of family, rather than wasting our time, energy and work invest-ing in a legacy that is about to be destroyed. But early Christian

18 Matthew 25.14–30.
19 1 Corinthians 9.7.

thinking about families and households is deeply impacted by this sense that if we're really committed to being part of God's family, God's household, then we have to choose between God the father and our earthly fathers. Rejecting the families we're born into in order to enter into the family of the church isn't about destroying the idea of the family in general, abolishing property and inheritance, or doing away with ideas of nation, peoplehood and identity, but about remaking them, creating new forms of exclusion as well as new forms of kinship.[20]

Getting rid of one type of family because another, more important type of family has come along doesn't necessarily take us in radical directions. But it does leave us with an interesting and ambivalent inheritance that's full of possibilities – especially if we recognize that the kinds of households we form today would have been in many ways unrecognizable to the authors of the New Testament.

Sex and the early church

If we want to know why Christians are weird about sex, the family and marriage then there aren't many better places to start than with St Augustine, whose idiosyncratic struggles with horniness, the pleasures of theatre, and unruly erections left an indelible mark on the Christian tradition. The fourth-century North African bishop grew up in a deeply violent world. The Roman Empire (which had maintained itself for many years with incredible brutality) was beginning to crumble under the pressure of barbarian invasions, and the growing prominence of Christianity was producing all kinds of local and international conflicts. The violence of the wider world was reflected in Augustine's childhood. At home, Augustine watched his

---

20 For further discussion of the ways that these new Christian ideas of nation, peoplehood and identity brought with them new forms of disinheritance and dehumanization, see Chapter 6, 'How Christianity invented Race' and Amaryah Armstrong, 'Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul', *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 16.2 (2017), pp. 126–41.

mother carefully try to appease his violent and angry father in order to avoid the beatings that so many of her women friends experienced. As a young child at school, Augustine was beaten so badly as a result of failing to pay attention in class that he begged God to intervene and help him, and described this brutal treatment as being as bad as torture.[21] In the background of his life and work, so ordinary that it is barely discussed directly, was the violence regularly meted out to enslaved people.[22]

As for many early Christians – though perhaps more extremely so – Augustine's anxiety about sexuality, and his inability to remain chaste, was deeply connected to his sense that the world was falling apart, that no human institutions could do more than simply hold off the descent into absolute chaos and conflict, and that the best and most secure approach to life was to invest his time and energy not in earthly forms of household, inheritance, property, work or politics, but in the spiritual hope of eternal rewards. Sex, for many early Christians, was hopelessly tangled up with death: to be born was to be set on a path leading inexorably to death, and only the omnipresent reality of human sexuality made the endless cycle of birth and death necessary. Sex was a sign of human fallenness, the fragility of earthly existence, and therefore should be rejected in favour of investing our desires not in things of this world, which wither and die, but in the unchanging and eternal God. For similar reasons, it was dangerous to invest time and energy in earthly families and households. Augustine witnessed the deaths of many people that he loved deeply, and warned that, while the household may seem a place of refuge from the dangers of the world, in reality this safety was illusory. The ones you love might die, and the members of your household –

---

21 'We boys didn't fear these torments any less than we would have feared full-blown torture, and we didn't entreat you [God] any less passionately to let us evade them.' Augustine, *Confessions*, ebook.

22 As Matt Elia writes, 'The image of the bad slave punished – for gossip, for theft, for running away – does wide-ranging conceptual and symbolic work across Augustine's corpus.' Matt Elia, 'The Problem of the Christian Master: Augustine in the Afterlife of Slavery', unpublished manuscript.

enslaved people, servants and family members – might betray you.[23]

As Augustine wrote, many Christians were, like him, becoming increasingly attracted to a new ideal for human life exemplified by the 'desert fathers'. These early Christian ascetics rejected the life of the family and the household in favour of lives of solitary or communal contemplation, committing themselves to become worthy heirs of a spiritual inheritance; divesting themselves of material possessions in order to store up treasure in heaven; and devoting their time, energy and labour to the development of spiritual riches.

For over a millennium, monasticism was the primary model for serious Christian life, and the spiritual household was widely understood to be more valuable than the material household. But household and family metaphors remained central to how these early Christians came to understand what it meant to commit to lives dedicated to the pursuit of God, and new forms of household sprung up around monastic communities. One of Augustine's distinctive contributions was to generalize the relationship between master and enslaved person as the primary model for understanding right relationships: relationships between individuals and God, between men and their women, fathers and their children, were to be modelled on this relationship of absolute obedience and submission.[24] This dominant model is obviously patriarchal, but it brought with it a certain kind of androgyny. If everyone was related to everyone else in relationships of mastery and submission, then everyone could act like a father to some and like a son to others. Masculinity and femininity came to represent the two poles of this relationship: to be more masterful was to be more masculine and to be more submissive was to be more feminine. This produced

---

23 Augustine of Hippo, 1998, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, R. W. Dyson (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 858–9.

24 Kim Power, 1995, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writing on Women*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, p. 122, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 2010, 'Augustine: Sexuality, Gender and Women', in Judith Chelius Stark (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 57.

a kind of androgyny that's often popular with contemporary queer theology. If we're all feminine in relation to God, and also all capable of becoming more masculine by gaining power over ourselves and the world around us, then the sharp opposition which has often characterized contemporary ideas about the relationships between men and women doesn't really work. Women were sometimes able to escape the domination of fathers, husbands and families by devoting themselves to God, and some rose to positions of considerable power within the church, particularly in Christianity's early centuries.

But as the church became more powerful, the earthly household of the church became increasingly conflated with the spiritual household of God, and the disruptive potential of Christianity's more apocalyptic ideas about the family and the household faded into the background. Setting one household against another can function in radically disruptive ways; but if the conflict is between two households organized under paternal authority then the struggle is between two similar powers. The androgyny of the early Christian household model tended to work, in the end, to uphold the idea of masculine superiority, even if within it some women were able to become more masculine than some men. Everyone came to be seen in terms of the 'great chain of being', by which all beings are connected to God as the ultimate head of the household. We might be able to move up or down the chain by behaving well or badly, but, however far we progress, this remains a deeply hierarchical model of human relationships.

Likewise, individual monks and nuns might have promised to renounce property, but over time the institution of the church amassed vast wealth. The church and monastic orders became significant land owners, and the life of contemplation that had become the monastic ideal was often sustained by the hard work of lay people. Worse, Christians came to believe that only God's management was legitimate. As Christian empires began to re-emerge in Western Europe towards the end of the medieval period, this belief that all the world ultimately belonged to God led Christians to see themselves as the only rightful representatives of God's household rule on earth, dividing the

newly-discovered-by-Europeans continents of Africa and the Americas between them. Yet at the same time, challenges to the idea that power and property are rightfully distributed by the accidents of birth opened up the space for more egalitarian transformations of the world.

Modern family

One of the most commented-on books of the Bible for medieval Christians – and especially for monastic men – was the Song of Songs.[25] Monk after monk wrote meditations on the biblical story of the intense love between a king and a young maiden, identifying themselves with the maiden, passionately longing for the sweet embrace of Christ. Bernard of Clairvaux, so committed to the virtue of chastity that he would go and stand in an icy pond every time that he found himself sexually aroused, wrote in his commentary on Song of Songs 1.1:

> Let him who is the most handsome of the sons of men, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth … I ask of him what I ask of neither man nor angel: that he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth … I ask, I crave, I implore: let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.[26]

Alongside these intensely erotic spiritual meditations came what Stephen D. Moore describes as a 'staggering profusion of delicious nonsense', as medieval commentators sought to reinterpret the Song as an allegory for the love between Christ and the church:

---

25 For more discussion of the role of the Song in medieval theology – along with a rather implausible denial that these commentaries tell us something about human sexuality as well as the human longing for God – see Denys Turner, 1995, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications.

26 Stephen D. Moore, 2000, 'The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality', *Church History* 69.2, pp. 339, 329–30.

> '*The meeting of your thighs*' ... this refers to the coming
> together of Jews and Gentiles in the one Church of Christ
> ... *your two breasts* are the two Testaments, from which the
> children begotten in Christ draw milk for their growth.[27]

By 1875, however, six years after the invention of the word
'heterosexual', things had changed. In his commentary on the
Song, the German theologian Franz Delitzsch took it not as the
erotic celebration of unmarried sex (the obvious literal reading
of the text), nor as an allegory for the relationship between
the soul and God, or Christ and the world (as for medieval
monks), but as a celebration of marriage. 'The Song', he wrote,
'transfigures natural but holy love. Whatever in the sphere of
the divinely-ordered marriage relation makes love the happi-
est, firmest bond uniting two souls together, is presented to us
here in living pictures.'[28] This dramatic shift is indicative not
only of a new way of understanding the relationship between
Christianity and sexuality, but also of an epochal transforma-
tion in western understandings of the relationship between
marriage and love. By the late eighteenth century, for the first
time in western history, people came to believe that the funda-
mental basis of and reason for marriage was not safeguarding
an inheritance, not ensuring property, not work, not national
or religious identity, but love.[29]

So what changed? There are all sorts of complicated ways we
could respond to that question, but fundamentally the answer
is quite simple: capitalism. The emergence of capitalism trans-
formed households not only across Europe but around the
world. Inheritance, property, work, nation and religion were
all transmuted, along with marriage, sexuality and the family.

Where the medieval world appealed to tradition and to God's
ordering of creation to justify the existence of social hierarchy,
as capitalism came into being so did new forms of wealth.
Suddenly, people could become extraordinarily wealthy not

---

27 Moore, 'The Song of Songs', p. 333.
28 Moore, 'The Song of Songs', p. 348.
29 Stephanie Coontz, 2006, *Marriage, a History: How Love Con-
quered Marriage*, London: Penguin.

because they were born into a wealthy family or were heir to a great estate, but by trading, piracy and conquest. Thus was born the myth of the 'self-made man' – the idea, foundational to modern western societies, that whatever wealth, success or power we can lay hold of is the result of our own hard work, rather than the luck of being born into a particular family, the inheritance we have received or the care and support that others have given us.

This is a crucial aspect of the idea of love as the foundation of marriage – the idea that our primary allegiance is not to our lineage, but to ourselves, the makers of our own destinies. Where in medieval society dependence was a normal and a good condition – peasants were the dependants of their lords, who were the dependants of their kings, who were ultimately dependent on God – in the early modern period dependence came to be seen as a sign of weakness and inferiority.[30] Where in the early modern world wives were understood to be the dependants and then the inferiors of their husbands, over time we have come to see dependence as a problem even in the context of marriage, such that, slowly, we are beginning to think about marriage in terms of a partnership between equal, independent people. This isn't all bad, but – as we'll see in a moment – it starts to cause problems when we realize that the ideal of independence, of freedom from tradition and inheritance, is made possible by the hidden, unacknowledged and undervalued contributions of others. It's also a problem because, whether we like it or not, we are all more or less the products of our inheritance. None of us would be alive at all if it weren't for the people who had cared for us when we were too young to care for ourselves. This is one reason why some people react so strongly against the idea that the world we live in continues to be shaped by racism, sexism and class exploitation – we want to believe that we are what we have made ourselves, that the good things we have are things we have deserved.

---

30 Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, 2013, 'A Genealogy of "Dependency": Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare State', in Nancy Fraser (ed.), *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, London: Verso, pp. 83–110.

The Christian equivalent of the 'self-made man' was the new Protestant idea that Christians needed to throw off the corrupt traditions of the church, reject the inherited traditions of theology, and seek instead to have a direct relationship to God and to the Bible. There were some very good reasons to reject much of what the church in Europe had become. As the institutional church had amassed power and wealth, so too it had become deeply corrupt. Clerics preached one thing and practised another, struggled for power and dominance, and made deals with secular powers. Increasingly disillusioned, many European Christians turned either to movements that sought to reform the church, or sought to establish alternative forms of religious practice. During the political and religious turmoil that led up to the Reformation, some Christians preached a message that drew on New Testament teachings which challenged inheritance, family and property, experimenting with new forms of communal life and looking to a coming apocalypse that would establish the kingdom of God on earth. Sadly, that's not quite what happened.

In the end, what came to be one of the defining features of the modern world was the new institution of private property. At first, 'private property' primarily meant land. As capitalism came into being, so did colonialism, and with it a massive expansion of the land owned by European powers. At first, this land was divided up by kings and popes, but over time the predominant narrative developed within the West that people came to own land by hard work. Of course, this was never really how things worked. Mostly, Europeans acquired land by stealing it: by murdering people, by signing contracts they didn't honour, or by forcing indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans to cultivate land for them. Worse still, owning property came to be the mark of personhood, and as some property-owning people – white men – gained political freedom and equality, others became less free and less equal. Across Europe, women lost status and legal rights; European men and women were forced away from land they had worked for generations; 95 per cent of the indigenous population of the Americas died or were killed; and millions of Africans were enslaved. As property became

privatized, many of the social bonds that had bound people together beyond the bounds of the household – shared property, complex networks of sharing and redistributing wealth – were undermined, and Christians increasingly saw property not as a distraction but as a mark of God's favour, and the family, rather than the monastery, as the best place to work out their salvation.

In contrast to the worlds of the Bible and medieval Christendom, capitalism created a new division between the public and the private sphere, and between two different types of work, 'productive' and 'reproductive' labour. 'Productive labour' is the work that people do to make things to be sold for money – farm work, factory work or office work. 'Reproductive labour' is the work that people do to keep themselves and other people alive in order that they can keep doing productive labour – cooking, cleaning, childrearing, education. Increasingly, from the sixteenth century onwards, this distinction was gendered: men were understood to be the ones whose role it was to go out to work for a wage, doing productive labour, and women were the ones whose role it was to stay home, do 'housework' and take care of the children.[31]

For medieval Christians, this distinction did not really exist. Working in the fields or the workshop was just as much a part of maintaining the household as feeding the children, brewing the beer or cooking the dinner. While some work was more commonly done by men and others by women, hardly anyone was paid a wage, and most work was done to keep the household going rather than to earn a profit. Early medieval people divided the world into 'those who fight' (the aristocracy), those who pray (monks, nuns and clerics) and those who work (the peasantry). To describe someone as 'religious' meant that they had dedicated themselves to the life of 'those who pray'. For most ordinary Christians, though, with no clear division between the different aspects of their lives, Christianity was entangled with all of them. Rituals relating to the harvest and the seasons

---

31 Silvia Federici, 2004, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

were built into Christian practice, along with prayers for good weather, rituals to remind everybody of their proper place in the social hierarchy, entertainment, and all aspects of life.

The new division of the world into public and private sphere happened in part as a result of the power struggles between the Catholic Church and newly emergent nation states. As the Reformation fragmented European Christianity, a new settlement emerged in which the church was increasingly – if reluctantly – relegated to the private sphere of home and family, the realm of social reproduction. Where for medieval Christians, the ideal Christian was a masculine-androgynous contemplative, dedicated to the intellectual pursuit of spiritual knowledge, increasingly Christianity came to be associated with spirituality, inner feeling and morality, and so with women, children, the private home, and the family.[32] For Martin Luther, the raising of children was 'the noblest and most precious work' that Christians could undertake, because, in raising children, Christian men and women were doing the work of salvation, acting as 'apostles, bishops and priests to their children', in contrast to the religious life which was an evasion of this high, though difficult, calling. It was better, for Luther, to 'rock the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries … and on top of that care for my wife, provide for her, labor at my trade … and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves' than to retreat to the 'peaceful and carefree' life of a priest or a nun.[33] Unfortunately, while Luther's preference for

---

32 Caroline Walker Bynum describes this shift in terms of a rise in the number and proportion of female saints, the emergence of distinctly feminine forms of religious piety, and a rapid growth of religious enthusiasm among women more broadly. Caroline Walker Bynum, 1987, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 13–15). David Keck describes an increasing focus on Mary and the angel Gabriel over the later medieval period. David Keck, 1998, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 40–1.

33 Martin Luther, 'The Estate of Marriage', 1522, https://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/Reformations441/LutherMarriage.htm#Part%20III (accessed 09.03.2023).

marriage over the religious life came to dominate within early modern Christianity, the surprisingly egalitarian distribution of the work of raising children did not. By the nineteenth century, an understanding of women and children as especially morally pure and inclined to religion had set in, resulting in the cloying sentimentality around children and innocence that can be seen so clearly in Victorian Christmas carols. In 1890 the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, a key figure in the emergence of liberal Protestantism, published a fictional dialogue between friends and family gathered together on Christmas Eve to talk about the nature of the Christian faith. The characters discuss the relationship between men, women and children in relation to the Christian faith. 'What is eternal in us (women)', one female character says, 'is maternal love; it is the fundamental chord of our being … Every mother has thus an eternal divine Child, and seeks devoutly in it for the stirrings of the higher Spirit.'[34] While men continued to dominate positions of power within the church, women increasingly came to be seen as the ones responsible for nurturing faith and moral values within the home; the work of prayer and moral instruction was as much a part of women's work as childrearing, cooking and cleaning.

This shift is one of the reasons why most practising Christians in the West today are women, and why people are constantly trying to figure out how to make Christianity more appealing to men, whether it's by using military language to talk about the Christian life, preaching the gospel while karate chopping

---

34 Friedrich Schleiermacher, 1890, *Christmas Eve: A Dialogue on the Celebration of Christmas*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, p. 28, https://archive.org/details/christmasevedialooschl/page/28/mode/2up (accessed 15.03.2023). Schleiermacher's role in shaping theological understandings of the relationship between women and religion is especially fascinating in light of his own relationship to gender – as he wrote in one letter, 'If I ever play with an impossible wish, it is that of being a woman', quoted in Karl Barth, 2015, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*l, Louise Pettibone Smith (tr.), Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, p. 158. Thanks to Max Zemlin-Thornton for drawing my attention to this.

through bricks, or proclaiming the importance of wifely submission.[35]

Out of these changes, 'the family' became increasingly central not only to Christianity but also to national identity. Along with the invention of private property came the invention of 'the nation' – the idea that individual nation states were bound together by shared history, culture and blood. These new nation states came to be understood, as Christianity had been, as a single body. Along with nations came eugenics: if the many citizens of a nation state made up one body, then that body must be kept healthy and its blood must be kept pure. White women and children came to symbolize the purity of the new nation; the home, the family and the church were where children were to be taught their duty as citizens.

The family now

While the world we live in today is still deeply shaped by racial capitalism, the form that our households and our families take continues to change. As capitalism developed, property ownership increasingly became less about land and more about finance – money, endlessly circulating through the economy, without regard for borders or boundaries. This shift has been reflected in the changing structure of our households. Increasingly our relatives and loved ones are spread around the country and around the world; more of us move around from home to home, following the call of jobs, education or love. As with all of the transformations that the family has undergone, this has

---

35 For a helpful overview of this tendency within American evangelical Christianity, see Kristin Kobes Du Mez, 2020, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, New York: W. W. Norton. Although what I've tried to show here is that while developments within twentieth-century US evangelicalism really do produce new kinds of ideas about the relationship between Christianity and the family, I wouldn't see these changes as a 'corruption', as though there was some good version of the Christian tradition that existed beforehand.

been both a blessing and a curse, bringing with it new kinds of freedom but also new forms of insecurity. In a world that is always moving, we have space to explore our sense of self, our sexuality and different ways of forming relationships, but with that freedom we have lost the promise of security. In an economy based on constant movement and relentless investment, more people are able to explore their gender, their sexuality and the kinds of relationships they want to have with others; but those same people are more likely to be precariously employed, spending more than half their income on rent, unable to access the health care they need for transition, unable to find work in the same city as the people they love, or unable to escape abusive homes or workplaces.

The nuclear family, which came to be seen as *the* model of the family for many western Christians, was built on a particular way of organizing inheritance, property, work, religion and nation. But when the world got divided up into public and private spheres, Christians – along with everyone else – started to think that marriage and the family could be separated out from these broader household questions, and started to think about them primarily in terms of private-sphere things – as being questions of morality and spirituality, rather than wealth and power. Failures to live up to this very new ideal of home and family get blamed on people's lack of morality, or on spiritual impoverishment, rather than on material and practical transformations in the organization of society. Because Christianity, losing power and influence in the public sphere of politics and economics, came to be associated with the private sphere, changes to this new kind of family were also seen as a direct threat to the church and to Christians – and many Christians doubled down on claiming moral authority to decide on the best way to organize a family.

In some ways, the Christians I grew up with were right to insist that sexuality and marriage are weirdly central to the whole of our lives. But what they never taught me was that this is because how we love one another – the bonds of care and the patterns of desire we choose to nurture – are inextricably entangled with every part of human existence. Who we love,

how we love them, who we live with and who contributes to our household, cannot be separated from what we inherit from the people we grew up with, who taught us and raised us, who passed on to us both blessings and curses. The structures of our households are utterly entangled with the questions of who gets to have property, who has no property and who is turned into property; with the different kinds of work we do; and with the kinds of communities, religious and national, that we belong to and that so often mark out the limits of our care for others.

What is best about all of the different kinds of families and households that people have formed throughout history is the kind of care they make possible. The kinds of families or households we grow up in are where we first learn to love and to be loved, to need and to be needed. But this great blessing that the family or the household offers us is also its curse. The families and households which raise us are also the places where we are most vulnerable, the places in which we are most likely to experience violence and abuse. The family, the household, is where we are trained in the behaviour that is expected of us by the society we live in – societies built on racism, inequality and patriarchy. And the family, the household, often tends to mark out the limits of our care. Families struggle to protect their inheritance, their property, whatever the cost to family members or to those outside the family.

Several years ago, I gave a very early version of this chapter as a sermon at the Anglican church I belonged to. Not long afterwards, my vicar at the time sat me down for a chat. He wanted me to know that he and the church really valued me, that they thought I was a gifted theologian, and that they appreciated what I brought to the church. But (there's always a but), he wanted me to know that when a woman has children, *it changes her*. There were things I couldn't understand or become as a woman (he said) until and unless I had children. I'd talked in church about how difficult it can be for women constantly to be fending off other people's ideas about the kind of life we should be living and the decisions we should be making about whether or not to have kids. I'd talked about grappling with the knowledge that getting pregnant would mean that I

couldn't do other things that were really important to me. I had tried to communicate how few options there can be in a society that sees freedom in terms of never having to rely on anyone else for anything. But all he'd heard was that I was missing out on God's plan for me as a woman.

One of the things I found most frustrating about the evangelical Christianity I grew up in was the idea that you could tell how good a relationship was by looking at the outward shape it took. It didn't seem to matter if a couple were kind to each other, had shared goals, helped one another learn and grow, as long as they didn't have sex or move in together before they got married. I've been reminded of that frustration recently watching another round of debates play out across my social media feeds about age gaps and consent in sexual relationships. Both inside and outside the church, people want rules to follow, simple ways to measure whether a relationship, a family or a household is good or bad. Both inside and outside the church, we want to believe that there are good ways to have relationships, and to form families and households so that they will offer us a refuge from the violent world that surrounds us. But our homes have never been separate from the world around them, and as long as we live in a world built on racism, patriarchy and economic exploitation, those things will shape our households and our families too. Families are a blessing, but they are also a curse, and until we are able to be honest with ourselves about this very mixed and ambivalent inheritance, we will find ourselves passing it on, even to the tenth generation.

One of the foundational symbols of Christian conversion was baptism, a symbol of going down into the grave, leaving behind our identity, and being born into a new life and a new community. It used to be, in some early Christian communities, that people would take off all their clothes before getting baptized as a symbol of leaving everything behind them (a practice that for some reason none of the advocates of 'traditional Christian values' seem keen to revive). There is a lot of rich meaning in this symbol. For some of us, it might be very difficult to lay aside our expensive clothes, all the good things we inherited from our families – our status, our education, our connections.

For others, it might be a relief to lay aside the weight of our families' expectations, the hurtful things they have said to us, the damage they have done to us, or the things that have marked us out as not belonging, as unwanted.

Over the years, as Christianity amassed its own weighty inheritance, its own blessings and curses, and as baptism became increasingly a ritual not for adults who had already entered into their inheritance but for babies who were being welcomed into it, this emphasis on laying aside, on dispossession, faded into the background. But I wonder if there might still be space to think of it in these terms. We come into the world naked and vulnerable, owning nothing, absolutely dependent, not knowing where we end and others begin, not knowing who is our household and who is a stranger.[36] All we have is each other.

---

36 For more discussion of how our ideas about what it is to be human are shaped by our relationships with the non-human animals both inside and outside of our households, see Eric Daryl Meyer, 2018, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human*, New York: Fordham University Press, and Beatrice Marovich, 2022, 'Hearing Nothing: A More than Human Silence', *Political Theology*, pp. 1–18.

5

How Christianity Invented Race[1]

In 1514, Bartolomé de Las Casas – owner of a brand-new estate in the newly settled Espiritu Santo, Cuba, and overseer of a small gang of Arawak forced labourers – had a dramatic conversion experience. The son of a Spaniard who had sailed to the Americas with Columbus, Las Casas was used to the violence of colonization, the forced labour and high death rates among the indigenous peoples of the lands recently renamed by European explorers. But something changed for Las Casas – a sudden moment of light breaking in to illuminate the world he had simply accepted for so long, bringing into sharp focus the cruelty, injustice and sinfulness of the Spanish settlers' actions. Miraculously, Las Casas was soon to discover that his business partner, Pablo de la Rentería, had experienced a similar and almost simultaneous revelation miles away, in the Jamaican town of New Seville. Las Casas realized that the violence they had participated in simply couldn't be justified. Suddenly it seemed very clear that what the Europeans were doing in the 'new world' went against the purpose of Jesus Christ and against the love commanded in the Scriptures. He and de la Rentería gave up their estate and dedicated their lives to working to change the society that had formed them. They trusted that the God who had so upended their own view of the world would work in them and through them to change the hearts of their fellow Christians.[2]

---

1 This chapter is largely based on my article, 2017, 'For Our Sins: Christianity, Complicity and the Racialized Construction of Innocence', in Robin Dunford, Afxentis Afxentiou and Michael Neu (eds), *Exploring Complicity: Concepts, Cases and Critique*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 53–64.

2 For a fuller account of Las Casas' conversion, see Sylvia Wynter,

Reading about Las Casas, it's hard not to feel hopeful. In the middle of a society steeped in violence and racial hatred, engaged in almost unprecedented ecological destruction, exploitation and genocide, some of the people who were most invested in that process were able to see outside it and to say, 'This is wrong; this has to stop.' But Las Casas' story contains a tragic irony. In his eagerness to put a halt to the injustices of the Spanish forced-labour system, but aware of the Spanish need for labourers to cultivate and make profitable their newly conquered land, Las Casas proposed that the unjustly enslaved indigenous people be replaced by enslaved Africans, a group he considered to be justly enslaved. Struggling against one form of injustice, Las Casas unwittingly enabled another: the transatlantic slave trade.

When I ask my British students what they're taught in school about the histories of slavery and colonialism, often what they talk about are the bits where the West gets to look good: when William Wilberforce ended the slave trade, or when Martin Luther King Jr won civil rights for black people in America. And did we mention that Wilberforce and King were both Christians? But we tend to gloss over the bits of the story that don't fit quite so comfortably into that framework – the fact that, as Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James argues, the British decision to abolish the slave trade was more about trying to get a competitive advantage over France than it was about ethics,[3] that British campaigners against the slave trade often enthusiastically supported colonialism, that King said that the biggest threat to the fight against racism was not the Ku Klux Klan but 'the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice';[4] or that, while formal racial segregation has ended in America, the bigger social and political issues King came to see

---

1984, 'New Seville and the Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de Las Casas Part I', *Jamaica Journal* 17.2, pp. 25–32, and Part 2, *Jamaica Journal* 17.3, pp. 46–56.

3 C. L. R. James, 1989, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, New York: Vintage, pp. 52–5.

4 Martin Luther King Jr, 1963, 'Letter from Birmingham Jail', https://letterfromjail.com (accessed 15.03.2023).

as inextricable from racial injustice – poverty, capitalism and imperial wars – continue unchecked.

That tendency to tell the story that makes us feel good goes deep in contemporary Christianity, especially among those of us who care about social justice and liberation. Sure, we often say, Christians have said and done a lot of things that have made the world worse – created and enforced oppressive gender roles, participated in the violence of slavery, colonialism and anti-Semitism – but at the heart of Christianity is a gospel of liberation, of the tearing down of differences that divide us, of a Christ in whom, as Galatians 3.28 says, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.' Right? Well, it's complicated.

It's true that in Galatians, Paul begins to articulate what it means to be a Christian in ways that radically reorder existing social divisions. The Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin suggests that the birth of Christianity meant not only the arrival of a new religion into the world but also a radically new way of thinking about what religion was. To become a Christian was to be transformed, to gain a new kind of identity that wasn't just an expression of where you were born, the language you spoke, the networks of family and culture you were part of. To become a Christian was to convert into a new community defined not by language, ritual, culture, history or ethnicity but by *belief*, by faith in Jesus Christ. That's why the difference between orthodoxy (right belief) and heresy (wrong belief) came to be so important to Christianity. If it was belief that made you a Christian, then believing the wrong thing, or believing it in the wrong way, could mean that you weren't actually a Christian. The distinction between orthodoxy and heresy that became so important to defining what it meant to be a Christian is specific to Christianity, Boyarin says. Christianity slowly turned into something you could get kicked out of for not believing the right thing in the right way; a religion that would be willing, on occasion, to torture people to death to try and get them to believe correctly, because if you didn't believe correctly then you wouldn't be saved. By contrast, Judaism ultimately chose to continue seeing Jewishness as something that

you *were*, so that however much you disagreed with other Jews you'd still be Jewish.[5] What mattered for early Christians, then, wasn't so much your gender, your status as a slave or a free person, a Jew or a Gentile, but where you stood in relation to Jesus. The reason that Christianity cut across all those existing distinctions was because it introduced a new, more fundamental distinction: the distinction between people who believed in Jesus and people who didn't believe in Jesus, between Christians and non-Christians.

What does it mean to be a Christian? There are almost as many answers to this question as there are Christians in the world, but I think it's fair to say that, for most of the history of Christianity, one of the fundamental things that Christians have believed is that Jesus died for our sins, and that to be a Christian is to somehow be saved from sin because of what Jesus did. This idea is expressed by the two core rituals of Christianity, baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism symbolized a new birth, a dying and rising (following on from Jesus' death and resurrection), and also a process of being cleansed. It represents leaving behind one identity – the family, citizenship or social status we were born into – and entering into a new one. Many early Christians believed that baptism cleansed a person of original sin – which is to say, the guilt we had incurred or the brokenness we inherited simply by being born, the sinfulness that had been passed down from Adam and Eve to us. To be a Christian, baptism suggests, is to leave behind our original, guilty, sinful status and to gain a new identity that's defined by forgiven-ness, by having had our sins washed away, by our relationship not to Adam and Eve who brought sin into the world but by our relationship to Jesus, who died in order to save us from sin. If baptism is about a single moment of conversion from sinfulness into saved-ness and forgiven-ness, then communion, the Eucharist, is about the repetition of that moment of forgiveness. We might understand it as a reminder of what Jesus has done for us, or we might understand it as a way of

---

5 Daniel Boyarin, 2004, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 1–33.

accessing that forgiveness and grace, but either way the ritual is defined by that central idea, that Jesus died for our sins and that to be a Christian is to enter into the freedom and forgiveness that he made possible.

So Christianity cuts across existing divisions of gender and social status by introducing a new distinction between Christians and non-Christians. And it seems as if that distinction is essentially a distinction between people who have had – and are continuing to have – their sins forgiven because of their belief in Jesus and people who have not had their sins forgiven. It's the distinction between people who are forgiven and people who are not forgiven; between people who are saved and people who are not saved. As the Jewish scholar Gil Anidjar suggests, Christianity 'is the difference between innocence and guilt as the basis of human society, the difference *across* humanity, between the old and guilty (humans) and the new and innocent (Christians)'.[6] That doesn't mean, of course, that Christians think they're perfect. Although a small minority of Christians have argued that it's possible to become perfectly sinless and completely holy in this life, the majority position for most of Christian history is that we're 'not perfect, just forgiven'; but everyone else is neither perfect *nor* forgiven.

The idea that the distinction between Christian and non-Christian was a distinction that cut across all other distinctions between people meant that early Christians understood themselves in universal terms. Absolutely everyone was either a Christian or a non-Christian. The idea that what Jesus did applied not only to Jews but also to Gentiles meant, as Denise Kimber Buell has argued, that absolutely anyone *could* become a Christian. The idea that membership in the people of God was open to everyone in turn – especially when paired with supersessionism, the idea that what Jesus did fulfilled, surpassed and replaced God's special relationship with the people of Israel – implied that everyone *should* become a Christian. And the idea that there was a clear distinction between Christians

6 Gil Anidjar, 2014, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 254.

and non-Christians led early Christians to think that Christianity itself was a unified and coherent identity, covering over the disagreements, differences and divides which have always characterized Christian communities.[7]

While for early Christians it was *belief* that made the difference between Christians and non-Christians, between saved-ness and unsaved-ness, forgiven-ness and unforgiven-ness, over time Christianity began to get more and more tangled up with questions of ancestry, language and culture. The first Christians were a small and occasionally persecuted minority within the Roman Empire, drawing on ideas and images taken from centuries of the Jewish people's experience of being invaded, conquered and sent into exile by a series of powerful empires. They drew on the language of empire to suggest that their God was a more powerful force in the world than any of the powers of the world. But as Christianity grew in influence, spreading rapidly not only among the poor but also the wealthy elite of the empire, that language made it all too easy for Christianity to come to see existing empires as a way to advance the Christian gospel. Christianity continued to mean lots of different things to different people, and Christians continued to argue about who was in and who was out, who was orthodox and who was a heretic. From very early on, early Christians said harsh and hostile things to and about people who chose to remain outside of Christianity, and over the latter part of the medieval period (beginning somewhere around the twelfth century), these ideas about guilt and innocence, Christian peoplehood and universalism began to congeal into the modern idea of race.

Christianity came into being in a society in which slavery was a key institution, and some of the ideas that eventually turned into race were present at its birth. But 'race' – as opposed to other forms of ethnic, caste or xenophobic prejudice – didn't really take shape until later. Gil Anidjar suggests that we can see the first beginnings of 'race' in an ecumenical council which took place in Narbonne in 1054.[8] Previous legislation had

---

7 Denise Kimber Buell, 2005, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 140.

8 Anidjar, *Blood*, p. 132.

prohibited murder, appealing to Genesis 9.6, which says that 'Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed' (exceptions were made, of course, for blood shed by the state in war or judicial punishment). But the ecumenical council which met made a decision to change this general prohibition on the shedding of blood to a prohibition specifically on shedding *Christian* blood. Forty years later, in 1096, Pope Urban II initiated the first of the Crusades, a series of holy wars directed against Christianity's others. Christian soldiers, setting out to fight a holy war, massacred Muslims, Jews and even other Christians. Two hundred years later, a theologian called Humbert of Romans wrote a theological defence of the Crusades. In it, he talked about Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds, where a master's slaves come to him to say that there are weeds growing among the wheat, planted there by an enemy. Instead of pulling up the weeds and damaging the wheat along with them, the master says that they should let the wheat and weeds grow up together, and separate them only after the harvest.[9] But what we find in the Muslim lands, Humbert says, is not wheat mixed with weeds, saved people with unsaved people; instead, we have whole fields full of weeds, and so we can destroy them, as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah where there were no righteous people.[10]

As the Crusades continued, conflicts breaking out at the same time in the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula (what we now know as Spain and Portugal), which for several centuries had been predominantly under Muslim rule, slowly came to be understood as a holy war between Christianity and Islam – as the Reconquista, a struggle to 'reclaim' the land for Christianity. Under Muslim rule, Jewish and Christian minorities had lived for the most part peacefully, sometimes rising to positions of considerable power. But as the Reconquista came to be understood as a holy war, Jewish and Muslim populations

---

9 Matthew 13.24–30.

10 Humbert of Romans, 'Opus Tripartitum', in Louise Riley-Smith and Jonathan Riley-Smith (eds), *The Crusades: Idea and Reality*, 1095–1274, London: Edward Arnold, pp. 103–17.

were increasingly offered a stark choice: convert to Christianity or leave. Many left, but those who stayed and converted to Christianity came to be viewed with hatred and suspicion by Christians. When you force people to convert or leave the country, how can you be sure that the conversions were authentic, or that they're not still practising their former religion in secret? These anxieties resulted in inquisitorial torture, suspicion between neighbours and (as we can still see today) the centrality to Spanish food culture of the public eating of *jamón*: how better to demonstrate that you're not a secret Jew or Muslim than by publicly eating pork?[11]

Medieval Christian Europe in this period was obsessed with blood. Pilgrimage sites in northern Europe sprang up where, people said, consecrated eucharistic hosts had started to bleed. People prayed complex prayers modelled on the number of drops of blood Jesus was said to have shed as he died. Anti-Jewish myths included the 'blood libel', the belief that Jews murdered Christian children in order to use their blood for ritual purposes.[12] In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council demanded that Jews and Muslims be forced to distinguish themselves from Christians by wearing special clothes, and in 1290 the entire Jewish population of England was forced to leave the country.[13]

---

11 María Rosa Menocal, 2002, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, New York: Back Bay Books, p. 262. For more discussion of changing attitudes in the Iberian peninsula, see Francisco Bethencourt, 2013, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, ch. 2, and George M. Fredrickson, 2002, *Racism: A Short History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, ch. 1.

12 For more discussion of the medieval obsession with blood, see Caroline Walker Bynum, 2007, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, and David Biale, 2007, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

13 For more discussion of this and the emergence of race in medieval Europe more broadly, see Geraldine Heng, 2011, 'The Invention of Race in the European Middles Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity the Middle

In Spain and Portugal, this blood obsession got tangled up with struggles over land and access to the rapidly expanding clerical professions. People became increasingly obsessed with the idea of blood purity and started to think of kinship and ethnic difference in terms of blood. Over time, many came to believe that the blood of aristocrats was different from the blood of peasants; and that the differences between Jews, Muslims and Christians could be understood in terms of blood.

In 1449, the rulers of Toledo, Spain, issued the 'Statutes on the Purity of Blood', which declared that there was a difference between the blood of old Christians – Christians descended from Christians for generations back – and the blood of new Christians – Christians descended from Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity. On the basis of this difference in the purity of blood, the Statutes declared, 'new Christians' were to be excluded from certain roles in the church and the military.[14] These changes took place alongside the European voyages of exploration and conquest which saw the beginnings of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. By the time Las Casas had his conversion experience, 65 years later, racism was already a central element of the ways that Europeans treated those they encountered. The idea of a difference between bloods was crucial to the formation of racism in the modern world. In America, the 'one drop' rule meant that anyone with any African ancestry was counted as black and therefore automatically as a slave, and the rule of 'blood quantum' (quantifying a person according to the percentage of native American ancestry they have) came to overrule existing indigenous American understandings of kinship and identity. Along with this idea of a difference between bloods, the distinction between Christians and non-Christians was slowly transformed into the distinction between white people and non-white people, in part so that Christians could justify continuing to enslave people even after

Ages' and 'The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race', *Literature Compass* 8.5, pp. 258–74 and 275–93.

14 Anidjar, *Blood*, p. 68.

they had converted to Christianity.[15] This distinction carried over two central aspects of the Christian/non-Christian division into this new idea of 'race'.

First, the idea that the distinction between Christians and non-Christians was the distinction between people who had had their sins forgiven and people who had not had their sins forgiven turned into the idea that white people were the ideal and non-white people were the failures. In early modern Europe, as rationality came to be seen as the ultimate marker of humanness and goodness, this meant (as the Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter argues) that white people were seen to be rational, and non-white people seen to be irrational, childlike, uncivilized and incapable of governing themselves. Around the eighteenth century, as capitalism became increasingly financialized and Darwinian ideas of evolution began to take root, this turned into the idea that white people were more 'selected' – by the market and by the processes of evolution – and non-white people were 'dysselected', less intelligent, less competitive, less able to provide for themselves and compete in the new global markets of capitalism.[16] Second, the idea that the difference between Christians and non-Christians is the difference between people who have converted and people who have not accepted the good news of the gospel was transformed into the idea of civilizational *progress*. White people, European nations, western societies, are understood to have advanced beyond their non-white, non-European, non-western counterparts, to be more developed, or more civilized.[17] This became a way to justify white/western/European dominance – just as missionaries were sent out to 'rescue' non-Christians from their

15 For an account of the transition from 'Protestant Supremacy' to white supremacy, see Katherine Gerbner, 2018, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*, Philadephia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

16 Sylvia Wynter, 2003, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3, pp. 257–337.

17 Alana Lentin calls this 'racial historicism' or 'progressivist racism', in Alana Lentin, *Racism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford: Oneworld, p. 27.

darkness and ignorance, so 'secular' western societies send out charity and 'development' workers and impose western ideas about what a good society looks like on non-western societies. It also became a way of blaming non-western peoples and societies for the suffering and violence they experience as a result of colonialism and the ongoing legacies of colonialism. Instead of recognizing the devastating impact of western intervention on colonized and enslaved people, we blame them. If only they would recognize the superiority of western culture and economics, then they too might be saved! Instead of condemning heathens, Jews and heretics to eternal suffering in hell, we condemn the jobless, homeless, criminalized and 'underdeveloped' to unending poverty and dispossession.

As western societies increasingly became secularized, this logic of conversion into innocence began to shape how newly secular westerners understood their relationship to religion. Just as Christianity was seen as replacing, fulfilling or overcoming Judaism (this is the idea of 'supersessionism', which lies beneath most forms of anti-Judaism), so too secular westerners were seen as replacing, fulfilling or overcoming 'religion', which came to be associated with the past, with backwardness and with non-white people. Daniel Barber puts it like this: 'The secular West rejects religion for itself, but it does so, one might say, as the price that must be paid to reject the non-West by characterising this non-West as religious.'[18] Sometimes in this configuration Christianity comes to be seen as bad and backwards; and sometimes it is seen as the least bad (most advanced, most rational, whitest) of the religions and therefore worth holding on to (even Richard Dawkins has expressed a preference for the 'lovely bells' of Winchester cathedral over the 'aggressive-sounding "Allahu Akhbar"'[19]).

So what does it mean to be white? Whiteness is about occupying a place in society that is associated with innocence, with superiority, with rationality, with intelligence and adaptiveness.

18 Daniel Colucciello Barber, 2011, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011, p. 110.

19 @RichardDawkins on Twitter, 16 July 2018, https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1018933359978909696 (accessed 09.03.2023).

Let me illustrate this for you. I love advice columns, and one of the things I've found fascinating is how often people writing into them ask for confirmation of whether or not they're *a good person*. It seems that we are often less concerned with the impact our behaviour has on other people than we are in being able to continue to think of ourselves as good. Likewise, it seems that however heinous the actions of prominent Christians, any harm we do can be excused by the fact that we're 'not perfect, just forgiven'. Whether it's evangelical leaders excusing Donald Trump's racism, sexism, infidelity and sexual harassment, or the response I saw to the recent news of Jean Vanier's history of sexual abuse of women – which said that although he might not have been perfect, we must not denigrate the 'fruitfulness of his life' – both whiteness and Christianity have a lot to answer for.

Sara Ahmed, writing about the kinds of reports that institutions produce when they are accused of racism, talks about the way that even the admission of guilt – of racism – can be part of the process by which individuals and institutions get to position themselves as good. Just as in church services, we confess our guilt in order to receive forgiveness and assurance that our sins are forgiven, Ahmed argues, so too the pattern we see in reports about the police handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence or Australian acknowledgements of historical violence towards Indigenous Australians is a pattern by which we confess our racism and express the shame that our racism makes us feel only in order to be able to feel good about ourselves. 'Our shame', Ahmed writes, 'shows that we *mean well*' and 'in allowing us to feel bad, shame also allows the nation [or institution] *to feel better or even to feel good*'.[20] Again, what's at stake here is less the question of how our actions are impacting others, how we can change ourselves or the institutions we are part of to do less harm, but how we can make sure that we can *continue to think of ourselves as good.*

_____

20 Sara Ahmed, 2004, 'Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism', *borderlands* 3.2, https://web.archive.org/web/20200207101016/http://borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm (accessed 09.03.2023).

By contrast, non-white people are racialized as guilty, as inferior, as irrational, as unintelligent. The philosopher George Yancy writes about hearing the clicks of car doors locking 'as white people in their cars catch a glimpse of my black body'.[21] People of colour in the UK and elsewhere are disproportionately likely to be stopped and searched; disproportionately likely to be excluded from school, arrested, convicted of crimes, sent to prison for longer, or simply killed by the police. When Mark Duggan was shot by the Metropolitan Police in London on 4 August 2011, the jury agreed that he was not holding a gun when he was shot, but ruled nonetheless that he was 'lawfully killed'.[22] The recent flourishing of white supremacy in the West has been accompanied by the return of claims that black people are intrinsically less intelligent than white people. Eric Kaufman, Professor of Politics at Birkbeck University, has argued for the existence of differences in intelligence across racial groups, and in 2018 it came to light that University College London had for several years hosted the London Conference on Intelligence with an array of white supremacist speakers.[23]

We also see the consequences of this Christian legacy in the way that we understand citizenship. From the beginning, the idea of race was tied up with the idea of nation, which (like 'race') didn't really exist until around the fifteenth century. Just as the church is understood as the body of Christ, as the idea of the nation state took form, it used the language of a

---

21 George Yancy, 2012, *Look, A White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, p. 30.

22 Harry Stopes, 2014, 'Five Thoughts on the Killing of Mark Duggan', *LRB blog*, 9 January 9, www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/january/five-thoughts-on-the-killing-of-mark-duggan (accessed 09.03.2023).

23 See Lisa Tilley, 2021, 'On Resigning from Birkbeck Politics', 31 August, https://litilley.medium.com/on-resigning-from-birkbeck-politics-3681c0f65a91 (accessed 15.03.2023), and Kevin Rawlinson and Richard Adams, 2018, 'UCL to investigate eugenics conference secretly held on campus', *The Guardian*, 11 January, www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/10/ucl-to-investigate-secret-eugenics-conference-held-on-campus (accessed 15.03.2023). For more on the return of race science, see Angela Saini, 2019, *Superior: The Return of Race Science*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

body to talk about national unity. 'Race' came to be a name for the shared biological underpinnings of national identity, and eugenics (the idea that we can improve the overall health of the nation by encouraging the 'right' people to have more children and discourage the 'wrong' people from reproducing) was an important aspect of many early modern European governments' attempts to secure the well-being of the nation. Many European people of colour experience racism specifically around the idea of citizenship – 'But where are you *really* from?' When, in late 2022, the late Queen's former lady-in-waiting, Lady Hussey, asked this question of black British domestic violence worker Ngozi Fulani, weeks of debate erupted across the British media, and Sistah Space, the charity Fulani founded, were forced to close temporarily due to the outpouring of racist abuse. Alongside the Windrush scandal – in which the British government attempted to deport British Caribbean people who had arrived in the UK as British citizens, only to have recognition of that citizenship denied them after many had lived in the country for decades – and the story of Shamima Begum – rendered stateless by the UK government's decision to strip her of her British citizenship after she left the UK to join the Islamic State, aided by Canadian intelligence agents – recent events have made it very clear that, however deep their roots in the UK, non-white people's citizenship is seen as a privilege not a basic right.

We no longer live in a society that explicitly segregates people on the basis of their ancestry or skin colour but racism never went away, though it has changed and morphed over the years. Whiteness – the status of being a good person, a good citizen – shifts and changes, often as groups previously racialized as non-white get involved with maintaining the existing order of things. The Irish, earlier racialized as non-white, began to be seen as white people once Irish Americans started to enter the police force in significant numbers. The Hispanic man George Zimmerman gained the full-throated support of white supremacists after he shot the black teenager Trayvon Martin. Jared Sexton suggests that the existing order of things might be described as white supremacy via 'multiracialism': a 'protest less against the genocidal *objectives* of Anglo white

supremacy than the inefficiency of unrestrained violence as the *means* of its accomplishment'.[24] It's easier to keep the peace by giving some people of colour access to some positions in power while continuing to enact racist violence: so in the UK in recent years we've have Priti Patel (Home Secretary, 2019–2022), Rishi Sunak (Prime Minister from 2022) and Suella Braverman (Home Secretary from September to October and then from December 2022) enthusiastically pushing for restrictions on immigration that would have meant their own parents could never have travelled to the UK, and Sajid Javid (Home Secretary, 2018–2019) overseeing the rise of racist stop and search practices. In the USA, likewise, we've seen the Jewish Stephen Miller (Senior Advisor to the President during Trump's presidency), whose parents arrived in America fleeing anti-Semitic pogroms in Eastern Europe, overseeing legislation designed to prevent refugees seeking shelter in the USA and separating migrant children from their parents.

So what should we do? This question is a problem, because so much of what we inherit from Christianity and from the construction of whiteness is tangled up with the desire to be good. Like a finger trap, the more we try to get out of it, the more it tightens around us, the more we are trapped. Sara Ahmed talks about the way that people respond to her work on whiteness. She says that the question, 'but what are white people to do … can work to *block* hearing; in moving on from the present towards the future, it can also move away from the object of critique, or place the white subject "outside" that critique'.[25]

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is presented as a rock, a stone. And that stone, Matthew suggests, can do two things: it can be a stone in the path that we stumble over, that trips us up, that offends or scandalizes us (the Greek verb *skandalizō*, translated as 'to give offence', means to put something in the way that causes people to stumble). Or it can be the rock on which the church is built, the solid foundation of a community. Jesus says

---

24 Jared Sexton, 2008, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 200.

25 Ahmed, 'Declarations of Whiteness'.

that those who are not offended by him are blessed. But perhaps what we need now, two thousand years later, is to stumble, to be interrupted, to be made uncomfortable, to have the solid foundations of our sense of self unsettled. The queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid suggests that we might learn to confront the Jesus who died for our sins as 'a stone in the road to force [us] to stop, fall down, while pausing in [our] pain and thinking during the pause'.[26]

In 2015, then UK Prime Minister David Cameron gave an Easter speech in which he spoke up for 'the values on which our nation was built … the values of Easter and the Christian religion – compassion, forgiveness, kindness, hard work and responsibility'.[27] *The Guardian* responded with an editorial suggesting instead that the central contribution of Christianity to the world was 'the extraordinary idea that people have worth in themselves, regardless of their usefulness to others, regardless even of their moral qualities', and with an article by Giles Fraser which said that 'there is no way 100 top business leaders would endorse the cross'.[28] I don't like Cameron's Christianity any more than *The Guardian* does, but I don't think it's helpful to suggest that it's not really Christianity. Christianity is and has been, among other things, the ideology of the ruling class, which measures people's humanity by their rationality, their economic success, their whiteness. And the danger is that if we seek to distance ourselves from these obviously harmful forms of Christianity – to make ourselves innocent, to make ourselves good – then we won't ever do the hard work of reckoning with

---

26 Marcella Althaus-Reid, 2003, *The Queer God*, London: Routledge, p. 35.

27 Simon Perfect, 2015, 'Politicians at Easter and Bishops at Election', *Theos*, 9 April, www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2015/04/09/politicians-at-easter-and-bishops-at-election (accessed 15.03.2023).

28 Editorial, 2015, 'The Guardian view on Easter: David Cameron's wonky cross', *The Guardian*, 2 April, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/02/guardian-view-easter-david-cameron-wonky-cross (accessed 15.03.2023), and Giles Fraser, 2015, 'Christianity, when properly understood, is a religion of losers', *The Guardian*, 3 April, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/apr/03/christianity-when-properly-understood-religion-losers (accessed 15.03.2023).

the ways that the entangled histories of Christianity and of whiteness that have deeply shaped David Cameron have also shaped us.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the hope of resurrection; that even when things seem most hopeless; even in the midst of defeat, there is the promise of new life. Sometimes it is Christianity itself that can seem hopeless. Paul's letter in Romans suggests the possibility of building human community across national borders or ethnic divisions, of care for one another that is not limited to others who seem the same as us. But it also brings into being the possibility of a new kind of distinction, between Christians and non-Christians, which came in time to ground the colonial violence that Las Casas tried to, but could not quite, escape from.

Sylvia Wynter, writing in the wake of the incomprehensible destruction unleashed by Las Casas' misplaced good intentions, finds a seed of hope in his moment of conversion. Las Casas failed, terribly, to stem the tide of violence he came to see as incompatible with Christian faith. But he laid the basis, she argues, for a vision of the world that refuses to accept the domination of some people by others, and for a vision of humanity where our care for one another does not stop with those who share our creed, with our Christianity. Only by coming to love every human being as our own, without distinction, she says, can we hope to survive.[29] We might yet be saved; but only if we are committed to working for the good of all of us, together.

---

29 Wynter, 'New Seville', Part 2.

6

Mammon[1]

Jesus said that you can't worship both God and Mammon: so how did Christianity come to play such an important role in contemporary capitalism? How can we make sense of a world in which Christians criticize the excesses of capitalism in one breath and celebrate the opportunities its crises present in another?

The 2008 financial crisis was very bad for a lot of people, but it turned out to be surprisingly good for Christianity in the UK. British newspapers reported something like a revival among city workers, who turned to Alpha courses and evangelical Christianity for a sense of moral purpose and spiritual sustenance in the middle of a very stressful time – it isn't easy to realize that the general public think you're the baddies responsible for destroying their lives.[2] Giles Fraser resigned from his role as canon chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in protest at

---

1 This chapter is (very) loosely based on my article, 2016, '"It's Not the Money but the Love of Money that is the Root of All Evil": Social Subjection, Machinic Enslavement and the Limits of Anglican Social Theology', *Religions* 7.103, pp. 1–12.

2 Alex Preston, 2011, 'God's bankers: How evangelical Christianity is taking a hold of the City of London's financial institutions', *Independent*, 23 April, www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/gods-bankers-how-evangelical-christianity-is-taking-a-hold-of-the-cityof-londonrsquos-financial-2270393.html (accessed 10.03.2023); Julia Finch and Nick Mathiason, 2009, 'Bankers and morality: Churches turn on the modern moneylenders', *The Guardian*, 25 October, www.theguardian.com/business/2009/oct/25/bank-pay-bonuses-religion (accessed 10.03.2023); and, 2011, 'Pass notes No. 3,074, Ken Costa: Just the man to preach morality to the City – A Tory banker', *The Guardian*, 7 November, www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/07/pass-notes-ken-costa (accessed 10.03.2023).

their decision to remove Occupy protestors, to much praise and a column in *The Guardian*. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, announced a 'War on Wonga', criticizing pay-day lending companies and announcing plans to set up credit unions to 'compete them out of business'. The enthusiasm with which this announcement was initially greeted was, however, somewhat dampened when it later turned out that the Church of England had money invested in a venture capital company that in turn invested in Wonga. As the government turned to austerity policies in the wake of the financial crisis, foodbanks proliferated, and Welby enthused that this was the 'greatest moment of opportunity' for the church 'since the Second World War'.[3]

Christians today often worry about the way that contemporary capitalism is undermining Christian moral values. Instead of loving God and taking care of our neighbour, the story goes, we are lured into the quest for profit and find ourselves seduced by consumerism. If this is true, then Christianity can also be offered as a solution to the problems created by capitalism. In the wake of the financial crisis, Christians and bankers alike agreed that there was a real need for a recovery of Christian moral values to save capitalism from itself.[4] But the problem is that 'Christian moral values' aren't the solution to the problems caused by capitalism: they're part of the problem.

God and Mammon

It's easy to make the argument that God and money are opposites. Jesus says that you can't worship God and money; that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven; that we should give to Caesar what is Caesar's (money) and to God what is God's. But underlying

3 John Bingham, 2013, '"Church must fill failing state void" – Arch-bishop-elect Justin Welby', *Anglican Communion News Service*, 1 February, www.anglicannews.org/news/2013/02/church-must-fill-failing-state-void-archbishop-elect-justin-welby.aspx (accessed 10.03.2023).

4 Finch and Mathiason, 2009, 'Bankers and morality'.

these arguments is the suggestion that God and money are similar enough that we might see them as being in competition with one another. If you can't worship both God and money, then that suggests that both God and money are things that can be worshipped. If riches get in the way of righteousness in the eyes of God, that suggests that riches and righteousness are somehow comparable. If money can compete with God, what does that tell us about what money actually is?

Value

The histories of God and money are more entangled than you might suspect. Both God and money function in part as measures of value, the single thing against which we can measure everything else to see what it is worth. For classical Christianity, God is, as the eleventh-century theologian Anselm famously put it, 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. God is everything that is good, great or valuable, only more so. If you want to know what God is like, you can think about the most beautiful, wise, just, desirable thing or person or idea you can imagine – and God is like that, but infinitely, unimaginably, better. Of course, different cultures and periods of history have different ideas about what is most important and valuable, and so our ideas about what God is like shift and change in tandem with our ideas about what is most important. In societies that see men as inherently better than women, God tends to be seen as masculine; in societies that care about the power of authority figures, God is seen as powerful and authoritative; in societies that care about kindness and mercy, God is seen as kind and merciful. But throughout the history of Christianity, the belief in one God has tended to imply the belief in one standard of goodness, the idea that everything that exists can be measured on a single scale according to how much it is like God. God is understood as the central point at which everything good, desirable and valuable converges. Every good characteristic of every thing that exists is seen as leading us back to the one God, and so Christians have for the most part

tended not to think that there are lots of different ways to be good or wise or just or kind, but only one way: the way that is closest to God's.

Money might not always have been understood to be the most important thing, that than which nothing greater can be imagined, but what it shares with God is this characteristic of being a universal measure of value. How can you weigh up the relative value of a rose's scent, a warm bed for the night and a day's work? With money. Money, like God, gives everything a value in relation to a single metric. We might think that there are things money can't buy, but the more central money becomes to the way we organize society, the more difficult it is to imagine what those things might be. Even if we believe that the value of a human life is infinite, or that you can't put a value on kind-ness, we are constantly forced to act as though that's not true. As capitalism has come to determine every aspect of our lives, we spend more and more time trying to measure everything so that it can be given a social value, and arguments about what is good or important increasingly play out in terms of monetary value: is it more expensive to provide houses for everyone or to let some people be homeless? Is the additional money a gradu-ate earns enough to justify the cost of their education? Would it be cheaper to invest now in order to minimize climate change or to pay for adaptations now that it's irrevocably in motion? Like God, we might encounter money in material things – coins, notes, cheques – but what those material things signify is an ultimate, unchanging reality in which all the components of value are united.[5] Just as, for theology, we cannot distinguish between God's beauty, God's justice and God's mercy because all are made one in God, so too the same money can be used to buy anything and everything – objects, time, ideas and love.

---

5 Here and throughout the chapter I'm drawing on Alfred Sohn-Rethel, 1978, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, and Philip Goodchild, 2009, *Theology of Money*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

The state

What binds together God and money is a third entity which is often understood to be in competition with both: the state. Both the emergence of money as one single, universal measure of value and monotheism – the belief in one single, universal God – seems to come into being at around the same time as the emergence of formal, hierarchical ways of organizing society in which everyone is expected to submit, honour and pay taxes to one single head of state.[6] While some strands of Christianity have, from Christianity's inception, seen a conflict between worshipping God and the kinds of obedience and honour demanded by the state, this is not because God and state are intrinsically opposed, but because Christian theology was born in the context of the occupation of Jewish land by an invading, hostile power. Obedience to the Roman Empire included an expectation of participation in the imperial cult, which worshipped the Roman emperor as a god. While many of the peoples conquered by Rome were able to assimilate the imperial cult into existing religious practices, this was not the case for the more strictly monotheistic Jewish people, and from them Christianity inherited this sense of a fundamental incompatibility between true worship of God and the imperial cult.

But the language of Christianity is also deeply suffused with the imagery of the state. Christians, the New Testament and early Christian writings suggest, owe allegiance to God the King, to the kingdom of God; Jesus is described as the Son of God, a term used to describe Roman emperors; and even the heavenly realm is conceived of as an imperial court, with androgynous angels instead of eunuchs, bureaucrats and messengers ensuring that the will of the ruler is carried out, and gathering around the throne to glorify the source of all

6 See, for example, Tapji Garba, 2022, 'Money', *Political Theology Network*, 8 November, https://politicaltheology.com/money/ (accessed 10.03.2023), and Devin Singh, 2018, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

power.[7] Despite Christianity's origins as a movement that saw the power of God as existing in direct competition with the power of state, the history of Christianity has been much more complex, with church and state – God and kings – acting together as often as they have come into conflict. Likewise, while many in the contemporary world see the power of the state as opposed to the power of money, whether in a good way (the state can rein in the excesses of capital) or in a bad way (the state limits the economy's growth and freedom), in fact the two have historically worked together. The state has historically been the body to issue and guarantee currency, both subsidizing and depending on new forms of business and finance. As capitalism developed, western states worked to open up new markets to business by colonizing and enslaving other people and societies, by imposing monopoly trade where it suited the interests of its richest citizens and insisting on free trade when other countries tried to protect their own financial interests. States sought to limit ordinary people's power to resist the domination of financial markets by destroying unions and by infiltrating and undermining left-wing, feminist, anti-racist and environmental groups seeking to redistribute wealth and transform the economy. They intervened overseas to sponsor coups, arrange assassinations or simply invade wherever foreign governments were seen to pose a threat to the domination of everything by big business, from oil companies to banana magnates. And they have, increasingly, opened up new markets to profiteering by privatizing health and social care, education and utilities.

---

7 The philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues, I think convincingly, that angelology and bureaucracy develop alongside one another across the history of Christianity: 'the paradigmatic relation of angelology and bureaucracy runs now in one direction, now in another. Sometimes … the administration of the worldly monarchy is the model of angelic ministries, whereas at others the celestial bureaucracy furnishes the archetype for the worldly.' Giorgio Agamben, 2011, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Lorenzo Chiesa (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 157–8.

Piety

In his book *Capitalism and Religion*, the philosopher Philip Goodchild describes piety as 'any determinate practice of directing attention'. To question piety – to ask about what we pay attention to and why – is, he says, to ask, 'What is ultimately worthy of honour, belief, value, trust, enjoyment, and worship?'[8] This question of piety – of attention – is one key aspect of the problem of the relationship between God and money. In so far as God and money are in competition, it's because both demand our attention – our honour, value, trust, enjoyment and worship. But we are not free to give our attention to whatever we decide is most worthy of it. I might think – like medieval Christian monastics – that the most important use of my attention is to focus it on prayer and contemplation. But I still have to pay my bills and taxes, show up to work and do a good enough job that I don't get fired. Why? Because I live in a capitalist society, a world organized not around worship and contemplation of God but around the endless circulation of money. If I want to survive in that world, I either have to pay attention to money or find ways to compel other people to pay attention to money so that I don't have to. As the economy makes more and more demands on us, as housing gets more expensive, jobs get more precarious and wages fall, we are less and less free to pay attention to things that we consider valuable but capitalism does not.

Debt

All of this might suggest that we're in a particular sort of crisis: we have created a society in which we are compelled to worship Mammon, and so it becomes more difficult for us to worship God. But that's only true if God and Mammon are in competition; and (you can probably guess what's coming next) things

---

8 Philip Goodchild, 2002, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*, London: Routledge, p. 5.

are more complicated than that. To understand the complex entanglements of God and money and how it is that so many of us have ended up trying to serve both, it's helpful to think about debt. Debt is increasingly a part of our lives. More and more of us are more and more indebted, whether that's credit card debt, mortgages, student debt, medical debt or just money we owe but can't afford to pay on our bills, council tax or rent. Debt shapes our individual lives, but it also shapes the global economy. Almost every nation is indebted, and the global financial economy increasingly relies on cycles of debt and investment, as we saw in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, prompted in part by a rise in unpayable consumer debt, where governments around the world stepped in to bail out banks and businesses.

While the centrality of debt to the global economy is new, debt itself is at least as old as money; perhaps even as old as the human belief in God. David Graeber's book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* argues that money emerged out of debt, and specifically out of practices of sacrifice to god or the gods, which both represent and embody the idea that to be a person is to owe 'a debt to the society that made us what we are'.[9] Debt, then, has essentially to do with morality. In Christianity, debt is fundamental to theological understandings of the nature of sin, salvation and forgiveness. To sin is to fail to pay our debts to God, to give God the honour that God deserves for creating us, for making us what we are; to be sinful is to be indebted to God, unable to pay back the cost of our disobedience; to be saved is to be redeemed, to have our debts paid off so that we can be set free, or to be forgiven, to have our debts cancelled out.[10]

In order for a society founded on debt to function, morality is essential. While of course creditors may be able to use force to ensure that their debts are repaid, a society in which everyone constantly tried to evade their creditors would be a disaster, not

---

9 David Graeber, 2011, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, p. 58.

10 Here and throughout this section I am drawing on the argument made by Friedrich Nietzsche, 2007, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Carol Diethe (tr.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

least because we'd never be able to trust other people enough to lend them things in the first place. So a society founded on debt of one kind of another relies on people *believing* in debt – believing that it is morally right to pay your debts; believing that the debts you owe ought to be paid; believing that people who don't pay their debts deserve to be punished. As the contemporary philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato says, in a debt economy, ethics and economics are intertwined with one another.[11]

Because capitalism emerged out of Christian societies, it has taken particularly Christian forms. I talk in Chapter 7, 'God is Useless', about how this has impacted the way we think about work under capitalism, but this is also true for the way we think about debt and ethics more broadly. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx argued that Christianity was 'the special religion of capital': just as Christianity distinguishes, he argues, between those who have faith and those who do not, those lucky enough to be predestined for salvation (having their sins forgiven) and those who will have to pay the price for their unforgiven sins, so too capitalism distinguishes between those who have credit and those who do not, those who are lucky enough to be born 'with a silver spoon in [their] mouth and those born without'.[12]

Debt is power: to be indebted to someone means that they have power over you. According to Lazzarato, it was the emergence in the ancient world of empires and states – of single, hierarchical forms of state power – that produced the idea of an infinite, unpayable debt which made Christian accounts of redemption possible. To be a good person was no longer to be entangled in mutual and reciprocal networks of credit and debt, but to be stuck in a hierarchy where you could never hope to pay off the debt you owed to those above you. So Christian ideas about the infinite, unpayable debts we owe to God, the impossibility of making good on our sin, emerged out of these

---

11 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Joshua David Jordan (tr.), Cambridge, MA: MIT.

12 Karl Marx, 1863, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch24.htm (accessed 10.03.2023).

hierarchical forms of society. What Christianity added to this, Lazzarato says, was the 'interiorization' of debt: not only would you be indebted for ever, but you were also expected to feel bad about it.[13]

In the medieval world, where church, state and money were more closely entangled, this link between ethics and economics was clear. Church law, confession manuals and sermons all explicitly addressed questions relating to money; churches collected tithes, and papal bulls gave Christian kings permission to invade and conquer newly discovered lands, to take possession of their wealth and to establish trade connections with Europe. But, as I've discussed in the previous chapter, the great transformations that arrived with the formation of capitalism, the advent of European colonialism and the emergence of the modern world meant a new division of human life into public and private spheres.

As the one Holy Roman Catholic Church fractured, setting Christian kings against one another and dividing communities from within, Christianity's claim to universality seemed increasingly shaky. Over time, it became increasingly associated with the private sphere of home life, conscience and personal morality. God didn't disappear from the public sphere, but the Christian belief in providence – the idea that God is at work in the world, ensuring that whether we accept or reject God, do good or evil, our actions will be incorporated into God's plan for the world – was transformed into a belief that 'the market' would ensure that our individual selfish actions would eventually come together to bring about economic goods.[14] In his 1536 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin – one of the key figures of the Reformation – argued that nothing could happen without God willing it. God gives us the responsibility to organize our lives however we want, and in the final judgement we will be held accountable for our actions. But whether we choose to love our neighbour or to murder them, we cannot escape the will of God. Whatever our intentions,

---

13 Jordan, *Indebted Man*, p. 78.
14 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, pp. 17–52.

even the worst decisions we make and the most depraved things we do will ultimately contribute to the unfolding of God's will in the world. God 'has fixed the boundaries of our life' but has 'at the same time entrusted us with the care of it'. As Proverbs 16.9 says, 'The human mind plans the way but the LORD directs the steps.' We are called, Calvin implies, to do what we believe to be right, working for our own personal salvation, while trusting that God will work all things together for good.[15] Two centuries later, in 1776, the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, one of capitalism's founding documents and arguably the first modern economic text. In the book, Smith argued that while individuals neither intend to contribute to the good of society as a whole nor know how a particular action will impact others, nonetheless we are each 'led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of [our] original intention'.[16] We are called, Smith implies, to do what we believe will benefit us, working for our own personal profit, while trusting that the market will work all things together for good.

This division between markets and morality makes it easy to think that the proper role of Christianity is to make sure that we behave well in our private moral decisions. This is one reason why churches have so often had more to say about sexuality than they have about economics. I think often about the time a friend went to a leadership conference organized by a big London church famous for attracting wealthy members. Over the course of the evening, he sent me a series of increasingly outraged texts as he listened to the head of a private prison and detention centre company known for terrible working conditions, rampant cultures of sexual abuse, and deaths in custody speaking to the gathered audience about how important his relationship with Jesus was for keeping him grounded and helping him to remember the importance of investing in his marriage and family.

---

15 John Calvin, 1845, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (tr.), www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.xviii.html (accessed 15.03.2023).

16 Adam Smith, 1977, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, p. 593.

Of course, that's not the whole picture, and neither churches as institutions nor Christians as individuals have ever entirely accepted that morality and markets are absolutely distinct. Throughout the history of capitalism, Christians have intervened in the public sphere of markets in various ways, especially when it seems that the excesses of the market are seen to be endangering morality. This has often played out in some ambivalent ways. During the Atlantic slave trade, for example, some Christians made moral arguments in favour of abolishing slavery and the slave trade. Others worried that slave owners were reluctant to allow missionaries to preach the gospel to the enslaved people they owned because they thought that conversion to Christianity would make enslaved people less subservient. This latter group of Christians tried to persuade slave owners to allow missionaries on to their plantations by arguing that encouraging enslaved people to convert to Christianity would actually make them more submissive by teaching them the Christian moral values of submission and obedience.[17] During the process of land enclosures and industrialization in nineteenth-century Britain, which saw thousands of people move from the British countryside to work in factories, many Christians reacted with horror as poor working conditions and low wages led to shockingly low life expectancy among the working classes in Britain, in the context of rising poverty, child labour and drug and alcohol addiction. Christians became involved in all manner of social and political organizations, often with a strongly moral tone. Christians worried especially about the way that long working hours and the entry of working-class women and

---

17 Katherine Gerbner tracks the development of these debates, arguing that in European colonies 'missionaries offered a new vision for Christian slavery that included both masters and slaves. In the missionary vision, Protestantism was a stabilizing force that would help to maintain, support, and reform slavery … they argued that Christian slaves would be more obedient and hardworking than others, and that a slave system built on Christian paternalism would be more productive and humane.' Katherine Gerbner, 2018, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 194.

children into the world of waged labour was 'destroying' the family and damaging women's femininity by exposing them to factory work. Christians campaigned for temperance laws, to make it harder for working-class people to spend what little money they had on alcohol; they campaigned against sex work, setting up organizations to 'rescue' sex-working women and find them other kinds of work;[18] they campaigned for laws to ban child labour and to keep women away from factory work. Because women had, by this period, come to be associated with the private sphere of moral purity and Christian values, Christian women often used the language of morality to justify their interventions in the public sphere. The Christian feminist Josephine Butler, who campaigned against the British government's attempts to force sex-working women to submit to invasive sexual health tests both in Britain and in India, argued that, in the light of the double standards of Victorian men, who were happy to insist that their own wives and daughters be sexually faithful while turning a blind eye to – or taking advantage of – the proliferation of sex work among poor women, it was essential that women enter the public sphere and demand that England give up its hypocrisy and return to moral purity.[19] For Butler, women's greater moral purity was essential to ensuring that Britain fulfil its divinely ordained mission to the world.

Throughout the history of capitalism, then, Christianity has acted as a kind of moral restraint on the unrestricted freedom of markets, stepping into the public sphere to intervene when economics seems to pose a threat to moral standards. It's tempting to see this as a good thing: Christians intervening to make

---

18 As Antoinette Burton has shown, some of these more 'morally acceptable' jobs were exactly the kind of badly paid work that sex-working women were trying to escape. Antoinette Burton, 1994, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture: 1865–1915*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press; a theme that, as I discuss in Chapter 1, 'The World Doesn't Need Saving, But Destroying', has carried on into present-day Christian interventions in issues of sex work.

19 Josephine Butler, 1879, 'Social Purity: An Address', http://purl. dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/vwwp/VAB7160 (accessed 10.03.2023).

sure that profit does not always come before people, protecting ordinary people from capitalism's worst excesses. As the examples above suggest, though, that's not always the case. Moral concerns have led to Christians championing imperialism, slavery and extremely patriarchal ideas about women, sex and the family. How can we make sense out of this tangle?

As we've already discussed, morality and markets have never really been distinct, any more than the public and the private sphere are. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this public/private distinction corresponds to the distinction between waged and unwaged work, between the kind of productive labour that, under capitalism, men are typically thought to do and the kind of reproductive labour that women are typically thought to do. It's easy to see how this makes sense if we think about the more practical aspects of social reproduction. The people who go out to work, to make things or to make money, need to be fed, clothed and housed; someone needs to bring them up when they're children and take care of them when they're old. But it's not just these practical, material types of work that fall into the sphere of the household, the family and social reproduction. As we said above, for capitalism to keep going, it's not just that people need to be kept physically alive. We also need to believe that the world we inhabit is basically moral. We need to be people who will pay our debts, who will work hard at our jobs, who won't try to steal from our employers or neighbours. So we need morality: we need to believe in the value of honouring our debts, of hard work and of abiding by the law. But more than that, we need to believe in the basic morality of the system that we live in. If we start to think that we're not being paid enough for the work we do, we might start to join unions, to see our bosses as the enemy, and refuse to work until we're better paid. That's bad enough on its own, but if we pursue this line of critique and come to believe that the reason for the specific injustices we experience is that the system is inherently rigged to help the rich get richer by exploiting and impoverishing everyone else, then we might start wanting to overthrow the entire system.

This is part of what the philosopher Nancy Fraser calls the

'social contradiction' at the heart of capitalism.[20] On the one hand, in order for profits to keep going up, capitalists have to keep finding new ways to exploit people and to increase profits: drive down wages, get people working longer hours, spend less on things like child care, training or employee benefits. But the more that these resources that people rely on for social repro-duction – for keeping each other and those that they love alive – are taken away, the more difficult it is for people to survive, and at some point, this starts to threaten the survival of cap-italism, which needs people to stay alive in order that they can keep being exploited. If your skilled workers die young, if people arrive at work not knowing how to read, or unable to concentrate because they're tired or hungry, or are worried about the family members they're caring for in their spare time, if everyone stops having children because it's too expensive or they don't have time, then at some point the system will start to wobble.

Because capitalism began by dividing the world up into the public and private spheres, the world of work and the world of the family, these periodic wobbles where capitalism starts to saw away too quickly at the branch it's sitting on often show up as crises of the family; and because the family has become the place that is supposed to preserve and pass on moral values, these crises of the family are also crises of morality. Because capitalism often relies on disrupting old ways of doing things in order to find new ways of making money, attempts to assert moral or family values tend to be conservative. For example, Christians have rightly condemned long hours and dangerous working conditions, the rise of foodbanks and exploitative lenders. But most of the time these critiques end up working to perpetuate capitalism – ultimately the source of these issues – rather than to end it.

How can critiquing the immorality of capitalism help to perpetuate it? Let's go back to one of the examples from the beginning of this chapter: Justin Welby's 'war on Wonga'.

---

20 Nancy Fraser, 2016, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care', *New Left Review*, pp. 99–117.

When Welby criticized Wonga – a payday lending company that charged steep rates of interest – he didn't argue that it was immoral for banks to charge interest on loans because it's fundamentally wrong for wealthy organizations to profit from other people's financial need. He didn't argue that payday lending companies should be made illegal, or that the government should ensure that no one needed to use payday lending companies by making sure that everyone had access to the basic resources they needed for life. Instead, he told Wonga, 'We're not in the business of trying to legislate you out of existence, we're trying to compete you out of existence', and announced the Church of England's plan to put resources into credit unions.[21] For Welby, the problem wasn't debt as such, or the fact that our entire social and economic system is built on debt. The problem was the wrong kind of debt: unfair debt. The proper response to this problem was not to try to abolish debt entirely but to make debt more reasonable, more moral, by exerting the influence of a church committed to good debt. For Welby, the intense exploitation of payday loans was not a problem because it laid bare the basic workings of the world, but because it went too far and threatened to undo the moral fibres holding together the social and economic system in which debt played a central role. The fact that it was later revealed that the Church of England was an (indirect) investor in Wonga illustrates just how much the church's own existence – or at least its financial stability – is dependent on the ongoing functioning of capitalism. The Anglican Church owns money, which it invests in businesses that profit from other people's work or debt, or from financial speculation on the profits from other people's work or debt. Its moral concern is not to dismantle this system in which wealth generates more wealth as others sink deeper into debt, but to ensure that this system does not go too far, does not seem *too* exploitative.

---

21 Andrew Grice, 2013, 'War on Wonga: We're putting you out of business, Archbishop Justin Welby tells payday loans companies', *Independent*, 25 July, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/war-wonga-we-re-putting-you-out-business-archbishop-canterbury-justin-welby-tells-payday-loans-company-8730839.html (accessed 10.03.2023).

Justin Welby is probably not in any danger of being seen as politically radical, but the problems with Welby's 'war on Wonga' show up in other Christian engagements with social justice issues. At the turn of the millennium, Christians mobilized in huge numbers alongside charities, NGOs, unions and many other organizations to form Jubilee 2000, a campaign that took its name from the biblical idea of a jubilee – a regular cancellation of all debts. [22] Jubilee 2000 called for the mass cancellation of debts owed by countries in the Global South to western countries and international bodies such as the World Bank. Cancelling these debts, campaigners argued, would produce a more just world. But the campaign proceeded primarily through lobbying the organizations to whom that debt was owed, asking them to forgive debts. As Devin Singh has pointed out, the problem here is that, while having your debts forgiven can make a real difference to the lives of countries or individuals, this does not mean that the fundamental relationship between creditor and debtor is disrupted. In the ancient world, Singh says, 'debt cancellation occurred primarily when a new leader came to the throne. As a mark of benevolence and supremacy, the new ruler would destroy the ledgers of indebtedness – often through visible, material acts of smashing clay tablets – effectively resetting the economy.'[23] A king might forgive his subjects' debts, but the relationship of king to subject remains, and the occasional forgiveness of debts and acts of mercy often worked to reinforce the sovereign's authority, emphasizing that his absolute rule was just, merciful and moral. The debts that have hampered the autonomy, independence and development of non-western countries are not the result of a just or moral political order. When countries throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia began to challenge

---

22 'Jubilee 2000', *Advocacy International*, http://advocacyinternational.co.uk/featured-project/jubilee-2000 (accessed 10.03.2023).

23 Devin Singh, 2016, 'Debt Cancellation as Sovereign Crisis Management', *Cosmologics* magazine, 18 January, https://web.archive.org/web/20170409185425/http://www.cosmologicsmagazine.com/devin-singh-debt-cancellation-as-sovereign-crisis-management (accessed 10.03.2023).

and overthrow colonial rule in the twentieth century, this period of decolonization was rapidly followed in the 1980s by 'structural adjustments'. This euphemistic term describes a process whereby the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank forced many countries in the Global South to restructure their economies by refusing to lend them money unless they cut public spending and reorganized their economies to benefit big corporations.[24] The vast wealth which made these loans possible, of course, had accumulated largely as a result of centuries of western pillage, theft and exploitation of the rest of the world. When Jubilee 2000 campaigners asked for these debts to be forgiven, they effectively legitimized the authority of the already-powerful creditors and refused to demand a fundamental restructuring of the unequal relationships of power that had brought these debts into being in the first place. By agreeing to forgive some (though not all) of these debts, national governments and international financial organizations were able to look moral – merciful, generous and just – while continuing to exercise ill-gotten power over their debtors.

Singh describes debt forgiveness as a kind of 'crisis management'. When debts tip too far into being unpayable, this can threaten the stability of the entire economic system. We saw this in the 2008 financial crisis, which resulted in part from too much financial speculation on subprime mortgages – money lent to people who were never going to be able to pay it back. This in turn can start to undermine the system's moral legitimacy. Why should we abide by the rules of institutions which clearly do not have our best interests at heart? Why should we pay back debts to people whose demands are immoral? In 1998, offering his backing to the Jubilee 2000 campaign, then-Archbishop George Carey described '*unpayable* debt' (italics mine) as 'a contemptible immorality'.[25]

---

24 For a detailed history of the central role national debt has played in the ongoing legacy of colonialism, see Kojo Koram, 2022, *Uncommon Wealth: Britain and the Aftermath of Empire*, London: John Murray.

25 Quoted in Eve Poole, 2002, *The Church on Capitalism: Theology and the Market*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 15–16.

Timothy Snediker describes acts of debt forgiveness like those that followed the Jubilee 2000 campaign as a 'theodicy of money' – theodicy, again, being the theological term for the ways that Christians try to reconcile our belief in a good and powerful God with the existence of suffering in the world.[26] Acts of mercy or forgiveness help us to believe that, although suffering and injustice exist, the basic structures of the world we inhabit are good and just. They help to persuade us that the people in power deserve to be there, and that we should continue to pay our debts. As Singh puts it, without more radical demands to reorganize the structures of power within society, these calls for debt forgiveness function 'as pressure valves designed to recalibrate the economic system and allow it to persist'.[27]

This doesn't mean, of course, that debt forgiveness doesn't make anything better. Snediker writes:

> On the one hand, wide-ranging and penetrating debt forgiveness is, by any measure, the only way forward for indebted nations such as Greece and for students drowning in educational debt. The situation as it stands is unsustainable … [but the] danger is that the debtors in question must necessarily accept forgiveness without calling into question the very structures of power that made them 'guilty' in the first place.[28]

In 1921, the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin argued that capitalism is a religion: 'that is to say', he wrote, 'capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers.'[29] But

---

26 Timothy Snediker, 2016, 'Theodicy of Money: The Scene and Subject of Forgiveness', *Religious Theory*, 18 May, http://jcrt.org/religioustheory/2016/05/18/theodicy-of-money-the-scene-and-subject-of-forgiveness/ (accessed 15.03.2023).

27 Singh, 'Debt Cancellation'.

28 Snediker, 'Theodicy of Money'.

29 Walter Benjamin, 1921, 1996, 'Capitalism as Religion', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, (tr.) Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard University Press, 1921, 1996, pp. 288–91.

this doesn't mean, for Benjamin, that capitalism is an opponent of Christianity, a false idol that must be toppled in order that we can come to worship the true God. Instead, he says, 'Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West … until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite – that is to say, of capitalism.' The worship of the God of Christianity has made possible the worship of Mammon. This is why neither Christian calls for a more just capitalism nor Christian attempts to care for capitalism's victims through aid, volunteering or debt relief will be enough to get us out of it.

In Chapter 5, 'How Christianity Invented Race', I talked about the way that, in the transition from the medieval to the modern world, the Christian distinction between saved and unsaved was transformed into the racial distinction between white and non-white. Understanding this invention of race is also crucial to how we understand the emergence of capitalism, in which the distinction between white and non-white people was crucial. The vast amounts of gold and silver which flowed into Europe at the beginning of the modern era were stolen from non-white peoples. This theft was justified by the idea that Christians would use this vast wealth for the sake of the gospel or, in more secular terms, by the idea that non-white people, existing outside of civilization, did not know how to take care of the wealth they owned and did not have the moral standing to be trusted with money. What was stolen by early Christian capitalists was not only wealth but people: the transatlantic slave trade reduced human beings to the status of livestock, to investments.

A society organized around money is one that treats money as the measure of value, as the marker of who is saved and who is unsaved. For medieval Christians, the distinction between Christians and non-Christians was the distinction between people who could have their debts forgiven, who could accumulate spiritual wealth, and people who would never be able to pay off their infinite debts to God. In the modern world, the key distinction is between those who have credit, who own property, and those who are indebted and have been turned

into property. This distinction is racialized.[30] During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the link between wealth and whiteness was explicit. Non-white people were seen as savage, and uncivilized, and therefore as incapable of owning property or being trusted with credit. These days it is money, rather than race, that explicitly justifies these global inequalities. Instead of telling the story that non-white people deserve to suffer poverty, criminalization and dispossession because of their racial inferiority, we say that the cause of people's suffering is their poverty, their failure to be good capitalist subjects. People suffer because they have not worked hard enough, have broken the law, have got themselves irresponsibly into debt; and it just so happens that the people suffering are disproportionately non-white.

Capitalism and racism are not separate systems but two parts of the same system, a system that was brought into being by Christianity. What are we to do with these entanglements? Amaryah Armstrong suggests that we might begin with liberation theology's declaration of God's preferential option for the poor. 'Only by turning to the figure of the black and brown poor, perpetually dispossessed, failing, and criminal, can Christian theology understand the economic reversals and redistributions that must be made in order to imagine an otherwise common good.'[31] Christians have spent much of the last four centuries worshipping God and Mammon at the same time. What if we took seriously the idea that 'you cannot worship God and Mammon' not as a statement of fact but as an aspiration?

---

30 See, for example, Amaryah Armstrong, 2015, 'Blackness and Value Part 3: On Blackness as Debt', *Women in Theology*, 2 March, https://womenintheology.org/2015/03/02/blackness-and-value-part-3-on-blackness-as-debt/ (accessed 10.03.2023).

31 Amaryah Armstrong, 2016, 'The Spirit and the Subprime: Race, Risk, and Our Common Dispossession', *Anglican Theological Review* 98.1.

7

God is Useless

I'm a millennial, which, as far as I understand it, means that I grew up in a world where everyone seemed to believe that things were just going to keep getting better all the time, only to have the rug pulled out from under my feet as I hit adulthood. My first great political disillusionment was in 2003, when I took part in the world's biggest ever anti-war protests against the invasion of Iraq, only to realize that the governments of the world were going to go to war anyway. Not long after that, the 2008 financial crisis hit, shortly followed by the great political betrayal of 2010 when, in the UK, the Liberal Democrat Party went into coalition with the Conservatives, and in the face of more mass protests decided to raise undergraduate tuition fees and cut the education maintenance allowance that was crucial to enabling young working-class people to stay at school. Watching the protests against tuition fees in 2010 was for me, like many of my peers, a radicalizing moment. As students fought for a better world, cops reacted with startling brutality, beating protestors and dragging people out of wheelchairs, then spent years afterwards trying to prosecute the very people they'd brutalized.

So much has happened since then, but however creative, committed or organized the protestors are, it feels as if the best we can hope for is to slow down the pace of destruction. My generation will be the first in several to be, on average, less well off than our parents. Rents are skyrocketing, mortgages increasingly out of reach, working conditions endlessly declining and the hope of retirement receding so fast that, however eye-watering the percentage of our salary we're paying into pensions, I don't know anyone my age who expects to retire.

Add to that the global context of rising fascism, climate destruction and accelerating capitalist exploitation and it feels fair to say that, overall, things aren't getting better. What does it mean to work hard at a job in an industry that's being destroyed or turned into an enclave for the kids of rich people? What's the point of political organizing if all we ever do is lose?

The question of what's worth doing with our time and energy is, historically, tangled up with the theological questions of creation and redemption: why God made the world and how we fix it. What I'm going to do in this chapter is walk you through some of that history: how have Christians understood what the point is of being alive, of what's worth putting our time and energy into. And I'm going to end by suggesting that there are parts of Christian theology we can use to think about what it might mean to live joyfully and intensely even if we accept that we're not going to win.

The angelic life

There's a basic story that Christians tell about the history of the world, and it goes roughly like this: God creates the world; Adam and Eve fuck it up; some stuff happens with the Israelites which in one way or another leads to Jesus showing up, dying, being resurrected, fixing things, sort of, though in a way that means we're still waiting around for resolution. Eventually we get to go to heaven (or, if we're being trendy, to inhabit the new heavens and the new earth), and then we all live happily ever after in some sort of everlasting worship service (try not to think about this bit too hard). The way that we tell this story tends to be very focused on the problem of sin and the question of how we solve it; and we tend to talk as though both we and God exist primarily to *get things done*, to save or be saved.

But what does it mean to 'be saved'? The answer has varied throughout the history of Christianity, often reflecting the particular worries that people had at different points in that history. Early Christian monasticism – which emerged in the context of growing social and political chaos as the Roman

Empire began to crumble around it – was fixated on the idea of an eternal, unchanging realm where nothing could go wrong. Early Christian theologians talked about the pain that came with living in a world of transformation, change and death. We might take pleasure in the people around us, our friends or family or children, but there's no guarantee that those people won't die, be kidnapped or betray us. Medieval Christians, in an age of famines, plagues and bread riots, imagined heaven as a realm where no one went hungry and no one got sick or died. For a long time, Christians took angels to be aspirational figures of what we could be like if only things were better. Unlike us, the angels didn't need to work to ensure they had enough food to make it through the winter, to take care of family responsibilities, or to worry about the possibility of losing everything in a fire, dying or becoming disabled through accident or sickness. In heaven, all of these earthly cares would simply fall away and we'd be free, like the angels, to live lives dedicated solely to the pleasures of knowing and being known by God.

As we've discussed in previous chapters, because sexuality was seen as one of the aspects of human life that tied us most decisively to the cycle of birth and death, many early Christians saw Christianity as a call to renounce sexual activity in favour of the more important work of prayer and contemplation. This way of life increasingly came to be referred to as 'the angelic life'. This was inspired in part by Luke 20.34–36 where Jesus, responding to a question from the Sadducees about what would happen to remarried people after the resurrection, said:

> Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die any more, because they are like angels.

This passage was taken by some early Christians as a challenge to renounce sex in this life in imitation of the life to come. Some couples decided to renounce sex with one another in order to live lives of chastity while continuing in other ways to maintain

their married lives; some unmarried women renounced both sex and marriage, choosing to remain with their families instead of getting married and having children of their own (a move that might have been appealing for a number of reasons, not all of them especially pious).

During the third and fourth centuries, many Christians moved away from cities and into the Egyptian desert to live lives of prayer, worship and renunciation – either individually or in communities sworn to poverty, chastity and obedience. It was out of this movement that Christian monasticism emerged, and increasingly the idea of 'the angelic life' came to be associated not just with sexual renunciation but with the renunciation of other kinds of material pleasures. As early Christians increasingly chose to abandon their family commitments in order to enter into a life dedicated solely to God, huge numbers of other Christians made pilgrimages to visit this communities of people trying to live like the angels.[1] Many members of these early monastic communities thought they were literally living in community with the angels. Some told stories of being assisted by angels in their struggle against sexual temptation. Angels helped these devout Christians out by flying them across rivers so they didn't have to get naked in public, castrating them so they were better able to resist sexual temptation when left in charge of thousands of female virgins, or keeping the community honest by snitching on monastics who were not living up to the community's standards.[2] Sometimes this desire to emulate the angels caused problems for these early monastic communities. Ellen Muehlberger reports a story from one early text about 'John the Dwarf'. One day, the story goes, John announced to his older brother that he wanted to be like the angels who 'are free from care … since they do not work', took off his clothes, and walked out into the desert. A week later, he came back and knocked on the door. The brother who answered replied that he could not possibly be John, as John had become an angel

---

1 Ellen Muehlberger, 2008, 'Ambivalence about the Angelic Life: The Promise and Perils of an Early Christian Discourse about Asceticism', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.4, pp. 447–78.

2 Muehlberger, 'Ambivalence about the Angelic Life', pp. 461–8.

and was no longer to be found among human beings and left the door locked, with John outside, for the rest of the night. The next morning the brother told John that, as a human being, he would still need to work if he wanted to be able to eat, and John, suitably humbled by his night of suffering, agreed and apologized.[3]

All these stories suggest, among other things, that John was not quite right when he claimed that angels didn't work – it seems as if they had plenty to do even just caring for the monks. As Christian understandings of the angels developed, so too did their thinking about the role and work of the angels. For Dionysius the Areopagite, sixth-century theologian and the first systematic angelologist (yes, that's a thing), the angels' role was not just to enjoy the endless worship of God, but also to mediate between God and human beings. Angels, for Dionysius, are essentially the bureaucrats of heaven: they manage the world on God's behalf, and they gather up worship instead of taxes as tribute to the power of God. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben points out that angels played a key role in the way that Christians came to understand the work of bureaucracy and government, a legacy we see even today in films and TV shows where angels often appear as men in suits carrying clipboards or tablet computers.[4] In trying to imagine how God might manage the everyday running of the created world, Christians often looked at earthly systems of government for inspiration, and angelologies often tell us as much about how government and bureaucracy were operating in a particular society as they do about more abstract theological concerns. But the problem with this way of thinking about things, Agamben says, is that it doesn't quite answer a more fundamental question: what's the point of all this work?[5] The big Christian story of creation

---

3 Muehlberger, 'Ambivalence about the Angelic Life', p. 475.

4 See, for example, *Heaven Can Wait*, directed by Warren Beatty and Buck Henry, (Paramount Pictures, 1978), or *The Adjustment Bureau*, directed by George Nolfi (Universal Pictures, 2011).

5 Or, as Agamben puts it, 'The problem of how to think the inoperative figure of divinity represents, in Christian theology, a veritable *crux*'. Giorgio Agamben, 2011, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a*

and redemption implies that eventually all the work that we are doing to struggle against our brokenness, and all the work the angels are doing to help God manage a world gone wrong, will eventually become redundant. 'When the complete comes,' as St Paul says, 'the partial will come to an end.'[6] What use will there be for angelic managers when creation has been made perfect? All that will be left is worship, the angels endlessly circling around God, crying out 'Holy, holy, holy' and inviting those of us who are lucky enough to make it into heaven to join in with them. You have to admit that this sounds a little bit, well, boring.

This problem keeps resurfacing throughout the history of Christianity. In the thirteenth century, half a millennium after Dionysius wrote his *Celestial Hierarchy*, Thomas Aquinas was grappling in slightly different ways with the question of what we're supposed to do once the world has finished being saved. Where Dionysius was obsessed with hierarchies – both human and angelic – so that the problems with his theology are primarily to do with the question of what the role of government will be when everything has been made perfect, for Aquinas the problem was more to do with questions about human nature as such. For Aquinas, everything that exists in the created world can be arranged into a hierarchy according to how closely it resembles God. This means that different levels of reality can be distinguished by their different characteristics. At the bottom, rocks and other inanimate objects are like God because they exist; plants exist, but are more like God than inanimate objects because they're also alive; animals exist and are alive but are more like God than plants because they also have the ability to sense what is happening in the world around them; humans exist, are alive, have sensation and are more like God than animals because we're also intelligent; and then, confusingly, angels exist, are alive, are intelligent, but are more like God than humans because they *don't* have bodies, which means that

---

Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government, Lorenzo Chiesa (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 162.

6 1 Corinthians 13.10.

they don't rely on their physical senses for knowledge about the world.[7]

Leaving aside the question of whether this works as a way of distinguishing between objects, plants, animals and humans, let's focus on the weird position of angels in this hierarchy. The angels are the only part of creation that, for Aquinas, become more like God by *losing* a characteristic – embodiment. More confusing still, the fact that angels exist above human beings in the created hierarchy means that embodiment is what makes human beings distinct within God's ordering of the universe. Angels are disembodied intelligent beings, and humans are embodied intelligent beings, which suggests that embodiment is an essential part of what it means to be human. But angels are also *closer* to God than human beings, and so this also suggests that if we want to become more like God, we need to become more like the angels, which in turn implies that we should become somehow less embodied. We see this conflict play out in Aquinas' discussion of the two forms of Christian life, the active life (a life of serving God by caring for other people and their bodily needs) and the contemplative life (a life of serving God by prayer and meditation). On the one hand, he wants to say that both ways of serving God are equally valuable; it's just that different people are called to serve God in different ways, and we should follow whichever path most delights us. But he also can't quite bring himself to be consistent about this, and so he also argues that the contemplative life is superior to the active life because it's more directly focused on loving God instead of on loving our neighbours. Ultimately, for Aquinas, the intellectual and spiritual work of prayer is more valuable than the material and embodied work of charity.

These priorities were clearly visible in the kind of monastic lives that Aquinas and many of his contemporaries lived. Like many influential theologians of his time, Aquinas was born into a wealthy family and he rejected his family's worldly ambitions for him in favour of vowing himself to the monastic life. His

---

7 This section is based on my article, 2013, 'The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*', *New Blackfriars* 94.1053, pp. 541–51.

family were so opposed to him becoming a monk that for a while they had him locked up in a castle and sent in women to try to seduce him into giving up his spiritual aspirations. The heavenly minded Aquinas chased them off with burning sticks of firewood. But Aquinas' spiritual and contemplative life was made possible by the hard work of other, poorer men and women who grew, cooked and served the food he ate, built and cleaned the libraries in which he worked, and paid taxes and tributes to the parents of the students he taught at Europe's new universities. The life of the mind that Aquinas lived was made possible by the hard physical labour of other people, and his pursuit of the contemplative life, in which he sought to leave behind the cares of the flesh, was deeply reliant on the unacknowledged work of the people he saw as less spiritually advanced than himself.

Aquinas does argue that human beings will always be embodied, but he also thinks that, in heaven, our bodies will be transformed so as to be radically different from the bodies we currently have. They won't change, die, get hurt, have sex, get hungry; they won't piss or shit. But it's this freedom from bodily needs or desires that causes Aquinas and other theologians such problems in envisioning what exactly it is that we will do in heaven. We won't need to work to sustain ourselves or others. We won't need to work to perfect ourselves or others. We won't need to communicate God to others because each of us will, in this state of perfection, enjoy a perfect and direct vision of God. No wonder that it's so hard to imagine what those who have attained this state are supposed to do. The angelic machine that worked to bring the world to perfection is stuck endlessly spinning its wheels; a perpetual motion machine with no goal or purpose.

Aquinas' solution to this problem was elegant, though not one I'd necessarily recommend. After working for years and years on an immense work of systematic theology in which he aimed to set out a coherent account of every aspect of God's creation and redemption of humankind, and just as he was about to get to work on the third part, which was to deal with questions of the last things and life in heaven, he had some kind

of crisis, declared that everything he had written so far was 'all straw', and shortly after dropped dead.

An anxious age

Even if Christians have struggled to imagine what life after death might be like (or to imagine it in ways that sound appealing) for most of the history of Christianity we've been convinced that whatever happens after we die is the most important thing. Christians have often seen what happens while we're alive as important only in so far as it determines what will happen to us afterwards. If the Christian imagination of heaven has felt a little uninspired, the same can't be said for Christian imaginings of hell, which have often been all too gruesomely creative.[8] Where heaven is imagined as the realm where work comes to an end in order to enjoy the peace of endless joy, the reliance of the contemplative life of Christian theologians on the hard work of other people is grimly reflected in Aquinas' argument that, while work in heaven ceases, the work of torture continues eternally in hell, and the ability to watch demons endlessly torturing unhappy human beings is one of the joys of life in heaven.

For early medieval Christians, salvation was understood to be in large part a question of communal identity. To be a Christian – to be saved – was to belong to a Christian community and to take up your proper place within that community, whether that meant being a priest, an aristocrat or a peasant. But over time people began to lose faith in the idea that community was the guarantee of salvation. As the medieval period went on, conflicts and scandals within the church and political struggles between the church and European kings and emperors made it increasingly clear that the church was an imperfect and corrupt institution. Along with the enormous social disruptions

---

8 Ramsey MacMullen describes the 'developing Christian vision of Purgatory' as 'the only sadistic literature I am aware of in the ancient world'. Ramsey MacMullen, 1986, 'What Difference Did Christianity Make?', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 3, pp. 335–6).

resulting from famine, plagues and mass migrations away from the countryside into newly prosperous cities, many were left feeling uncertain of their place in the world and anxious about their salvation. European people felt less and less confident that the terrors and suffering of the present world – full of plagues, inquisitions, corruption, wars and other signs of apocalypse – were guaranteed to give way to the peace of eternal life in heaven. The emergence of belief in Purgatory meant that even if you felt confident of escaping the torments of hell, you still had to worry about the less-eternal but still pretty unpleasant punishments you might have to undergo before you were allowed into heaven. People began to put more time and energy both into being good in the first place and in atoning for the sins they had already committed – going on pilgrimages or crusades with the promise of having past sins wiped out, following prophets and a variety of oddballs claiming to be the new messiah, setting up lay religious communities in newly thriving cities, paying money for indulgences, or leaving large sums in their wills for people to pray for their souls after they'd died.

One thing that seemed to characterize the era of the Reformation – not unlike the contemporary world – was anxiety. Martin Luther found himself caught out in a terrifying thunderstorm when he was a young man and was so scared that he promised God he would become a monk if only God would save him from dying. After committing himself to the monastic life, though, he struggled for years with his inability to overcome temptation and his fear of hell until one day, suddenly, while sitting on the toilet, after months of both literal and spiritual constipation, he had a dramatic spiritual experience which convinced him that, despite his own worthlessness, he was saved by faith – in fact, *only* by faith (or, as the Latin has it, *sola fide*).[9] This sudden conviction became one of the rallying cries of the Reformation.

---

9 For a discussion of the role of the toilet in Luther's breakthrough, see Heiko A. Oberman, 1989, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, Eileen Walliser-Schwartzberg (tr.), New Haven, KT: Yale University Press, pp. 151–74.

The other great figure of the Reformation, John Calvin, was just as anxious as Luther. William Bouwsma argues that understanding Calvin's anxiety is crucial to understanding both his thinking and his influence on Christian history.[10] Bouwsma argues that Calvin's thought was driven by a tension between two types of anxiety: the fear of uncertainty, confusion and a lack of boundaries, which led him to seek clear distinctions and rules, and the fear of being trapped in the systems and structures of the world, which led him to criticize sharply the traditions and practices that had gradually developed in Catholic Christianity. Anxiety was also, according to Bouwsma, one reason why the question of what happened after we die was so important to Calvin – even the good things that happen in this world are fraught with anxiety because we are all vulnerable to death and change. Only in heaven could we finally get hold of happiness that would never turn into loss.[11]

One thing Luther and Calvin had in common was a belief in predestination – that God decided before the beginning of time itself to save some human beings. This belief in predestination was one way to respond to the anxiety about salvation that was shared by Luther and Calvin with many Christians of their time. Calvin went one step further than Luther, arguing not only that God predestined some people to be saved – so that if God had decided you were saved, you couldn't do anything to fuck things up and undo that decision – but also that God predestined other people to hell. You were either saved or damned, and nothing you could do would change a decision that was ultimately made by God.

If God determined before time itself began whether we would be saved or damned, this might seem like a recipe for despair (what's the point of trying to be good if it doesn't make a difference to our salvation?) or licence (if we're already saved or damned regardless of what we do, then we might as well enjoy ourselves!). But when this idea emerged in the very anxious age

---

10 William J. Bouwsma, 1988, 'Calvin's Anxiety', in William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 32–48.

11 Bouwsma, 'Calvin's Anxiety', pp. 36–8.

of Luther and Calvin, something quite different happened. In his famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the sociologist Max Weber argued that what emerged out of this set of anxieties about salvation was instead a radical transformation in the way that European Christians thought about work.[12]

In the fourteenth century, roughly 200 years before the Reformation began, somewhere between a third and a half of the population of Europe died of the bubonic plague. As you might imagine, this produced a fair amount of anxiety. Late medieval people began intensely to anticipate the end of the world, various people declared themselves to be the second coming of Christ and amassed large followings, and already marginalized groups, especially Jewish people, were increasingly targeted by a paranoid population. But the plague also resulted in a dramatic increase in the standard of living for much of Europe's peasant population. With so many people dead, there was a dramatic shift in the balance of power between the rich and the poor. Wages went up, as did living standards, and the old European system of feudalism came into a new kind of crisis.[13] This crisis was not totally dissimilar to the rising wages and intensified struggles over pay and working conditions that have followed in the wake of Covid-19, as the *Financial Times* acknowledged in 2021:

> The Black Death is often credited with transforming labour relations in Europe. Peasants, now scarce, could bargain for better terms and conditions; wages started to rise as feudal lords competed for workers. Thankfully a lower mortality rate means such a transformation is unlikely to follow coronavirus.[14]

12 Max Weber, 2001, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (tr.), London: Routledge.

13 Jason W. Moore and Raj Patel, 2018, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things,* London: Verso, p. 22.

14 'Antivirus fight takes a dreadful toll on jobs', cited by @wescz1312 on Twitter, 1 December 2021, https://twitter.com/wescz1312/status/1466128884387115010 (accessed 10.03.2023).

As the power of working people increased, many were able to work less and take more time off, and this difference was reflected in a huge increase not only in general standards of living but also in the number of Christian feast days, where people stopped work to enjoy themselves. Where the Christian monastic elite – people like Aquinas – longed to escape hard physical labour in order to devote themselves more fully to seeking after the pleasures of a more intense communion with God, most ordinary Christians saw time away from work as an opportunity for less abstract forms of pleasure, not least among these the simple pleasure of time spent not working.

Weber argues that capitalism relies on two things: workers who are willing to work hard, and capitalists who are willing to re-invest their profits into expanding and developing their business. But early capitalism ran into problems at both ends: workers didn't want to work hard, and capitalists wanted to use the wealth they accumulated to buy nice things, have enjoyable experiences or gain social and political power.[15] In contemporary capitalism, Weber says, employers often try to encourage their workers to work harder or more efficiently by offering them piece rates – that is, paying them by how much work they got done rather than by how long they worked for – as a way to try to encourage them to get more work done in less time. But what tended to happen when this approach was taken in pre-capitalist cultures was that workers would instead work until they had earned their normal daily wage and then down tools and take the rest of the day off. In this situation, 'the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less'.[16] In order for capitalism to function efficiently, Weber says, it needs workers who aren't constantly trying to work out how little work they can get away with before they get fired. What it needs, then, is a set of moral ideals that see hard work and diligence as morally good and laziness as morally bad. That's where Calvinism came in.

Where late medieval Catholicism's increasingly elaborate

---

15 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. xi.

16 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 24.

descriptions of gradations of Purgatory and different circles of hell suggested there was a huge range of possible eternal destinies, for Calvinists the choice was stark: saved or unsaved, eternal happiness or eternal suffering. Calvinism also largely did away with confession, leaving people alone with any sense of guilt they had about the ways they had fallen short, leaving people to deal with their anxiety about their salvation 'in deep spiritual isolation'.[17] No amount of good works could guarantee salvation, and there was no sure way to know whether or not you were saved. This anxiety, Weber argues, drove people to dedicate themselves to endlessly working to try to *look* like people who were saved, in order to convince themselves and others that they were predestined for glory. Because Protestantism tried to do away with the distinction between lay people and monastics, this meant that people started to see all kinds of work and activity as a way to demonstrate their likely predestination to heaven. There was no way to know for sure whether or not you were saved, but it seemed, on balance, that someone who worked hard and lived a modest and thrifty life was more likely to turn out to have been predestined for salvation than people who were lazy or extravagant.

A new kind of asceticism emerged, where instead of abandoning work to contemplate God or taking pleasure in the wealth that God had given them, people worked to show how dedicated they were to God, and worked not in order to achieve earthly pleasures but as a kind of ascetic practice. For this new Protestant work ethic, Weber says,

> Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's election. Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, and more sleep than is necessary for health, six at most eight hours, is worthy of absolute moral condemnation.[18]

Sound familiar?

---

17 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, pp. 62–3.
18 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, p. 104.

The angel of the home

The idea that hard work was virtuous and pleasure was a dangerous temptation to stray from the narrow path of salvation, Weber argues, is what made capitalism possible. Without this new Protestant work ethic, it wouldn't have been possible to convince people to dedicate their lives to working harder and harder for less and less material reward; nor would it have been possible to convince rich people that the point of having money was not to spend it on big houses and fancy dinners but to reinvest it in the economy.

As capitalism developed over time, the intensity of people's belief in an afterlife started to decline. As religion became increasingly associated with home and the family, the rewards of hard work in this life came to be more central to people's hopes and dreams. The rewards of our hard work and sacrifice were, increasingly, not the treasures stored up in heaven but the hope of being able to provide for our families and our children. With this shift came some big transformations in the way that people in the West imagined heaven. Where for medieval Christians the end of life meant the end of familial concerns and the hope of entering instead into the community of the church in heaven and experiencing the joys of the angelic life – free from hunger, thirst, sexual desire and pain – it became increasingly difficult for modern people to imagine happiness without the pleasures of the home.

When angels show up in twentieth- and twenty-first-century pop culture, they're more likely to be jealous of human beings than the other way round. In the 1947 film *The Bishop's Wife*,[19] remade in 1996 as *The Preacher's Wife*,[20] Cary Grant (Denzel Washington in the remake) is an angel sent to earth to help a married couple reconcile, only to find himself falling in love with the woman whose marriage he's meant to be saving. In Wim Wender's 1987 film *Wings of Desire*, angels spend their time observing the minutiae of human joys and sufferings and

---

19 Directed by Henry Koster (Samuel Goldwyn).
20 Directed by Penny Marshall (Touchstone Pictures).

offering comfort to those in need, until one angel falls in love with a human woman and, longing to know what it's like to experience the changeability of human life and embodiment, gives up his heavenly status in order to become an ordinary mortal man.[21] And in *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989), a dog called Charlie, caught up in dangerous but exciting underworld gangs, finds himself in heaven after his supposed friend has him assassinated, but is so bored that he risks his everlasting happiness to come back to earth.[22] In Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991–92), filmed as an HBO series in 2003, it is not the angels but God who gives up on heaven in search of a more exciting life on earth.[23]

This sense that eternal life in heaven is less appealing than mortal life on earth seems to be related to a change in the way that we value sexuality. Where for early Christians, sexuality seemed tangled up with all that was most painful and difficult about human life – grief, loss and weighty responsibilities to others – in contemporary society it has come to represent not only what's most important and beautiful about life but also, in some ways, the opposite of work.

As the division between public and private life took hold, so too did the idea that the home was a refuge from the difficulties and dangers of the outside world, and a place of rest away from the endless grind of work. In some ways, marriage came to replace heaven as the symbol of completeness and satisfaction; instead of 'rest in peace and rise in glory' we get 'and they all lived happily ever after'. We also see this changing vision of a happy ending reflected in angel films of the twentieth century. In *Michael* (1996), John Travolta plays a charmingly dishevelled angel who shows up in a small town and manages to convince a workaholic journalist who's given up on love to fall for Andie McDowell.[24] In *Christmas on the Square* (2020), the

21 Road Movies.

22 Directed by Don Bluth, Gary Goldman and Dan Kuenster (DreamWorks).

23 Tony Kushner, 2017, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, London: Nick Hern Books.

24 Directed by Nora Ephron (Alphaville Films).

angel Dolly Parton starts appearing to the put-upon assistant of mean workaholic Regine (played by Christine Baranski); together they help Regine to rediscover the importance of love and the family.[25] Again, of course, the restfulness that some people find in marriage, the home and the family has always been reliant on the work of others – housewives, servants and enslaved people. And the problem of boredom still remains. In a culture organized around the idea that a love story is the central drama of our individual lives, our commitment to marriage and monogamy means we struggle to tell interesting stories about married life.

So what are we to do with all these complicated histories and theological challenges? What's ultimately the point of life? To work hard? To find love? To invest our treasures in heaven? To build the kingdom of God on earth?

The world's end

It's clear that the desire to escape the burdens of earthly work – feeding, clothing, housing ourselves and those around us – has some problems, not least that, usually, if we manage to escape this work then it's because someone else is doing it for us. Some Christians have argued that, in light of this, we should see work as good, a way for us to work out our salvation, to grow and find fulfilment. But the problem here is that one of the reasons so many people have longed to escape work is that work often sucks. Work can be meaningful and fulfilling but it can also be boring and pointless. Work can be a way for us to discover our capacities, develop our creativity and find new ways to connect with other people, but it can also be exploitative, dangerous and miserable. Sometimes the difference between good and bad work is due to our working conditions. A well-paid job with co-workers we like and freedom to do the work how we want to is better than a job that barely pays our bills, where we're

---

25 Directed by Debbie Allen (Warner Bros).

bullied by bosses, harassed by customers and constantly under surveillance. Sometimes the difference has to do with the nature of the work itself. Even though the working conditions at my lecturing job aren't great, I find the teaching and research I do there much more meaningful and fulfilling than the washing-up, cooking and cleaning I do at home.

The ambivalence of work is tangled up with the ambivalence of human embodiment more broadly. Our bodies can be a source of real joy and pleasure. If we weren't embodied then we wouldn't be able to touch and be touched by the people we love, enjoy delicious food, or see and hear beautiful things. But bodies are also a source of much suffering and loss. We and the people we care about get sick, die and are vulnerable to the dangers of the world around us.

Christians throughout the ages have solved these problems in different ways. I want to suggest that one way to understand the problem of how we should spend our lives is to think about it as being shaped by the fundamental tensions that we find in the Christian doctrines of creation, fall and redemption. The doctrine of creation basically says that all of the things that are not God are good because God made them; the doctrine of the Fall says that things that are not God have gone wrong some-how; and the doctrine of redemption says that if things that are not God are to reach their full potential they must be radically transformed into something unrecognizable.

There isn't any one way to make sense of these basic doc-trines, and Christians through the years have interpreted them in different ways, with varying results. The doctrine of creation has been used to justify existing hierarchies and inequalities, because (people have argued) they are part of the created order. The doctrine of the Fall has been used to stigmatize, marginal-ize and oppress particular groups, especially those who have been associated with sin and the body. And the doctrine of redemption has been used to cover over the deep conflicts and violence that have characterized Christianity – to shut down criticism, to demand that people give up their appeals for jus-tice in the name of peace, to abandon their cultures, languages and possessions in order to be incorporated into Christianity.

But there are other ways that we can think about these central Christian beliefs.

Perhaps we can take from the doctrine of creation the idea that we can't just reject everything that we are. To say that we are not God can be to say that a fundamental condition of our existence is limitation. Perhaps we might say that to be human is to be dependent on other people and things, and this is not just a problem but also a source of pleasure, joy and beauty. To be human is to be embodied: to need food, movement and interaction with the world around us. While embodiment is frustrating in lots of ways, that very frustration can itself be part of what makes it good to be alive. Would food taste as good if we never experienced hunger? Would physical strength be as satisfying if we never experienced tiredness or muscle aches? Would knowing things be so pleasurable if we didn't have to struggle to grasp ideas at the limits of our understanding? Would we learn to care for one another if we were not born into the world vulnerable and at one another's mercy? Our limitations make us what we are: it's the hole that makes the donut.

Perhaps we can take from the doctrine of the Fall the idea that what makes human life difficult is not just the built-in challenges of struggling for survival. We also suffer because we have built a world on violence, inequality and injustice. Being alive in this world sucks because we have brought into being an economic system that relies on racism, sexism and exploitation. The pleasures and frustrations of human life are not evenly distributed, and some people get to convince themselves that they have overcome bodily limitation and weakness because – consciously or unconsciously – they rely on the miserable, backbreaking, hungry work of other people, not to mention the imprisonment, indebtedness and death of those excluded not only from work but from recognition as human beings at all. If we want to be able to live and work in ways that are pleasurable and joyful, we need to find ways to challenge the systems and structures that make work miserable and to create new ways of living where we have the time, space and resources to experiment with different ways of relating to our bodies, and new ways of working.

Finally, the doctrine of redemption suggests that another form of life is possible, one that would look so radically different from the one we currently inhabit that we cannot even imagine it yet. To say that our bodies are good but fallen and in need of redemption is to say that figuring out ways to transform our bodies can be part of the joy of being alive. We can find ways to change our body's capacity – through exercise, through surgery, through spiritual practice, through drugs – in ways that aren't just about overcoming our body's limitations, but are instead about finding pleasure in exploring our body's possibilities, about finding new ways to do things to, through and as our bodies. We can find new ways to relate to one another – new ways to organize our life, work and intimate relationships, which let us become different kinds of human beings.

Here, though, I'm starting to push up against the limits of the doctrine of redemption, which for Christians has tended to mean not the creation of new possibilities but the overcoming of bad things. When we start to think about life not just in terms of survival, in terms of the things we need to do to stay alive, and to try to unlearn and undo the harm that we have caused one another, we start to have to ask questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. That takes us back to the doctrine of creation, because we have to start to ask the question of why God created the world in the first place. If God didn't just make us so we could screw up and then spend ages fixing what we had broken, then what was the point of making the world?

If we can't answer this question, then it becomes very difficult to think about the world except in terms of the problem of sin; any vision of the good just becomes a vision of the absence of bad things. Our idea of redemption just becomes the negative idea of getting rid of sin. And the whole of our relationship to the world gets caught up in the question of how to fix what is wrong. If things aren't useful for fixing the world then we aren't interested in them, or, worse, we start to see them as dangerous; like St Augustine, who couldn't see how nice smells could help him love God and so worried about whether or not

he got too much enjoyment from them, about whether his nose was leading him astray.

So I think that the question we need to ask is this: why did God create the world in the first place? What is it for? What's the point of all this work we keep doing to keep ourselves alive? It's difficult to generalize about Christian theology, but it's roughly true to say that theologians have traditionally argued that God didn't create the world out of necessity. There wasn't a problem that God needed to solve or a lack in God that needed creation to fill it out; God wasn't bored, or lonely, or somehow incomplete. And I think, really, that that leaves only one real answer to the question of why God created: for joy.

Where salvation is all about paying debts, righting wrongs and seeing justice done, creation is excessive; it is unnecessary, it is, in a really important sense, pointless. It's not *for* anything. It isn't meant to achieve anything. It's not useful: it's just good. We can see this superfluity everywhere we look. Obviously things in the world perform functions: the sun provides energy for the plants, and brings into being the cycle of water that produces clouds and rains and rivers and seas. But there is something over-the-top, exaggerated, about the whole thing. There are hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe. There are something like 10 million different species on earth. There are luminescent sea creatures at the bottom of the ocean; there are blobfish; there are peacocks; there are fractal vegetables. There is – and I think that this alone would be enough to make my case – the duck-billed platypus. There's something baroque about the world, to the point where the functions of things are almost totally overwhelmed by unnecessary beauty or bizarreness. We can see this excess not only in the world around us, but also in the Bible. The Garden of Eden has not one river but four; there are trees that are 'pleasing to the eye' as well as trees that bear fruit, and there is, we are told, aromatic resin, gold and onyx, which sounds fun, if not necessarily very useful. The Israelites needed somewhere to store the ten commandments, and even though they probably could have made do with a really strong box, God tells them to make an ark, cover it in gold and, as if that wasn't enough, to stick enormous great

gold cherubim on top of it. Even in the central sacrament of Christianity, we see this excess, in the juxtaposition of bread – which tends, in the Bible, to represent our basic human needs (give us this day our daily bread) – and wine – which represents excess, feasting and goodness beyond what is necessary.

All of which is a long way round of saying that, fundamentally, primarily, *we* aren't useful, the world isn't useful to God; creation exists for joy. But just as we tend to see ourselves and the things around us as fundamentally existing to be useful, to get stuff done, the same thing tends to happen with the way that we think about God. God is often, in academic theology as much as ordinary church life, reduced to usefulness. Jesus becomes the thing that fills the hole in the middle of our hearts, as you will know if you've ever been on an Alpha course. God is there to protect me from the world when it is frightening, or to tell me what to do with my life when I don't know what I want. Or God becomes a useful way of explaining the things we can't explain, of grounding our ideas of morality or the nature of things. And even if those things are true, by reducing God to usefulness, what we do is we determine the space in which God is allowed to show up, the functions that God is allowed to perform for us.

The philosopher Jean-Luc Marion talks about the difference between an idol and an icon. Both idols and icons are about trying to think about God using ideas or things we find in the world. We talk about God as Father, or Goodness, or say that God is a rock, or has wings like an eagle. And the difference between an idol and an icon isn't a difference in the thing or the idea itself, but in the way that we relate to it. An idol is a face we make for God to show up in: it's our way of controlling what sort of God we encounter, and where and how we encounter the divine. But an icon doesn't try to make God present; instead, it points beyond itself. The whole point of an icon is that it isn't the thing it represents. And so I want to suggest that, just as the world always exceeds any usefulness we want to ascribe to it, so too with God: any time we try to make God useful to us, we miss the point a little. God is more than any purpose, any function, any usefulness, any space that

we make in the story of our lives.[26] To put it another way, to see 'God' as, ultimately, a name for 'value' is to collapse God and Mammon, to see God only in terms of measure and of profit.

What would it mean to live in a world where neither we nor God are, essentially, useful? Here's what I think. If creation existed primarily for a purpose, then everything would get sucked into that purpose; everything would be worth paying attention to only in so far as it was useful. When we look at the world in that way, everything becomes more and more similar. Everything is reduced to its function, and seen in relation to us: how can this help me? What can I get out of it? What can I use it for? But if we start to work with a theology of uselessness, of extravagance, then things become interesting not for what they *do* but for what they *are*. The challenge is not to work out how we can achieve certain goals, to add or create value, but to become more interested in the world, more curious; to learn to love things and people and experiences in their specificity; to enjoy them for what they are in themselves and not for what they can do for us; to do things not because we think we will end up winning but because they are inherently worth doing, or simply because we want to.

It's interesting that the Bible starts out in a garden and ends up in a city, in the heavenly Jerusalem. The thing about cities is that they often emerge at the point where human societies have the resources to do more than just survive. Cities are the places that emerge when we have the time and freedom for creating culture, for studying ideas, for doing things that we don't, strictly, need to do, for being less concerned with useful-ness and realizing that the pointless stuff is, in a strange way, the point. In the words of Robert Farrar Capon: 'We are free: nothing is needful, everything is for joy.'[27]

---

26 Jean-Luc Marion, 2001, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, Thomas A. Carlson (tr.), New York: Fordham University Press.

27 Robert Farrar Capon, 1979, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

8

Enslaved by Freedom

What does it mean to be free? Freedom has come to be one of the defining values of the modern world, one of those principles that everyone agrees is good even if they can't agree on what it means. Maybe it's about the ability to choose between 25 brands of tinned tomatoes at the supermarket; or maybe it's about being able to live our lives without fear of hunger. Maybe it's the ability to own guns, vote, pollute the air, have a job, not have to work for a living, say what we like without fear of consequences, protest other people who are saying things we don't like, drive a car, not have to drive a car, walk into public places without a mask on, or walk into public places without having to worry about dying from a transmissible disease.[1]

Slavery's freedom

But it's not just defining freedom that's difficult. Freedom emerged as a central value for modern western nation states during the Enlightenment, that is, right in the middle of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant extolled the virtues of freedom while arguing for the inherent inferiority of black people; white revolutionaries in France risked their lives to overthrow governments

---

1 Many of the ideas in this chapter were developed over several years of teaching a module titled 'Introduction to Political Philosophy'. I'm very grateful to Dr Robin James, who generously shared a syllabus with me that became the basis for my own version of the course, and to the many students who have worked through the course with me over the years for helping me to clarify many of the ideas in this chapter.

in the name of freedom while arguing for the betrayal of the Haitians fighting for the end of slavery under the same cry of 'liberté, egalité, fraternité'. One way to make sense of this apparent contradiction is to argue that early Enlightenment ideas about freedom really were meant to apply to everyone, and it just needed a couple of hundred years of political and intellectual struggles to realize this potential. But the other way to think about it is to suggest that freedom was never meant to be for everyone, and if we want to understand what's meant by 'freedom' in the modern world then we have to understand the ways that freedom for some has been built on the unfreedom of others.

In *White Freedom*, the historian Taylor Stovall makes this second kind of argument. If we look carefully at the history of the idea of freedom, he argues, we find that modern ideas of freedom have always been tangled up with whiteness: 'To be free is to be white and to be white is to be free.'[2] Just as the universal human being of early modern philosophy turns out, on closer inspection, to look suspiciously like a rich man, so the supposedly universal ideal of freedom is modelled on an idea of human life that's based on whiteness.

How can we make sense of this? There are two ways we can think about the entanglement of whiteness and freedom. The first is to ask how freedom came to be a value in the first place. This might seem at first to be a strange question – isn't it obvious that freedom is a good thing? In his magisterial history of the idea of freedom, though, the historian Orlando Patterson argues that freedom hasn't always been seen as something

---

2 Taylor Stovall, 2021, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 5. Here Stovall is glossing Frantz Fanon's claim that, in the context of colonialism, 'You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich', nicely suggesting the connections between whiteness, property and freedom that we've been tracing throughout the book and that this chapter will try to bring together. Frantz Fanon, 1963, *The Wretched of the Earth* (better translated, especially for our purposes, as 'The *Damned* of the Earth' – italics mine), Constance Farrington (tr.), New York: Grove Press, p. 40.

desirable or important. For many societies across history, other values have been more central:

> the pursuit of glory, honor and power for oneself or one's family and clan, nationalism and imperial grandeur, militarism and valor in warfare, filial piety, the harmony of heaven and earth, the spreading of the 'true faith', hedonism, altruism, justice, equality, material progress – the list is endless. But almost never, outside the context of Western culture and its influence, has it included freedom.[3]

Freedom is not a universal value, he argues, but a specifically western and Christian value. As we've already discussed, Patterson writes elsewhere that slavery imagery is central to Christian theology: images of redemption, justification, reconciliation and adoption have very deeply shaped how Christians have understood what it means to be a Christian, and made freedom a central Christian value. The centrality of slavery to Christians' understanding of freedom isn't an aberration. If we look at the emergence of freedom as a value in the ancient world, we can see that freedom comes to be seen as an important and good thing precisely in contexts where slavery is practised. It's specifically in contrast with slavery, Patterson argues, that the Greek and Roman worlds came to see freedom as important in the first place; and it's because Christianity came into being in this context that it came to value freedom so highly. If the power of freedom as an ideal comes from the contrast with unfreedom, then it becomes less puzzling that a society could see freedom as a good thing while also creating different kinds of unfreedom.

---

3 Orlando Patterson, 1991, *Freedom, Volume 1: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, New York: Basic Books, p. x.

Christian slavery

For much of Christian history, the kind of freedom offered to Christians in Jesus is seen as itself a kind of slavery, so the choice we are given is not between freedom and unfreedom, but between slavery to sin and the devil or slavery to God. We can see this very clearly in the work of Augustine who wrote extensively about the freedom offered by Christ even as he used the language of master and slave to describe his own relationship to God.[4]

For Augustine, slavery to sin was a problem not because slavery was a problem but because sin was the wrong master. Freedom, for Augustine, was not about the destruction of relationships of domination and submission, but about the proper ordering of relationships of domination and submission. The rational capacity of a free person should master their bodily passions and desires rather than the other way around, and human beings should submit to God, the highest being, rather than being ruled by our lower desires for food, sex or music. As Augustine treated the relationship between master and slave as the paradigm for all human relationships, for him a good marriage meant one in which the wife submitted to her husband as a slave to their master. But even better than a properly ordered marriage was a life of chastity. For Augustine, it wasn't just that women represented the threat of becoming enslaved to our bodily passions, but that sexual desire itself was inextricably entangled with our inability to master our bodies. Before the Fall, Augustine thought, we would have been in control of our bodies and desires rather than being controlled by them.

---

4 In her recent translation of Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions*, Sarah Ruden, broke with tradition by translating Augustine's original language in this way, instead of the gentler but inaccurate 'Lord' and 'servant'. Augustine, 2017, *Confessions*, Sarah Ruden (tr.), New York: Modern Library. This translation decision is discussed in Peter Brown's review, 2017, 'Dialogue with God'. *The New York Review of Books*, 26 October, https://web.archive.org/web/20171010050412/https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/10/26/sarah-ruden-augustine-dialogue-god/ (accessed 13.03.2023).

The state of unfreedom into which human beings fell was, he thought, perfectly encapsulated in the unruliness of erections, which escaped the control of the rational will and appeared only when reason was mastered by desire. A truly free man, Augustine thought, would be able to control his erections just as easily as he mastered the movement of his arms and legs. The violence that surrounded Augustine – the beating of enslaved people, children and wives – did not lead him to question the goodness of the social order in which he was born so much as to see violence as both the natural consequence of and the just punishment for sin. To step out of line was to invite violence both because disobedience deserved to be punished and because it was only by suffering the consequences of our disorderly behaviour that we would learn to submit to those rightfully above us, whether parents, husbands, masters or God. His mother was better than her women friends because she knew how to submit to her husband and so avert the worst kinds of violence from him; his childhood beatings were unpleasant, but did at least go some way to teach him the value of education; the torment he experienced in his struggles with temptation ultimately worked to bring him back to God.

For Augustine, a crucial distinction was the difference between free will – the ability to make choices – and freedom – liberation from slavery to sin. Free will, Augustine thought, was what made sin possible in the first place. Both the angels and human beings were created in order to know, love and submit to God, and because this was the ultimate goal of our natures, the only way for us to be truly happy was knowing, loving, and submitting to God. But in order for that relationship of submission to be possible, God made us with free will – that is, with the ability either to know, love and submit to God, or to reject that knowledge, love and submission out of pride. Some of the angels chose pride, and as a result they fell and became demons – slaves to sin – while other angels chose God and remained good. By contrast, once Adam and Eve had fallen, their sinfulness and enslavement to sin was passed on to all human beings, so that it became impossible for us to find our way back to right relationship with God.

In telling the story of his life, Augustine makes it clear that for him the central problem of his life was his struggle to choose God and goodness over sin, especially sexuality. After rejecting his mother's Christianity as a young man and living a dissolute lifestyle of casual sex and theatregoing, Augustine eventually started wanting to become a Christian and to live a chaste life, but found himself unable to bring himself to do this. 'Lord, grant me chastity and continence – but not yet!' he prayed. He eventually converted after a miraculous experience in a garden where he heard a child's voice asking him to take up the Bible and read it. Suddenly something changed for him, for ever, from that moment on. This experience of being freed from his own inability to do the right thing came to exemplify the freedom that Augustine saw as ultimately more important than free will. Far better, he thought, to be free from our own desire to sin than to be free to sin, which could only ever lead us into slavery to sin and to our own base desires.

Not all Christian theologians have struggled quite as much as Augustine with their unruly sexual desires. But time and time again, as we've seen throughout this book, Christians have articulated a sense of frustration with embodiment and its limitations, and a desire to escape or overcome that embodiment, to be able to live lives of spiritual detachment, in ways that have relied on slavery both as an image of unfreedom and also as a reality – a source of labour or wealth that has made it possible for a minority of Christians to live lives of relative freedom from the demands of the body.

The centrality of slavery imagery to Christianity has not only relied on existing slavery both for metaphorical heft and for material labour, it has also functioned in many ways to justify slavery. This has happened in three ways: by spiritualizing freedom; by taking slavery to be part of God's good intention for the world; and by limiting the freedom promised to Christians by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Ever since St Paul wrote that 'in Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female' (Gal. 3.28), at least some Christians have taken this claim to imply a spiritual reality that rendered the literal

fact of slavery as an institution unimportant. For Augustine, both spiritual and literal slavery were consequences of sin, but just as it was right and proper for God to punish human beings for their sin – even to the extent of making them suffer for all eternity in hell – so too was literal slavery a just and a fair punishment for human transgression. Some people, he suggested, were enslaved as a specific form of divine punishment for their own sins, whereas others became slaves as a more general consequence of the fallenness of all human beings.[5] But either way, although spiritual liberation could come through Christ to Christians, this did not mean that Christians should work for the end of slavery in its literal sense. In a fallen world, the institution of slavery was both part of the inevitably imperfect operations of secular societies and also (like state torture and domestic violence) a form of chastisement or transformative suffering that God could use to discipline sinful human beings back to righteousness.[6]

For the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, slavery was just if the process by which a person had been enslaved was just. The most common version of this was the argument that it was morally acceptable to enslave people who had been captured in war. To go to war was, many ancient thinkers argued, to risk death; and so to enslave prisoners of war instead of killing them was a kind of commutation of a justly imposed death sentence. This is the kind of argument that Bartolomé de Las Casas drew on so tragically to argue that instead of forcing indigenous people to work for them – an unjust form of enslavement – Europeans should instead import enslaved Africans – whom las Casas believed at first to have been justly enslaved in war – to work their newly conquered lands in the Americas. Las Casas' regret came not because he had a change of heart about the justice of slavery as such, but because he came to realize that

---

5 Peter Garnsey, 1996, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 218.

6 Paul Weithman, 2001, 'Augustine's Political Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 237–340.

what he thought was *just* slavery was actually unjust slavery: the product not of war but of the capture and enslavement of civilians.

In the theological debates about the humanity of indigenous Americans and the justice of enslaving them, however, another view played an important role: the idea, which originated with Aristotle, that some people were *natural* slaves. As Sara Maria Sorentino argues, in contrast to the Stoics (who argued that it was human custom that turned some people into slaves) and to others who argued that might made right and that if it was *possible* to force some people into slavery it was therefore also just to do so, Aristotle argued that there might be some people who were naturally slaves, inherently unfitted to take part in society in the same way as other people, and so closer to animals than human beings.[7] As Sorentino points out, though, what's curious about this argument is that it does not seem to have formed the basis of justifications for slavery in the ancient world. It came to have real historical significance only when it re-emerged in the theological debates between las Casas and his peers about the status of indigenous Americans and the justice of enslaving them in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It took several centuries for this to fully take hold as a justification of slavery, eventually the third type of justification for Christian slavery – the idea that the difference between free and enslaved people was based on the difference between Christians and non-Christians.

One of the earliest accounts of Christian attitudes to slavery is Paul's letter to Philemon, leader in the church at Colossae. Paul is writing because Onesimus, an enslaved person, has run away from Philemon, his master. According to the letter, Onesimus had met Paul and become a Christian. Paul is writing because he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, asking Philemon to forgive him for running away (and perhaps for stealing money) and to take him back as a 'beloved brother'. The implication seems to be that Philemon should free Onesimus from slavery.

---

7 Sara-Maria Sorentino, 2019, 'Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness', *Theory and Event* 22.3, pp. 630–73.

Sarah Ruden says that what we see in Paul's letter to Philemon is 'how, more than anyone else, Paul created the Western individual human being, unconditionally precious to God and therefore entitled to the consideration of other human beings'.[8] But this misses a crucial point: at the heart of Paul's attempt to convince Philemon that he should treat Onesimus 'no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother' is Onesimus' conversion. As we've seen throughout the book, what's potentially radical in Christianity – the way it can cut across existing divisions of gender, class and peoplehood – is bound up very tightly with what is most dangerous in it, the division of the world into Christian and non-Christian, friend and enemy. Over time, the difference between Christian and non-Christian came increasingly to signify the difference between people who could and people who could not be enslaved.

While slavery persisted in the Christian world for centuries, over time it was mostly replaced by the institution of serfdom – not exactly freedom in the sense most modern people would understand it, but not quite as unfree as slavery either. Enslaved people were increasingly taken from non-Christian areas outside Europe. The word 'slave' derives from the word 'Slav', because by the end of the medieval period a crucial part of the European economy was the capture and enslavement of Eastern European people for sale to North Africa. In the Protestant world, by the seventeenth century, the distinction between Christians and non-Christians had become part of a system that the historian Katherine Gerbner calls 'Protestant supremacy', a precursor to white supremacy in which human beings were arranged into a hierarchy from Protestant Christians in the established churches at the top to Catholics, Jews and non-conforming Protestants in the middle, and 'heathens' – enslaved

---

8 Sarah Ruden, 2010, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, New York: Image Books. If you've been following along with the footnotes, then yes, this is the same Sarah Ruden who has recently retranslated Augustine's *Confessions* with an emphasis on the centrality of slavery imagery to the text.

Africans – at the bottom.⁹ Christian missionaries in Barbados, then a British colony, arrived hoping to spread the gospel to enslaved people and discovered that a major barrier to their work was this sense of the incompatibility of Christianity and slavery. Slave owners worried that encouraging enslaved people to convert to Christianity would also mean encouraging them to rebel against their enslavement by teaching them to see themselves as rightfully free people. In order to convince local authorities to carry out their work, missionaries began to articulate a vision of 'Christian slavery', a theological justification of the enslavement of Christians. This need to justify the continued enslavement of people who had converted to Christianity was, Gerbner suggests, a key reason why race, rather than religion, came eventually to be the key determinant of slave or free status. One version of this was the 'myth of Ham' – the idea that black people were descendants of Noah's son Ham, whose descendants were cursed to be slaves because their father looked at his father while he was drunk and naked, a kind of Christianized version of the Aristotelian idea of 'natural slaves'.¹⁰ Another version, still common today, was the belief that, while not inherently incapable of freedom, enslaved people, like children, were simply not yet ready for so great a responsibility such that, as the Baptist Richard Furman argued in 1823, 'general emancipation' of enslaved people 'would not, in present circumstances, be for their own happiness'; they were simply not (yet) 'qualified' for freedom.¹¹

9 Katherine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 3.

10 For the history of this idea, see Sylvester A. Johnson, 2004, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens and the People of God*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, and David Goldenberg, 2003, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

11 Richard Furman, 1823, 'Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Colored Population of the United States in Communication to the Governor of South Caroline', Charleston, https://glc.yale.edu/exposition-views-baptists-relative-coloured-population (accessed 13.03.2023).

Satanic freedom

One final aspect of the historical entanglement of freedom, slavery and Christian theology is worth mentioning. One of the reasons why the imagery of freedom and slavery has been so central to Christian theology is because of the central importance of freedom in theological attempts to solve the problem of evil. The basic problem of evil is this: if God is both good and all powerful, then why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? If the world as originally made by God was perfect – as, it seems, it must be if we are to claim both that God is good (so presumably did not *want* the world to be imperfect) and that God is powerful (so should have been *able* to make a perfect world) – then where did evil come from, and why didn't God act to prevent it? The classical solution to the problem is to say that, while God *could* have created a perfect world where nothing ever went wrong, human freedom was so important to God that we were created with the ability to make bad choices as well as good ones and so to mess up the whole of creation. Here the question of what it actually *means* to be free comes into play in a particularly intense way. Freedom can't just be the ability to choose between a range of equally good options – to decide to eat peanut butter instead of jam, or to learn to dance instead of to make music. If that was the kind of freedom we'd been given, then freedom would no longer make sense as an answer to the problem of evil. If we think about Augustine's two types of freedom, then we also can't be talking about freedom *from* evil or temptation; nice as that sounds, again it wouldn't be a very satisfying answer to the question of why there is evil and suffering in the world.

For freedom to solve the problem of evil, then, it has to refer specifically to the capacity to make morally bad decisions: to do evil. The problem is that, if we imagine an originally perfect world in which human beings were created to know and to love God, with everything they needed to be perfectly happy, it becomes quite difficult to explain *why* they would have chosen to sin in the first place. In a fallen world, the decision to do evil things makes a lot of sense. Stealing might be morally wrong,

but in a world of great inequalities of wealth, it's clear what a person might get out of theft. Debauchery might be sinful but if, as Augustine thought, both our ability to know how we ought to live and our capacity to rule over our disorderly passions had been damaged by sin, then we can understand why people's relationship to sensual pleasures might be out of whack. But if we imagine Adam and Eve being created without shame or defect, living in a newly created paradise with everything they needed to be happy and to love both one another and God to their fullest capacity, sin becomes a puzzle.

There are only really two ways to solve this puzzle. The first is to say that evil is essentially nonsensical. There's no way to explain it: choosing to reject God does not make us happier or wiser; we don't get anything out of it that God wouldn't have given us anyway. The initial decision to sin must have been, in this version, fundamentally irrational, self-destructive and incomprehensible. The second solution is to say that pride is the reason that sin first entered the world. Created beings could have been given everything they could ever want or need; we could have been perfectly happy and perfectly fulfilled for ever. But in order to achieve that state of perfect and permanent fulfilment, we would have to know the truth – that all of those good things came from God – and willingly submit ourselves to God as our Creator and Master. In this version, some of the beings created by God decided to refuse to bend the knee and acknowledge God's superiority and rule over them.

Over the centuries, as theologians gradually developed their ideas about creation and fall, the question of the first moment when sin entered the world came to be increasingly focused on the question of the fall of the devil and other angels. This was partly because, as early Christians tried to turn the assorted stories and references in the Bible and other theological texts to angels and demons into a clear and systematic account of these beings, they slowly converged on the consensus that the angels were created and that some of them fell, before the rest of the world was even made. But focusing the question on the fall of the angels also acted as a useful kind of thought experiment. Because angels are generally thought to be spiritual – rather

than material – beings, they couldn't have fallen because they were tempted by bodily pleasures such as sex or food, or by fears of physical pain or death. This meant that the idea of the angels' fall let theologians consider the question of sin in its most abstract form. But thinking about sin in relation to disembodied beings brought with it certain other challenges. We humans, as embodied beings, are changeable. We get hungry, we get tired, we grow, we get injured, we age, we die. As a result, theologians have traditionally thought that we can repent and turn to God at any point right up until the moment of our death (and sometimes even beyond). By contrast, angels, as disembodied or more spiritually embodied beings, are much less changeable and much more firmly fixed in their goodness or sinfulness. While some early Christians thought that even the devil could repent and be forgiven by God, over time a theological consensus emerged that the spiritual nature of angels meant that they did not change or die in the same way as human beings, and so the moment when the angels fell must have occurred right at the very moment of their creation, in a split-second decision to accept or reject God.[12] As Adam Kotsko argues, this intensifies the already difficult problem of freedom. In this account of the fall of Satan, he argues,

> everything we associate with moral responsibility seems to be lacking. There is no moral obligation at play here other than sheer submission to God, a demand that seems to have no concrete content … the decision to rebel was not only instantaneous but at the time it occurred was quite literally the only thing that had ever happened in God's created world.[13]

---

12 According to Adam Kotsko, the peak of Christian optimism about the possibility of universal salvation occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Roman recognition of Christianity – if even the demonic Roman Empire could be saved, then why not the devil himself? Adam Kotsko, 2017, *The Prince of This World*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 144.

13 Adam Kotsko, 2018, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 83.

Ultimately, Kotsko suggests, it seems that God is setting (some of) the angels up to fail: he gives them just enough freedom that they can be blamed for their fall, and so that their eternal suffering can be seen as a just punishment for their wrongdoing, but not enough freedom for the options available to them to be in any way meaningful. For Kotsko, the primary purpose of the traditional Christian account of freedom is not to think about what makes human life worth living, or to think about how the world as it is can be transformed, but theodicy: finding ways to continue to affirm the goodness and power of God in the face of the suffering and violence of the world. However terrible the sufferings we experience in our life, however incomprehensible the violence and destruction we see around us, the idea of free will functions to say that this suffering is not God's fault, but ours.

Here we find ourselves pretty thoroughly tangled up in the contradictions of Christian ideas about freedom and slavery. On the one hand, if our choice is one between slavery to sin and slavery to God, then our attitude to God has to be one of absolute submission to an absolute master. On the other hand, if freedom is understood as the opposite of slavery and God created us for freedom, then the only way it's possible to imagine what freedom means is as the refusal of mastery. So the very freedom that is supposed to be so extraordinarily good that it was worth all the misery and suffering of the world we inhabit can *only* be expressed in ways that directly cause that suffering: by rejecting the mastery of God.

In many ways these problems are very old. Ideals of freedom have been entangled with ideas about slavery in the West since before Christianity came into being, and Christianity has played a key role in cementing the relationship between them. But something distinctive came into being with the birth of the modern world. As new forms of property began to take shape, so did new ideals of freedom and, as we've already discussed, these ideals of freedom became tangled up with the new ideal of independence. Carol Pateman describes this shift in terms of a transition from 'paternal patriarchy', where familial, social and political power is arranged by a hierarchical ordering of

men understood in terms of fatherhood (so that the father is the head of the household, the king is the father of the nation, and God the father of the church), to 'fraternal patriarchy', where power is shared equally (in theory) between men understood as equals, as brothers.[14] In the name of equality and freedom, men rejected the authority of tradition, monarchy or God in order to understand themselves as self-made, independent and – crucially – self-possessed. It's here, around the time of the Enlightenment and the Reformation, that supposedly universal ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood begin to take form. Of course, this new social order is not one in which everybody gets to be equal. As we can see from the earliest European democracies, some people count more than others: the people who got to be equal were rich (specifically, at first, landowners), white, male citizens of the newly emerging nation states.

Capitalist slavery

But what does this have to do with slavery? The key is in the centrality of property to these new ideas of the independent self. From around the sixteenth century onwards, as European nation states emerged, new forms of property came into being. The term 'private property' can be confusing, because it sounds to contemporary people as though it refers to the things that belong to us in the private sphere of the home – our clothes, our furniture, our mobile phones. But when 'private property' began to take shape as a central legal form in the early modern world, it referred primarily to land.[15] For much of the medieval world, all land belonged to the monarch or emperor. These rulers then parcelled it out between various members of the aristocracy, who in turn allowed that land to be used by serfs

---

14 Carol Pateman, 2018, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 3.

15 Brenna Bhandar, 2014, 'Property, Law, and Race: Modes of Abstraction', *UC Irvine Law Review* 4.203, pp. 203–18.

and peasants.[16] Many of those at the bottom of this hierarchy had long ancestral ties to the land, and many were formally tied to the land by legal structures, so that if a king decided to redistribute some of his land to his friends, the people who lived and worked on that land would be transferred with it. Some land was, by ancient law and practice, 'common', which meant that anyone had a right to make use of it – to graze their cows or sheep on it, to gather wood from it or to catch wild animals on it. After the Black Death in Europe killed somewhere between a third and a half of the total population in the fourteenth century, the balance of power between the peasantry and the aristocracy began to shift.[17] Wages went up, the diets of the poor improved, and the rich began to worry that their power was waning. One response was to demand the enclosure of common land. New laws were passed transferring ownership of common land to landowners who were already rich, and many people across Europe were forced to leave their ancestral homes, criminalized if they chose lives of wandering and vagrancy, and forced into the new form of work called 'wage labour'. Instead of subsistence or peasant farming, where families farmed land and paid a portion of their crops to the local landowner, increasingly people were forced to work for a wage, paid at first by the day, then the half day, and eventually by the hour.[18] As democracies began to emerge in Europe, land ownership became a key criterion for participation in the new parliaments: across Europe, only land owners were allowed to vote or to stand for election. Land ownership increasingly became a right of private individuals, instead of a privilege in the gift of monarchs.

---

16 Edwin G. West, 2003, 'Property Rights in the History of Economic Thought: From Locke to J S Mill', in Terry L. Anderson and Fred S. McChesney (eds), *Property Rights: Co-operation, Conflict and Law*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 20–42.

17 Jason Moore and Raj Patel, 2017, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

18 Jacques Le Goff, 1980, 'Labor Time in the "Crisis" of the Fourteenth Century: From Medieval Times to Modern Times', in Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*, Arthur Goldhammer (tr.), Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 43–52.

Around the same time, Europeans began to discover and to conquer new (to them) lands. As European peasants were pushed off their lands by the enclosures of common land and other expressions of the increasing greed of the rich, they began to look to the Americas for opportunities to own their own land. Political philosophers began to consider a new problem: if land was not the monarch's to give, then how did common land become private property?[19] For seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, the solution was to say that private property starts with our ownership over ourselves and our own bodies. 'Every Man has a Property in his own Person', Locke writes; our body is our property, something we own, which no one else has the right to.[20] Because we own our bodies, whatever we produce via the work of our bodies thereby becomes our property. If I pick an apple from a tree, that apple becomes mine because I used my body, which I own, to pick it. If I spend time working on a piece of land – cutting down trees, clearing plants, planting and tending seeds, building a fence around it to keep out animals or other people – then by mixing my work with the land, it eventually comes to belong to me.

There are lots of problems with this account. The first is the question of how much work I have to mix with the land before it becomes mine. As the libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick asks, does the sea become mine if I mix some of my labour with it by opening a tin of tomato juice and pouring it into the ocean?[21] A more important problem is the question of whose labour we are talking about. There's a telling moment where Locke writes that it's not just the products of my own work, such as 'the ore that I have digged', that become my property but also 'the grass my horse has bit' and 'the turfs my servant has cut'.[22] Elsewhere, he argues that there is 'a foundation in

---

19 Bhandar, *Property, Law, and Race*.

20 John Locke, 1988, *Two Treatises of Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 27.

21 Robert Nozick, 2001, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 175.

22 Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 289.

nature' for women's subordination to men.[23] It appears that not all people get to have property in their own person; in fact, it seems that this is a privilege that belongs primarily to men who are heads of their own households. More fundamental, though, is the problem that becomes apparent when we consider *which* land Locke is talking about when he talks about the conversion of land from common ownership, given by God to all, to private ownership. Locke worked for much of his life as secretary for various colonial administrative bodies and was involved in drafting the fundamental constitution of the Carolinas (which at the time covered several states in the present day USA as well as the Bahamas). It is clear from the examples that Locke uses when he talks about the emergence of private property that he's primarily thinking not about European land but about land in the newly conquered Americas.

Like many thinkers of his day, Locke draws a contrast between human life 'in the state of nature' – that is, before people came together to form ordered societies based on law and contract – and civilized societies. It's clear that he considers the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas to be living in 'the state of nature'.[24] Property does exist in the state of nature, Locke argues, but only in a very limited sense. Even in the state of nature, people own themselves, and 'the wild Indian', that is, the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, can gather or hunt

---

23 Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 174. For more discussion of Locke's ideas about women's subordinate status, see Pateman's discussion in *The Sexual Contract*, pp. 52–3.

24 Two hundred years earlier, in his defence of the humanity of indigenous Americans, Las Casas argued that, while the indigenous Americans could not read or write, they did nonetheless have systems of government, which in turn meant that they could not be classed as 'natural slaves' in Aristotle's sense, although there were some people who lived entirely without government and so *did* fit this description. Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1992, *In Defense of the Indians*, Stafford Pools (tr.), DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1992. While both Las Casas and Locke agree that people who live entirely without government are legitimately enslaveable, Locke has a lower view of indigenous American societies than Las Cases did several centuries earlier. The arc of history does not always bend towards justice.

what they find on the land – fruit and venison. By picking fruit or hunting deer they can make some of the world that God has given to all people in common their own property in order to eat it. There are two limits on this property ownership, however: first, individuals cannot gather so much of what belongs to everyone that there is not enough left for others; and, second, individuals cannot gather more than they can use. For Locke, without government and a state to enforce the laws of property, this means that the only things that can become property are perishable things like food. If you gather more food than you can eat, it will go off, and this, for Locke, is obviously morally wrong, against the 'law of nature'. Only with the arrival of civilization – governments, laws and, crucially, money – can people begin to accumulate more than they need for their day-to-day lives.

Locke's argument relies on the claim that the land of the Americas was at the time largely empty and uncultivated. Not only have the indigenous inhabitants failed to mix their labour with the soil of America and so make it their own, the fact that they have failed to do so means that, for Locke, they are being irresponsible stewards of the riches that God has created. God made things to be used and enjoyed, and by failing to farm the land that God has given them, indigenous Americans have forfeited their right to that land. In some ways, Locke wasn't wrong that the Americas were 'empty'. Over the two centuries following Columbus's voyage, the population of the Americas declined by about 95 per cent, due to a combination of the introduction (sometimes deliberate) of European diseases, war, forced labour, inquisitions and even manhunts, where indigenous people were chased with dogs to capture and enslave them or simply for sport.[25] The population decline was so enormous that forests grew back rapidly in once-cultivated areas. This reforestation was so dramatic, and the carbon sequestered by this new growth so significant, that this process contributed substantially to the Little Ice Age, which took place over the

25 For a discussion of the manhunts, see Grégoire Chamayou, 2010, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, Steven Rendall (tr.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.[26] By the time Locke was writing, then, the land was much emptier than it had been, but this was not a natural or original condition. While much cultivated land had reverted to forest, much of the land that Europeans saw as wilderness was actually carefully managed, with towns, roads and complex forms of social organization, along with domesticated plants like corn and tobacco which quickly became crucial to European economies and diets. As Roxane Dunbar Ortiz notes, 'Had North America been a wilderness, undeveloped, without roads, an uncultivated, it might still be so, for the European colonists could not have survived.'[27]

For Locke, then, the crucial difference that determined whether someone could own land was the racialized difference between 'civilized' people and 'savages'. Non-white people who, for Locke and his contemporaries, were seen as living in a backwards condition, before or outside of the world of money, property and trade, could not own property in the same way as white people. In a famous article, Cheryl Harris argues that what happened over time within modern capitalism was that whiteness came to be a kind of property that is owned by white people. In North America, she argues, ideas about property were central to the development of racism. Indigenous Americans were seen as incapable of owning land, and so their land was taken from them, while black people were enslaved and so turned into the property of white people.[28] This created a new and strange legal category of human beings who were also the property of other human beings; who could be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of deciding how to measure the population and so influence the number of votes each US state was given in Congress, but not be allowed to vote themselves; who had no rights themselves but who could nonetheless be held criminally responsible should they fight back

---

26 Moore and Patel, *Seven Cheap Things*, p. 162.

27 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, p. 46.

28 Cheryl Harris, 1993, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review* 108.6, pp. 1709–91.

against their enslavers.[29] Whiteness, by contrast, was a kind of property in person that could not be taken away from white people. It gave them the ability to acquire property by their own work (or by the world of the enslaved people whom they owned); it gave them a guarantee of freedom from slavery; and it gave them access to certain kinds of rights and privileges, in a similar way to owning membership of an exclusive club. In this period of history, freedom was above all understood as the freedom to live your life without the intrusion of others, to own yourself, and to be able to defend your property against the intrusions of others. Slavery became a key metaphor against which people understood what it was to be free.

This idea of property in the person – that whatever else, white people owned themselves and in that sense were free – not only worked to undermine the possibility of solidarity between poor white people and enslaved black people, it also functioned to cover up the violence and unfreedom that characterized the lives of many white people. At the heart of many of the legal structures and philosophical justifications of early modern political orders was the idea of a contract, which was understood to be an agreement freely entered into by two or more people who agreed to be bound by the contract and to face certain consequences if they broke the contract. This idea of the contract was, increasingly, how western people understood political societies – an agreement between a nation of people who agreed to give up certain rights and freedoms in order to get the benefits of civilization – as well as the structure of marriage and employment. Yet although the idea of freedom was central to these core institutions, the reality was much less rosy.

One important form of contract was the marriage contract, in which, for many early modern European societies, women were understood to be free people up until the point that they freely entered into a marriage contract. At this point their personhood became subsumed into the personhood of their husband

---

29 See, for example, Saidiya Hartman, 1996, 'Seduction and the Ruses of Power', *Callaloo* 19.2, pp. 537–60.

and they lost the right to own property, even the property in their own persons; marital rape was not recognized by law in most western countries until well into the twentieth century. Another important form of contract was the employment contract, in which one person agreed to work for another person. The idea of the employment contract – often understood as a free form of labour in contrast to slave labour, understood as unfree labour – was that people were free to choose which boss they wanted to work for, and what kind of work they wanted to do. But the reality for many people was that paid work was the only way they had to buy food and to pay for housing, clothing and all the other necessities of life. The choice was not so much between the different, often dangerous, badly paid and degrading kinds of work available to them, as between doing those awful kinds of work or starving to death. Perhaps even less meaningfully free was participation in 'the social contract', the implicit agreement between citizens of a nation state, which was understood to be the basis of the legitimacy of that state's government.[30] John Locke, one early advocate of the social contract theory of state legitimacy, argued that consent was crucial to the establishment of government, and that, while individuals could not choose the state they were born into, they were nonetheless free to move somewhere else once they reached the age of adulthood. While borders were, admittedly, less tightly controlled in Locke's day than in our own, he was also writing in a context where most ordinary people had no real say in the systems of government that determined their lives. This is hardly a meaningful form of freedom.

Crucially, all these forms of contract – presented as though they represented freedom – relied on the contrast with the more profound unfreedom of slavery or racialized 'savagery' to seem

---

30 For more discussion of the unfreedom covered over by the idea of free entry into the marriage, employment and social contracts, see Carol Pateman, 1980, 'Women and Consent', *Political Theory* 8.2, pp. 149–68, and, 2002, 'Self-Ownership and Property in the Person: Democratization and a Tale of Two Concepts', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10.1, pp. 20–53.

like good options.[31] Wage labour might have been exploitative, dangerous and miserable, but at least it wasn't as bad as slavery; women might be trapped in violent or unhappy marriages, but at least they had at one point had the freedom to consent to those marriages; most citizens of western nation states might be denied the right to vote or to participate meaningfully in government, but at least they were given certain legal rights and protections – whiteness among them – which marked them out as legal persons in a way that enslaved and colonized peoples were not.

Much like the angels at the first moment of creation, the freedom we have is vanishingly small. Women could in theory refuse to get married, workers to get a job or citizens to remain in their country of origin. But in practice the alternatives we have are either impossible or terrible, and founded on vast inequalities of power. These contracts are not agreements between free and equal people but between one party who holds all the cards and the other whose only option is to submit or to suffer.

Over time, both ideas about personhood and legal and economic organizations of property underwent significant transformations, and here, too, slavery played a central role. As capitalism became less about tangible financial assets such as land and more about more abstract forms of wealth relating to money, futures and expectations, the transatlantic slave trade (which saw goods produced in England and Western Europe shipped to the West Coast of Africa to buy enslaved people, who were sold to America in exchange for raw materials such as sugar and cotton, which in turn were shipped back to Europe) relied on speculative financial investments. Money was invested in hiring and kitting out ships to make the tri-

31 For a discussion of the way that this idea of a contract freely entered into relied on the contrast between the freedom of contracting parties and the unfreedom of enslaved people, see Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino, 2020, 'Slavery is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor"', *Antipode* 52.3, pp. 1–19, and Sara-Maria Sorentino, 2019, 'The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx's Method', *International Labour and Working-Class History* 96, pp. 17–37.

angular voyage, in the hope of eventual return on investment. Ian Baucom argues that slavery was crucial to the emergence of finance capital.[32] Instead of being seen as human beings, or even just (as was the case earlier in the emergence of racial chattel slavery) as valuable property, enslaved people came to be seen in terms of their potential for future profit and their value as investments in the future. Over the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this understanding of property and value in terms of investment and the hope of future profit came to deeply shape western understandings of (white) freedom. To be free increasingly meant not the right to be left alone but the right to make choices about how we invest our time and energy, and the expectation of return on that investment.[33]

Of course, while the modern world began with the massive expansion and racialization of slavery and new forms of colonial domination, from the eighteenth century onwards the ideals of 'freedom' began to be expanded to new groups, through global struggles for the abolition of the slave trade, slavery and colonialism. In some ways it seems as though people have become more free. But the reality is more complex. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman describes what happened in the USA in the wake of the formal abolition of slavery, arguing that what happened was not the expansion of freedom but the use of freedom to justify new forms of unfreedom.[34] Hartman argues that the idea that formerly enslaved people were now free functioned to create not new opportunities and possibilities but new ways to make them responsible for their own suffering. In the wake of emancipation, white Americans worked hard to find new ways to force black Americans back into conditions of servitude. The 1865–66 Black Codes, introduced in a number of southern states, found new ways to criminalize formerly enslaved people, and a new system that allowed convicted crim-

---

32 Ian Baucom, 2005, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

33 Bhandar, 'Property, Law, and Race'.

34 Saidiya Hartman, 1997, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

inals to be forced to work for free; they restricted black people's rights to own property, businesses or land, and increasingly restricted their right to vote. Without the 40 acres and a mule that they had been promised in the wake of slavery, formerly enslaved people were forced into unpayable debt in order to get access to land, tools and other materials, often to the very same people who had been their masters during slavery. By the late nineteenth century, new forms of white vigilante violence became common alongside more legal forms of violence – white supremacist gangs like the Ku Klux Klan, and the semi-legal practice of lynching, where crowds of white people would brutally and publicly murder black people accused or suspected of crimes. Amid this violence, Hartman argues, the idea that black people were now free functioned not to liberate them but to make them newly responsible for their relative powerlessness and poverty. Not only were black people still trapped in relations of violence and domination, they were now also expected to internalize the discipline that had previously been forced on to them by the whips of plantation owners. Educational manuals produced by white people to teach black people the values of 'freedom' argued that, because of the great price paid by the white people who had shed their blood in the civil war in order to win black people's freedom, black people owed an unpayable debt of gratitude to their liberators. Their suffering – their poverty, hunger debt, and lack of education or property – was now no longer seen as the result of their enslaved status but as the result of their failure to use their freedom in order to become worthy citizens. Hartman talks about 'the double bind of freedom' in which 'self-mastery was invariably defined as willing subjection to the dictates of former masters, the market, and the inquisitor within'.[35]

If this idea of freedom as the choice between submitting to an all-powerful master or being endlessly punished sounds suspiciously Augustinian, that's not a coincidence. Hartman's argument draws on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that the Christian idea of an unpayable debt to God was

---

35 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 134.

the foundation of the idea of conscience.[36] This double bind, in which the idea of freedom seems to function primarily to make us, rather than God, responsible for any of the bad things that happen to us, is what Kotsko calls 'demonization': 'to set someone up to fall, providing them with just the barest sliver of agency necessary to render them blameworthy'.[37]

Over the twentieth century, struggles against colonialism and racism brought an end to the formal structures of domination that characterized the first part of the twentieth century, including the Jim Crow laws of racial segregation which emerged out of the post-emancipation history that Hartman discusses. In his book *Neoliberalism's Demons*, Kotsko argues that, again, these changes did not bring about liberation so much as new ways of using the idea of freedom to justify enslavement and domination. Neoliberalism began in the late 1970s under Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and can best be understood both as an attempt to revive the economy by introducing markets into areas of life that previously existed outside of market logic (creating league tables for schools and introducing charter schools and academies to compete with schools run by local government, increasing student debt so that education increasingly became understood as an investment, or the emergence of social media companies which seek to turn our personal relationships into opportunities for profit making) as well as to provide new justifications for the inequalities produced by capitalism (new forms of theodicy) in response to the anti-racist, decolonial and feminist movements of the 1960s.

In neoliberalism, freedom came to play a central role in justifying inequality. This new neoliberal vision of freedom, Kotsko argues, saw economic freedom – the freedom to invest one's money and resources in economic and exchange and competi-

---

36 Friedrich Nietzsche, 2007, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Carol Diethe (tr.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Here Nietzsche also influenced Maurizio Lazzarato's arguments about the centrality of debt to capitalism you might remember from the earlier chapter on God and Mammon.

37 Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, p. 84.

tion – as the most important human value, so important that all kinds of suffering could be justified in the name of preserving it. This new logic can be seen in the emergence of the US 'war on drugs' which began under Richard Nixon and continues to the present day. During the 'war on drugs', recreational drugs were criminalized and police departments were incentivized to more heavily enforcing drug laws, and mass-media campaigns whipped up social anxiety about the harms of drugs use. This resulted in the wildly disproportionate criminalization of black Americans, a result which Nixon's domestic policy advisor John Ehrlich recently admitted was directly their intention:

> We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities … Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.[38]

Kotsko finds in the language of addiction, which became increasingly important to the war on drugs, a clear parallel to theological accounts of sin and the fall: 'the view that crack was irresistible once taken renders drug addicts, like the fallen angels, simultaneously irredeemable and morally responsible, since their condition results from their ostensibly free choice to take crack rather than "just say no."'[39] Just as earlier visions of freedom in the West relied on the enslavement of some in order to present the limited options and coerced choices of others as a form of freedom, so too the cost of neoliberal freedom falls most heavily on black people, while entrapping us all.

---

38 Dan Baum, 2016, 'Legalize it all: How to win the war on drugs', *Harpers*, April, https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/ (accessed 13.03.2023).

39 Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, p. 91

The gospel of the dispossessed

The ideal of freedom we inherit, both as Christians and as modern westerners, is not about liberation or emancipation so much as it is about domination. A small minority get to determine their own lives while most of us find ourselves entrapped in various kinds of forced choices. For all of us the ideal of freedom has functioned not so much to call us to a better world as to justify the violence and suffering that characterize the world we currently inhabit. What are we to do, then, with freedom? Three issues with early modern accounts of freedom might give us some sense of a way to escape from this trap.

The first issue is that the model of self-ownership or 'property in person', which is so central to early modern understandings of freedom, takes as its exemplary human being an able-bodied adult man, someone able to take care of himself, make his own decisions and do his own work. But none of us, with the possible exception of Adam and Eve (let's not get into that here), is born into the world as an adult, able to care for our own needs. Each one of us comes into the world helpless, vulnerable, at the mercy of the human beings around us as we are born and the resources made available to us by the societies and the earth we are born into. Without other people we would not be able to survive, let alone acquire the knowledge, skills and capacities that we need to be self-sufficient. If there is a kind of freedom that comes from being able to determine our own lives and take care of ourselves – and I don't want to deny that there is anything good in this – then it is not, as for liberal political philosophers or early Christian theologians, something that we begin with, that we must defend from external threats. It is something that we – humans and other beings – have created for one another.

Early modern philosophers thought that societies emerged over time, as human beings gradually began to realize that there were some benefits they could get by working together that they couldn't achieve by themselves. But this has it exactly backwards. The model for the self-possessed individual of early modern thought is sovereignty, the kind of power exercised by

a king. But what makes it possible for a king to rule is not some inherent property like charisma or intellectual superiority but the existence of hugely complex machineries of state and government that have developed over hundreds of years. Likewise, the rational individual of early modern philosophy was the product of a very specific kind of social and political organization of the world: the transformations in gender roles and production we have already discussed, which meant that women, servants and enslaved people were running the household so that the Enlightenment man of reason was able to sit in his study and read books all day; the genocide and forced labour of human beings that made the early dream of land-ownership on which this vision of self-possession rests a possibility for many Europeans; the enslavement of Africans which provided the material – both literal and metaphorical – for the construction of freedom in the West. Both the structures of violence that organize our world – racism, sexism, capitalism – and the resources that enable us to survive in it – society, language, agriculture – are the product of the labour of generations upon generations of human beings who came before us.

The second issue is that at the centre of the idea of private property is the idea of exclusivity, that if something belongs to me it can't also belong to someone else. This concern with exclusivity arises out of a worry about competition and conflict: if lots of us want the same thing, and only some of us can have it, then it becomes important to make sure that the things that belong to us are our own exclusive possession. The modern idea that conflict and competition are fundamental to human life and motivation came into being along with capitalism. As private property came to dominate the organization of western societies, so too did evolutionary theory, which posited that all living creatures were involved in endless competition and conflict with one another. The idea that the principle of the survival of the fittest governed the emergence of all life on earth was important both to justifying capitalism as the only economic system which took into account the fundamental selfishness of human nature, and to new forms of scientific racism, which saw white people and western societies as more advanced than

others. But we don't need to reject the theory of evolution absolutely to suspect that Darwin's account of human motivation leaves something to be desired. In a letter to Engels, Karl Marx noted that what Darwin found in nature looked suspiciously like the England of his day: 'It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovers, among the beasts and the plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions," and Malthusian "struggle for existence".'[40] If we see competition and the war of all against all when we look at the world around us, perhaps that tells us as much about us as it does about the world. In his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, the anarchist zoologist and philosopher Peter Kropotkin (who lived and wrote at roughly the same time as Darwin) argues that, if we just pay attention, we can see that cooperation and collaboration can also be found everywhere, both within and between species.[41] Bees and ants have evolved ways of working together which produce surprisingly complex forms of social organization. Smaller birds gang up to fend off attacks from bigger predators. Kropotkin even tells a story of watching crabs spend hours struggling to help one of their number that had fallen on its back to right itself, even fetching more crabs to help them (if you, like me, can't help but imagine this as a cute video on the internet then I'm sure you can also think of many other examples of adorable animals cooperating). Not only do members of individual species help one another but different kinds of living thing interact in incredibly complex ways: mushrooms whose complex webs network forests together and help trees to communicate;[42] or the billions of microscopic

40 Karl Marx, 1985, letter to Friedrich Engels, 18 June 1862, in *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, vol. XLI, London: Victor Gollancz, p. 381; quoted in Kristin Ross, 2015, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, London: Verso, ebook.

41 Peter Kropotkin, 1902, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*; available at https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution (accessed 13.03.2023).

42 See, for example, Peter Wohlleben, 2017, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, Jane Billinghurst (tr.), Glasgow: William Collins.

organisms that make up the human body so that, some scientists argue, it might be more accurate to describe each human being not as an individual but as a multitude.[43] Kropotkin also gives a potted history of humankind, arguing that, all around us and across history, we find human beings taking care of one another, making sacrifices to benefit others, and working together to achieve things that would be impossible alone. Of course, human beings – like other living things – have struggled against and competed with one another, have been predator as well as prey. But to focus only on this aspect of human life is to tell a partial and misleading story.

The third issue is that, as I've tried to demonstrate over the course of this chapter, modern ideas of freedom – like many ancient ideas of freedom – take their meaning and significance from the contrast with unfreedom, with slavery. Without the existence of slavery, both as hard fact and as metaphor, freedom would never have come to have the meaning and the value that it does for the modern world. If the existence of slavery is necessary to the value of freedom, then perhaps we should begin not from the desire to master ourselves or others but from the position of the enslaved person. Jared Sexton suggests that this would mean starting not from the scramble from possessions but from the experience of absolute loss, what he describes as 'the landless inhabitation of selfless existence'.[44] Not possession, then, but dispossession, to know that, like Jesus, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave'.[45] We own nothing. We have nothing. We are nothing.

---

43 See, for example, Ed Yong, 2016, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life*, New York: Harper-Collins.

44 Jared Sexton, 2014, 'The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign', *Critical Sociology*, p. 15.

45 Philippians 2.6–7.

Conclusion: Theology
for the End of the World

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and
the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,
if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already
reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because
Christ Jesus has made me his own.
(Phil. 3.10–12)

Do not give up on your desire!
(Jacques Lacan (perhaps))

Nothing is needful, everything is for joy.
(Robert Farrar Capon, 'The Supper of the Lamb')

In Chapter 7, 'God is Useless', we talked about the basic struc-
ture that the Christian story tends to take: God made the world
and made people to enjoy God, but sin enters into the world
and damages our relationship with God. God sends Jesus to
save us, and by suffering and dying he makes it possible for
us to be reconciled to God. This structure is mirrored in many
church services, both the more standard eucharistic services
where repentance leads to remembering and ritually participat-
ing in the sacrifice of Christ, followed by worship, and the more
happy-clappy versions, where we are led along the same theo-
logical and emotional trajectory either by the transition from
happy songs to sad and reflective songs and then back to happy
songs, or by the sermon, which begins with jokes to warm us

up, leads us into sorrowful confrontation with our own sinfulness, and then climaxes with an altar call or a call to prayer, and then back into the happy songs.

There are two ways we can think about this narrative of creation, fall and redemption. Conservatively, we can see the process as one of simple return: we regain what was lost, we go back to the beginning, we reclaim the lost Eden. This is the underlying structure of many contemporary right-wing narratives (remember when men were men, women were women, and children respected their parents?), as well as many theological accounts (remember when the West was Christian, Christianity was Christendom, and churches were at the centre of their communities?). If we could just return to some earlier stage, before things went wrong, then everything would be good again. It's also the narrative of superhero films: things are fine as they are, and we need to defeat the evil forces which are threatening to end the world and get things back to normal. But the second way to tell the story is as a narrative of progress. Sure, things are difficult now, but if we work through the difficulty, make enough sacrifices, transform ourselves sufficiently, then it will all have been worth it in the end.

This second kind of narrative is just as deeply Christian, and although it tends to be the one preferred by liberals, progressives and even revolutionaries, it can be just as dangerous. The problem with the narrative of progress is that however admirable the goal it seeks to achieve (the kingdom of God on earth, enlightenment, evolution, economic development, full communism), by emphasizing that ultimately all of our struggles and suffering and pain will bring about the arrival of a better future in which all wrongs will be righted, it functions as a theodicy: it justifies the world. As Walter Benjamin argues, this is a vision of history that takes the side of the victors. It says that what ultimately matters is whether or not we win, and it disposes us to sympathize with those who are currently winning, and to dismiss the suffering of history's victims.[1] As Philip

---

[1] Walter Benjamin, 2006, 'On the Concept of History', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard University Press, p. 391.

Goodchild argues, this desire to believe in a final redemption helps us to avoid an honest confrontation with the depth and reality of suffering. He writes:

> The apocalypse has already happened. A slave has been beaten to death. A child has died of diarrhoea. A lover has vanished without trace. A woman has been murdered by her husband. A child has been suffocated, sexually abused, and resuscitated by her own father. A people has been subjected to genocide … Each event, in its own significance, outweighs the counting of numbers … There is no evil which could happen on Earth which has not already happened. One may hope to diminish some of the tragedies of the future, but all action comes essentially too late. One may hope to judge such tragedies from the perspectives of God, morality or truth, but any such God, morality and truth profits from the existence of suffering, in relation to which it finds a role.[2]

We've spent this book taking a journey through the many and various ways that Christianity has shaped the world that we currently inhabit, a world built on immeasurable, incomprehensible, irredeemable violence. It is tempting to end this book in a more hopeful tone, to offer you a solution to the problems I've identified, to reassure you that everything is going to work out OK in the end, and to tell you what you need to do to be saved. That's how books are supposed to end, right? But as I suggested back in Chapter 2, 'Theology Can't Be Saved', our desire for wholeness, for a final wrapping up that ties up all the loose ends and solves all the problems, is one of the reasons we continue to re-enact the violence of this world we inhabit and continue to invest our hope and our desire in the possibility of redemption of the world. What I'm suggesting instead is something more apocalyptic: not a vision of history as the field on which salvation is gradually worked out, but an

---

absolute rejection of and opposition to this world.[3] For Benjamin, this looks like the difference between going on strike in the hope of returning to work with better pay and conditions, and a general strike in which the refusal to work is instead an absolute rejection of the capitalist order as such. Frank Wilderson understands this difference in relation to the different positions of whiteness and blackness within the world. Imagine, he says, a slaughterhouse. In the slaughterhouse, workers are exploited, while cows are killed. Just so, within the world, while white people are exploited, the role of blackness is instead 'to be warehoused and die'. Where 'the worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic … the slave … demands that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratization'. A world built on the equation of blackness and death cannot be redeemed.[4] Amaryah Armstrong locates a similarly apocalyptic vision in the short stories of W. E. B. Du Bois, who uses Christian theological imagery to present a vision that is not prophetic – not a call to reform the world – but apocalyptic, a 'radical negation' of the world. 'A black theological sense of apocalyptic', she suggests, 'is not simply an openness to seeing something that is transcendent appearing as ultimate in the world, so much as it is *a revelation of the ultimacy of the world as a product of the anti-black social order*'.[5]

We could call what I'm suggesting here an abolitionist theology – and again, I'm not suggesting that this is the real, true essence of Christianity, but imply one thing we can do with the materials we have inherited from Christianity's long and complicated history. Abolitionism takes its name from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century struggles to end slavery and the slave trade. When slavery was abolished, racism did not

3 Walter Benjamin, 1996, 'Critique of Violence', Edmund Jephcott (tr.), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard University Press, pp. 236–52.

4 Frank Wilderson III, 2003, 'Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society', *Social Identities* 9.2, pp. 238, 230.

5 Amaryah Shaye Armstrong, 2002, 'The Apocalyptic Theology of W E B Du Bois: Black Culture at the End of the World', *Black Theology* 20.1, 27, 34.

end but was transformed into new systems and structures of violence. Later abolitionism began to focus on the central role of policing and prisons in this reorganization of racism during the latter part of the twentieth century, an argument that has returned to prominence more recently in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement which emerged in around 2013 after the police killings of George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd and others in the USA. Abolitionism says that some of the core institutions that make, maintain and reproduce the world – the police and prisons – cannot be reformed, because their central function is not to make everyone safe but to protect the violent institutions of whiteness and private property. They cannot be redeemed; they must be abolished.[6]

But even if we are able to let go of our investment in the world, our desire for a katechonic force to hold back the forces of chaos, it can be difficult to imagine what it means to start from an apocalyptic refusal of the world and a commitment to its abolition. As many others before me have argued, and as we've hopefully seen over the course of this book, to set out to abolish policing and prisons is ultimately to aim to abolish not just the police and prisons but all of the institutions and systems that make them necessary: borders, private property, the state, capital, race and gender. It is to commit to abolishing the world.

That's a big ask! However much you're convinced by the argument I'm making here, it might feel impossible to imagine what this looks like in practice. With a task so big, it might be tempting to give up entirely. One thing that can help us here is a concept I'm taking from the abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba: the idea that what we should be aiming for is not the immediate overthrow of everything, but instead 'non-reformist reforms', small changes which function not to shore up the power of the world but to undermine and diminish it. 'When you say things can't be reformed,' Kaba writes, 'the question

---

6 If you want to read more about abolitionism, some good places to start are Angela Y. Davis, 2003, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, New York: Seven Stories Press, and Avia Sarah Day and Shanice Octavia McBean, 2022, *Abolition Revolution*, London: Pluto.

becomes how do you handle people who are in immediate need for relief, right? How are you going to make life livable for people living in unlivable circumstances?' If we're trying to think about what's worth putting our time and energy into, Kaba suggests, we can ask what a 'non-reformist reform' might look like:

> Which reforms don't make it harder for us to dismantle the systems we are trying to abolish? Don't make it harder to create new things? What 'non-reformist' reforms will help us move toward the horizon of abolition? Sometimes people who you love dearly want you to fight for their reformist reform. They want you to fight for something they think will benefit a small tiny sliver of the people harmed by this behemoth monster without consideration for how it would then entrench other things that would make life harder for other people.[7]

Small acts, small changes, small transformations, might not add up to much, might not come close to ending the world. But they are not nothing. As Jesus said, 'whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly, I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'[8]

Of course, if we want to understand whether small actions are likely to shore up the world or to push back against it, we have to understand what we're up against. One reason to reject a vision of the world that anticipates an inevitable and ultimate triumph that will justify everything that has gone before it is that the more we're invested in the fantasy of winning, the harder it will be to face up to the world as it actually is: to confront the ways that the things we love and care about – whether that's particular people, institutions, Christianity or certain kinds of radical politics – are still, inescapably, shaped by the world we want to reject, even if it's our love for them that leads

---

7 Mariame Kaba, 2021, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, ebook.

8 Matthew 10.42.

us to long for an end of the world in the first place. What I've tried to do in this book is to show you where I've gotten to in my attempts to make sense of how the Christian tradition that has deeply formed me is also deeply responsible for the world that I think we should be trying to end; to face up honestly both to myself and to the world that I am part of. What would this mean for you?

For Augustine, as for many early Christian thinkers, the question of knowledge was at the heart of the problem of sin. If God made us so that the most morally good way to live was also what would make us happiest, then for sin to make any sense at all, ignorance had to play a crucial role. Why would we keep doing things that made us unhappy if it weren't that we no longer knew what would make us happy? I don't share Augustine's conviction that the quest to know and love God would lead us all inevitably in the same direction, to the same forms of life and the same decisions about the right way to live. But I do think he's right that one of the reasons we continue to invest in a world which is built on death-dealing and joy-destroying principles is that we have come to believe, incorrectly, that it's what will make us happy and secure. To work towards the end of the world means, in part, to realize that the peace, security and happiness we are promised by the institutions of this world are fantasies; to realize that we should find ways to work alongside those trying to end the world because, as Fred Moten puts it, 'this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?'[9]

As the stability of the world we inhabit has been threatened over the last few years by climate change, the pandemic and a number of political movements that have tried, however unsuccessfully, to roll back some of the violence on which the existing order of things depends, both liberal and far right concerns have increasingly focused on queer and trans people who have specifically been seen as threatening young children. Writing almost 20 years ago, the queer theorist Lee Edelman

---

9 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 2013, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, p. 140

argued that, in contemporary western society, the idea of 'the Child' had come to represent our investment in what he called 'reproductive futurity', that is, the desire for the future to be the same as the past, the desire to hold off the end of the world. 'The Child' is not the same as actually existing children, but an image of a fragile innocence which must be protected – an image which has much more to do with the fantasies of the white supremacist 14 words than it does to do with actually existing children, who are as much subject to the violence of the world as the rest of us. Drawing on the same Lacanian critique of our fantasies of wholeness that we looked at in Chapter 2, 'Theology Can't Be Saved', Edelman suggests that the threat to the Child, to the ongoing existence of the world, is 'sinthomo-sexuality', by which he means the ways in which human desire always escapes the systems and structures that we put in place to limit and contain it. But rather than asking ourselves the difficult and destabilizing question – what do we *really* want? – it is easier instead to project all of our dissatisfaction and longing outwards on to others. There's nothing inherently radical about queerness, Edelman says, but because (as we discussed in, Chapter 4, '"We Have To Talk" …') the image of the private family household has become so central to the world we inhabit, it is easy for queer people to be made the object of these fantasy projections. But rather than rejecting this association of queerness and negativity, Edelman suggests, we should embrace it,

> not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order – such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism – but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane.[10]

Not hope that the world will continue, then, but hope for the end of the world. Like so many Christian theologians, Edelman

---

10 Lee Edelman, 2004, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 4.

suggests that our deepest desires and longings, our most pro-
found and meaningful joys, will lead us beyond this world.

But it isn't enough, as Augustine knew, simply to say that our
desires will lead us to the end of the world. For Augustine, the
damage done to us by sin was not only damage to our intellec-
tual capacity to know what was good, but also damage to our
capacity to *want* what was good – to our desire. Intellectually
convinced that he should convert to Christianity and commit
himself to a life of chastity, Augustine nonetheless struggled for
a long time to master his desire. For Augustine, struggling to
control himself like a parent struggling to discipline a naughty
child or a master struggling with a rebellious slave, the solution
to his own lack of mastery was to invoke a greater and more
powerful master: God. Only with the help of God could his
unruly desires be brought back into proper alignment with God
and the good. In his struggles with himself, Augustine grasps
something that has been central to psychoanalysis (including
the Lacanian analysis, which I suggested earlier can help us to
better understand our investment in fantasies of wholeness and
control) but is sometimes missing from contemporary discus-
sions of what it means to resist the violence of the world and to
work towards its abolition: namely, that despite the centrality
of ideas of self-ownership and self-possession to modern under-
standings of personhood, in fact we do not possess ourselves;
we do not control ourselves; we do not even understand our-
selves. What might it mean to hold on to Augustine's insight
into the way that we are unmastered by our own desires with-
out resorting to the violence of the quest for self-mastery?

Let me tell you a story. A few years ago, I was in the pub
with some colleagues, and we started to play a game, trying to
guess from one another's accents where each of us had grown
up. Someone in the group asked if I was from the north-west of
England, which surprised me. I have never lived in the north-
west, and I don't even sound like I'm from the north-east,
which is where I actually grew up. And then suddenly I realized,
with horror, that somehow over the course of the evening I had
started to talk in my mum's Manchester accent. I have never
lived in Manchester, and I couldn't do a Manchester accent if I

was trying to, and yet here it was emerging from me, like that famous scene in *Alien*, except worse because what suddenly burst out from my chest wasn't a ruthless killing machine, *it was my mother*.

What *Alien* captures, according to Slavoj Žižek, is the fundamental experience of subjectivity, of being a person: there is 'something "in me more than myself" … an indestructible foreign body that …invades my interior and dominates me'.[11] To speak, to act, to desire, is to find ourselves, like Augustine, dispossessed, unsovereign in relation to our own selves. Who is this person who talks like that, who decided to do that, who wants that? One use of the idea of God has been as a name for this otherness of ourselves to our own selves. The Spirit intercedes, Paul tells us – for us, or as us, or through us – with sighs too deep for words; it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me; it is God who is at work in us, enabling us to will and to work for his good pleasure.[12] We are not our own, these foundational texts of Christianity tell us: instead we are possessed by God, we are children of God, slaves of God.

One way of understanding modernity is to see it as the struggle to reclaim for our own the powers that we had ceded to the divine, to take back control of our lives and our selves, to own ourselves, to master ourselves, instead of being owned or mastered by God, by others.[13] Only when we have recognized that the powers and capacities we have attributed to God are really our own can we, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel puts it, 'assume control of [our] destiny and become master of [our] social history and [our] relationship to nature'.[14] Sylvia Wynter, a sharp and attentive chronicler of this shift, does not flinch

11 Slavoj Žižek, 1996, '"I Hear You with My Eyes"; or, The Invisible Master', in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (eds), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 111.

12 Romans 8.26; Galatians 2.20; Philippians 2.13.

13 Some of the material in this section is adapted from my blog post, 2018, 'Knots', *An und für sich* (blog), 8 November, https://itself.blog/2018/11/08/knots/ (accessed 02.01.2023).

14 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, 1978, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, p. 133.

from the incomprehensible horrors unleashed by the emergence of western modernity, but nonetheless sees what she calls the 'de-godding' of European conceptions of human being as a necessary, though not sufficient, step on the road to the kind of understanding of ourselves that will be necessary if we are to survive – an outcome which she sees as desirable, though by no means guaranteed.[15] For Wynter, the central struggle of the contemporary world is between, on the one hand, those who seek to ensure that a particular (white, western, masculine, property-owning) conception of the human continues to be seen as universal and normative and, on the other hand, those who work instead for 'the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the human species itself/ ourselves'.[16] There is a complex interplay in Wynter's work between, on the one hand, her rejection of modern accounts of the human and, on the other, her affirmation of the need to recognize that the world – human life – is what we make it, to take responsibility for our own collective self-fashioning, our world-making, what Frantz Fanon called 'sociogeny'.[17]

Wynter is trying to find a way both to reject modern notions of sovereignty, of self-ownership, of self-mastery, and also to affirm the importance of human responsibility. We must stop talking about God, she suggests, in so far as talk about God becomes a way of disavowing what we are and do; in so far as 'God' has become a name for what we've decided we can't control, our hope that there is someone or something out there who guarantees the meaning and significance of our lives and so gives us permission to disavow our own role in creating and sustaining the world we inhabit, the world we make. 'The buck', she says, 'stops with us.'[18]

---

15 Sylvia Wynter, 2003, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/ Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3, pp. 257–337.

16 Wynter, 'Unsettling', p. 260.

17 Frantz Fanon, 1967, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Richard Philcox (tr.), New York: Grove Press.

18 Wynter, 'Unsettling', p. 331.

Another thinker who grapples with this complex tangle of responsibility and the impossibility of self-mastery is Stefania Pandolfo. Her book *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis and Islam* explores the different ways that contemporary Moroccans grapple with the ongoing catastrophe of a world formed by Christianity and colonialism: in homes, hospitals and sacred places riven by trauma; alongside families, doctors and imams seeking if not the end of the world then for ways to survive it. She asks what it would mean to interrupt a way of life 'of entrapment, resentment, and self-reproach in relation to a history of loss, thereby transforming one's relation to that history, opening up the possibility of living again – of futures unseen'.[19] Pandolfo understands the interplay of powerlessness and responsibility in human life through two Islamic concepts: *jihad* and *ibtila*. *Jihad* signifies the struggle against both the world and our own selves in order to transform them. It is both the ongoing grappling with our unruly selves – what Pandolfo calls our 'internal enemy, impossible to eliminate, and in fact also necessary for life' – and with an external enemy, the fight against the injustice and violence of the world.[20] *Ibtila*, or ordeal, is about bearing with, enduring, the violence that happens to us, that tears our lives apart, that bereaves and disables us. Yet it is not just about surviving this violence but about discerning in it the voice of God, however difficult it may be to hear. We must both take responsibility for what we are and do, must struggle against ourselves, the world and God and yet also bear them, suffer them, endure them.

We've traced in this book some of the ways in which we can see modernity not in terms of secularization but in terms of the transformation of theological concepts and structures into new forms. We've looked at the way that characteristics previously attributed to God come to be attributed instead to the figure of the sovereign, powerful, self-possessed, white, wealthy, rational man. But this Copernican revolution in our understanding of human nature was followed by another revolution

---

19 Stefania Pandolfo, 2017, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis and Islam*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, p. 243.

20 Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, p. 9.

– the emergence of psychoanalysis, which suggests another kind of decentring of the world. Not only are human beings not the centre of the universe, Freud suggests, but we are not even the centre of our own selves. For all it seem as though our minds revolve around our conscious intentions, for all that we envision ourselves as prime movers of our own being, we are in fact in the hands of unconscious forces, endlessly locked in an ordeal in which we must endure what is given to us, including our own selves. What does it mean to struggle for an end to the world when we cannot control even that which is most intimately our own?

The modern notion of the self-owning, self-controlled sovereign individual cannot help us here. We are not our own because everything we are has been given to us by what we are not; because we cannot disentangle our selves from how we have been made by those around us; because we come into the world helpless, with dependence and dispossession the conditions of our being. We cannot hold on to ourselves, cannot control ourselves, cannot possess ourselves. We can only accept ourselves and give ourselves. Jesus was tempted in the desert by Satan, who offered him material goods, power and rulership over all the nations of the world. He refused in order that he might do instead the will of God, the God with whom he was identical; that he might take up the task of being the self that was given to him.

Slavoj Žižek suggests that the truly ethical act is 'assuming one's Destiny as the highest (albeit forced) free choice'.[21] I like to think of this as a fancy way of telling us that the point of life is, as Dolly Parton has it, to 'find out who you are and do it on purpose', although Žižek recognizes perhaps more fully than Dolly does the true depths of horror that that entails, that it might mean monsters bursting out of your belly, that you might figure out that who you are is someone from whom your mother's Manchester accent suddenly erupts in the pub one night.

---

21 Slavoj Žižek, 2009, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso, p. 20.

The task of knowing ourselves and doing it on purpose is endless. To be human is to be constantly following the thread that ties our individual self to others, to our cultural, linguistic and religious heritage, to language, to our parents, to the world, to God. The 'knot of the soul' is the name that a mother Pandolfo speaks to gives to 'a wound … the intertwining of her suffering with that of her son'; because what we are is the ways we have been broken by the world, the ways we struggle against and bear with that brokenness, the ways we inherit and transmit that brokenness.[22] We are not things to be possessed, even by ourselves; we are what we do with what we are given, what we create with and for each other. We should speak about God, I am suggesting, only if we can do so in order to take responsibility for what we are – because what we are is that which escapes us, which we cannot control but perhaps can acknowledge, confront and accept when it bursts forth from us even at those moments when we least want or expect it. What we are is that which is in us more than ourselves, that which both makes and undoes the world, that which is to be struggled against and endured, that which goes by the name of God, that which is nameless and unknown.

---

22 Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, p. 114.

Bibliography

2011, 'Pass notes No 3,074 Ken Costa, Just the man to preach morality to the City – A Tory banker', in *The Guardian*, 7 November, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/07/pass-notes-ken-costa (accessed 01.12.2023).

2013, 'Prime Minister thanks campaigners and workers for helping bring about equal marriage legislation', Gov.uk website, 24 July, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-thanks-campaigners-and-workers-for-helping-to-bring-about-equal-marriage-legislation (accessed 01.2.2023).

Adler, Rachel, 1998, 'The Battered Wife of God: Violence, Law and the Feminist Critique of the Prophets', *Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies* 7, pp. 171–202.

Agamben, Giorgio, 2011, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Lorenzo Chiesa (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Agustín, Laura María, 2007, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, New York: Zed Books.

——, *The Naked Anthropologist*, www.lauraagustin.com (accessed 07.03.2023).

——, 2013, 'The sex worker stigma: How the law perpetuates our hatred (and fear) of prostitutes', *Salon*, 17 August, www.salon.com/2013/08/17/the_whore_stigma_how_the_law_perpetuates_our_hatred_and_fear_of_prostitutes_partner/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

Ahmed, Sara, 2004, 'Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism', *borderlands* 3.2, https://web.archive.org/web/20200207101016/http://borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm, (accessed 09.03.2023).

Allen, Debbie, director, 2020, *Christmas on the Square*, Warner Bros.

Althaus-Reid, Marcella, 2003, *The Queer God*, London: Routledge.

Anderson, Terry L. and Fred S. McChesney (eds), 2003, *Property Rights: Co-operation, Conflict and Law*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Anidjar, Gil, 2014, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Armstrong, Amaryah, 2015, 'Blackness and Value, Part 3: On Blackness as Debt', 2 March, *Women in Theology*, https://womenintheology.org/2015/03/02/blackness-and-value-part-3-on-blackness-as-debt/ (accessed 10.03.2023).

——, 2016, 'The Spirit and the Subprime: Race, Risk, and Our Common Dispossession', *Anglican Theological Review* 98.1, pp. 51–69.

——, 2020, 'Christian Order and Racial Order: What Cedric Robinson can teach us today', *The Bias*, 3 June, https://christiansocialism.com/cedric-robinson-racial-order-christianity-socialism/ (accessed 24.03.2023).

——, 'Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul', *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 16.2 (2017), pp. 126–41.

——, 2022, 'The Apocalyptic Theology of W E B Du Bois: Black Culture at the End of the World', *Black Theology* 20.5, pp. 25–40.

Augustine of Hippo, 1998, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, R. W. Dyson (ed. and tr.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Augustine of Hippo, 2017, *Confessions*, Sarah Ruden (tr.), New York: Modern Library.

Barber, Daniel Colucciello, 2011, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Barth, Karl, 2015, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*, Louise Pettibone Smith (tr.), Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Baum, Dan, 2016, 'Legalize it all: How to win the war on drugs', *Harpers*, April, https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/ (accessed 13.03.2023).

Beatty, Warren and Buck Henry, directors, 1978, *Heaven Can Wait*, Paramount Pictures.

Benjamin, Walter, 1921, 1996, 'Capitalism as Religion', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, Rodney Livingstone (tr.), Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, pp. 288–91.

——, 1996, 'Critique of Violence', Edmund Jephcott (tr.), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, pp. 236–52.

——, 2006, 'On the Concept of History', Harry Zohn (tr.), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, pp. 389–400.

Bethencourt, Francisco, 2013, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bhandar, Branna, 2014, 'Property, Law, and Race: Modes of Abstraction', *UC Irvine Law Review* 4.203, pp. 203–18.

Biale, David, 2007, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bingham, John, 2013, '"Church must fill failing state void" – Arch-bishop-elect Justin Welby', *Anglican Communion News Service*, 1 February, www.anglicannews.org/news/2013/02/church-must-fill-fail ing-state-void-archbishop-elect-justin-welby.aspx (accessed 01.02.2023).

Blisset, Luther, 2000, *Q*, Sean Whiteside (tr.), London: Arrow Books.

Bluth, Don, Gary Goldman and Dan Kuenstner, directors, 1989, *All Dogs Go to Heaven*, Dreamworks.

Bouwsma, William J., 1988, 'Calvin's Anxiety', *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 32–48.

Boyarin, Daniel, 2004, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christian-ity*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Brenner, Athalya (ed.), 1998, *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Brown, Peter, 2017, 'Dialogue with God', *The New York Review of Books*, 26 October, https://web.archive.org/web/20171010050412/ https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/10/26/sarah-ruden-augus tine-dialogue-god/ (accessed 13.03.2023).

Buell, Denise Kimber, 2005, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Burton, Antoinette, 1994, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture: 1865–1915*, Chapel Hill, NC: Univer-sity of North Carolina Press.

Butler, Josephine, 1879, 'Social Purity: An Address', http://purl.dlib. indiana.edu/iudl/vwwp/VAB7160 (accessed 10.03.2023).

Bynum, Caroline Walker, 1987, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

——, 2007, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medie-val Northern Germany and Beyond*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Calvin, John, 1845, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beve-ridge (tr.), www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.xviii.html (accessed 15.03.2023).

Capener, Sean, 2021, 'The Time that Belongs to God: The Christian Prohibition on Usury in the 12th–13th Centuries and the Making of the Subject of Debt' (doctoral dissertation), University of Toronto, Toronto.

Castro, Eduardo Viveiros de, 2014, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, Peter Skafish (ed. and tr.), Minne-apolis, MN: Univocal Press.

Césaire, Aimé, 2001, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (tr. and ed.), Middletown, CT: Wes-leyan University Press.

Chelius Stark, Judith (ed.), 2010, *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Cohn, Norman, 2011, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millennials and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages,* London: Random House.

Cone, James H., 2018, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Coontz, Stephanie, 2006, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, London: Penguin.

Davis, Angela Y., 2003, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, New York: Seven Stories Press.

Dawkins, Richard, 16 July 2018, https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1018933359978909696 (accessed 09.03.2023).

Day, Aviah Sarah and Shanice Octavia McBean, 2022, *Abolition Revolution*, London: Pluto.

Delaney, Carol, 1998, 'Abraham and the Seeds of Patriarchy', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 129–49.

Dubilet, Alex, 2018, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Du Mez, Kristin Kobes, 2020, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, New York: W. W. Norton.

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne, 2014, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Edelman, Lee, 2004, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Editorial, 2015, 'The Guardian view on Easter: David Cameron's wonky cross', *The Guardian*, 2 April, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/02/guardian-view-easter-david-cameron-wonky-cross (accessed 15.03.2023).

Elia, Matt, 'The Problem of the Christian Master: Augustine in the Afterlife of Slavery', unpublished manuscript.

Empower Foundation, 2012, 'Hit and Run: Sex Worker's Research on Anti-trafficking in Thailand', www.empowerfoundation.org/sexy_file/Hit%20and%20Run%20%20RATSW%20Eng%20online.pdf (accessed 14.03.2023).

Ephron, Nora, director, 1996, *Michael*, Alphaville Films.

Fanon, Frantz, 1967, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Richard Philcox (tr.), New York: Grove Press.

——, 1963, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Constance Farrington (tr.), New York: Grove Press.

Farrar Capon, Robert, 1979, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Federici, Silvia, 2004, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Financial Times, 2012, 'Antivirus fight takes a dreadful toll on jobs', www.ft.com/content/bc7b919c-80a5-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84, cited by @wescz1312 on Twitter, 1 December, https://twitter.com/wescz1312/status/1466128884387115010 (accessed 10.03.2023).

Finch, Julia and Nick Mathiason, 2009, 'Bankers and morality: Churches turn on the modern moneylenders', *The Guardian*, 25 October, www.theguardian.com/business/2009/oct/25/bank-pay-bonuses-religion (accessed 10.03.2023)

Fraser, Giles, 2015, 'Christianity, when properly understood, is a religion of losers', *The Guardian*, 3 April, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/apr/03/christianity-when-properly-under-stood-religion-losers (accessed 15.03.2023).

Fraser, Nancy, 2016, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care', *New Left Review,* pp. 99–117.

Fraser, Nancy and Linda Gordon, 2013, 'A Genealogy of "Dependency": Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare State', in Nancy Fraser (ed.), *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, London: Verso, pp. 83–110.

Fredrickson, George M., 2002, *Racism: A Short History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fry, Stephen, 2014, 'An Open Letter to David Cameron and the IOC', *StephenFry.com*, 7 August, www.stephenfry.com/2013/08/an-open-letter-to-david-cameron-and-the-ioc/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

Fukuyama, Francis, 1989, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest* 16, pp. 3–18.

Furman, Richard, 1823, 'Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Colored Population of the United States in Communication to the Governor of South Caroline', Charleston, https://glc.yale.edu/exposition-views-baptists-relative-coloured-population (accessed 13.03.2023).

Garba, Tapji, 2022, 'Money', *Political Theology Network*, 8 November, https://politicaltheology.com/money/ (accessed 10.03.2023),

Garba, Tapji and Sara-Maria Sorentino, 2020, 'Slavery is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor"', *Antipode* 52.3, pp. 1–19.

Garnsey, Peter, 1996, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gerbner, Katherine, 2018, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*, Philadephia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gira Grant, Melissa, 2014, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, London: Verso.

Gleeson, Jules Joanne and Elle O'Rourke, 2021, 'Introduction', *Transgender Marxism*, London: Pluto, pp. 1–32.

Goldenberg, David, 2003, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Goodchild, Philip, 2009, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*, London: Routledge.

——, 2009, *Theology of Money*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Graeber, David, 2011, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years,* Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.

Grice, Andrew, 2013, 'War on Wonga: We're putting you out of business, Archbishop Justin Welby tell payday loans companies', *Independent*, 25 July, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/war-wonga-we-re-putting-you-out-business-archbishop-canterbury-justin-welby-tells-payday-loans-company-8730839.html (accessed 10.03.2023).

Haley, Alex and Malcolm X, 1965, *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York: Ballantine Books.

Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten, 2013, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Harris, Cheryl, 1993, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review* 108.6, pp. 1709–91.

Hartman, Saidiya, 1996, 'Seduction and the Ruses of Power', *Callaloo* 19.2, pp. 537–60.

——, 1997, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heng, Geraldine, 2011, 'The Invention of Race in the European Middles Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity the Middle Ages', *Literature Compass* 8.5, pp. 258–74.

——, 2011, 'The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race', *Literature Compass* 8.5, pp. 275–93.

Humbert of Romans, 'Opus Tripartium', in Louise Riley-Smith and Jonathan Riley-Smith (eds), *The Crusades: Idea and Reality*, *1095–1274*, London: Edward Arnold, pp. 103–17.

Ipsen, Avaren, 2009, *Sex Working and the Bible*, London: Equinox.

James, C. L. R., 1989, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, New York: Vintage.

Jameson, Frederic, 2006, 'First Impressions', *London Review of Books* 27.17, 7 September, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n17/fredric-jameson/first-impressions (accessed 14.04.2023).

Johnson, Sylvester A., 2004, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens and the People of God*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

'Jubilee 2000', *Advocacy International*, http://advocacyinternational.co.uk/featured-project/jubilee-2000 (accessed 10.03.2023).

Judge, Rajbir Singh, 2021, 'The Invisible Hand of the Indic', *Cultural Critique* 110, pp. 75–109.

Kaba, Mariame, 2021, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, ebook.

Keck, David, 1998, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King Jr, Martin Luther, 1963, 'Letter from Birmingham Jail', https://letterfromjail.com, (accessed 15.03.2023).

Kipling, Rudyard, 1899, 'The White Man's Burden', www.poetry.com/poem/33606/the-white-man's-burden (accessed 07.03.2023).

Koram, Kojo, 2022, *Uncommon Wealth: Britain and the Aftermath of Empire*, London: John Murray.

Koster, Henry, director, 1947, *The Bishop's Wife*, Samuel Goldwyn.

Kotsko, Adam, 2017, *The Prince of This World,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

——, 2018, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kreeger, Erika Lynn Abigail, 2013, 'Gay Imperialism and Olympic Oppression Part 1: Russian Sexual Politics and the East/West Divide', *Static* (blog), 8 August, https://stnfrdstatic.wordpress.com/2013/08/08/gay-imperialism-and-olympic-oppression-part-1-russian-sexual-politics-and-the-eastwest-divide/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

——, 2013, 'Gay Imperialism and Olympic Oppression Part 2: Boycotting Boycotts of Russia', *Static* (blog), 9 August, https://stnfrdstatic.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/gay-imperialism-and-olympic-oppression-part-2-boycotting-boycotts-of-russia/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

Kropotkin, Peter, 1902, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution (accessed 13.03.2023).

Kushner, Tony, 2017, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, London: Nick Hern Books.

Lacan, Jacques, 1998, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972–1973*, Jacques Alain Miller (ed.), Bruce Fink (tr.), London: W. W. Norton.

——, 2007, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Alain Miller (ed.), Russell Grigg (tr.), London: W. W. Norton.

Las Casas, Bartolomé, 1992, *In Defense of the Indians*, De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press.

Lazzarato, Maurizio, 2021, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Joshua David Jordan (tr.), Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Leacock, Eleanor, 1981, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected articles on women cross-culturally*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Le Goff, Jacques, 1980, 'Labor Time in the "Crisis" of the Fourteenth Century: From Medieval Times to Modern Times', *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*, Arthur Goldhammer (tr.), Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 43–52.

Lentin, Alana, 2008, *Racism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford: Oneworld.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 1967, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Lewis, C. S., 2001, *Mere Christianity*, New York: HarperCollins.

Locke, John, 1998, *Two Treatises of Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Long, Scott, 2013, 'Truths behind the gay torture images from Russia', *a paper bird* (blog) 11 August, https://web.archive.org/web/20130815181352/http://paper-bird.net/2013/08/11/truths-behind-the-gay-torture-images-from-russia/ (accessed 07.03.2023).

Luther, Martin, 1522, 'The Estate of Marriage', https://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/Reformations441/LutherMarriage.htm#Part%20III (accessed 09.03.2023).

Lynch, Thomas, 2014, 'Making the Quarter Turn: Liberation Theology after Lacan', in Creston Davis and Marcus Pound (eds), *Theology after Lacan*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, pp. 211–31.

——, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*, London: Bloomsbury.

MacMullen, Ramsey, 1986, 'What Difference Did Christianity Make?', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 3, pp. 322–43.

Marion, Jean-Luc, 2001, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, Thomas A. Carlson (tr.), New York: Fordham University Press.

Marovich, Beatrice, 2022, 'Hearing Nothing: A More than Human Silence', *Political Theology*, pp. 1–18.

Marshall, Penny, director, 1996, *The Preacher's Wife*, Touchstone Pictures.

Marx, Karl, 1863, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch24.htm (accessed 10.03.2023).

——, 1985, *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, vol. XLI, London: Victor Gollancz.

Menocal, María Rosa, 2002, *The Ornament of the World*: *How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, New York: Back Bay Books.

Meyer, Eric Daryl, 2018, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Miren, Frankie, 2020, 'The English Collective of Prostitutes: Occupation of Holy Cross Church', British Library website, 20 October, www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/english-collective-of-prostitutes-occupation-of-holy-cross-church# (accessed 14.03.2023).

Moore, Jason W. and Raj Patel, 2018, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, London: Verso.

Moore, Stephen D., 2000, 'The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality', *Church History* 69.2, pp. 328–49.

Muehlberger, Ellen, 2008, 'Ambivalence about the Angelic Life: The Promise and Perils of an Early Christian Discourse about Asceticism', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.4, pp. 447–78.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 2007, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Carol Diethe (tr.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nolfi, George, director, 2011, *The Adjustment Bureau*, Universal Pictures.

Nozick, Robert, 2001, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Oberman, Heiko A., 1989, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, Eileen Walliser-Schwartzberg (tr.), New Haven, KT: Yale University Press.

Pandolfo, Stefania, 2017, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis and Islam*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Parliament of Australia, 2020, '2019–2020 Australian bushfires – frequently asked questions: a quick guide', 12 March www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/Quick_Guides/AustralianBushfires (accessed 07.03.2023).

Pateman, Carol, 1980, 'Women and Consent', *Political Theory* 8.2, pp. 149–68.

——, 2002, 'Self-Ownership and Property in the Person: Democratization and a Tale of Two Concepts', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10.1, pp. 20–53.

——, 2018, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Patterson, Orlando, 1982, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

——, 1991, *Freedom, Volume 1: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, New York: Basic Books.

Perfect, Simon, 2015, 'Politicians at Easter and Bishops at Election', *Theos*, 9 April, www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2015/04/09/politicians-at-easter-and-bishops-at-election (accessed 15.03.2023).

Poole, Eve, 2002, *The Church on Capitalism: Theology and the Market*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Power, Kim, 1995, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writing on Women*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Preston, Alex, 2011, 'God's bankers: How evangelical Christianity is taking a hold of the City of London's financial institutions', *Independent*, 23 April, www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/gods-bankers-how-evangelical-christianity-

is-taking-a-hold-of-the-cityof-londonrsquos-financial-2270393.html (accessed 10.03.2023).

Puar, Jasbir, 2007, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rawlinson, Kevin and Richard Adams, 2018, 'UCL to investigate eugenics conference secretly held on campus', *The Guardian*, 11 January, www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/10/ucl-to-investigate-secret-eugenics-conference-held-on-campus (accessed 15.03.2023).

Rose, Marika, 2009, *A Theology of Failure: Žižek Against Christian Innocence*, New York: Fordham University Press.

——, 2013, 'The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*', *New Blackfriars* 94.1053, pp. 541–51.

——, 2016, '"It's Not the Money but the Love of Money that is the Root of All Evil": Social Subjection, Machinic Enslavement and the Limits of Anglican Social Theology', *Religions* 7.103, pp. 1–12.

——, 2017, 'For Our Sins: Christianity, Complicity and the Racialized Construction of Innocence', in Robin Dunford, Afxentis Afxentiou and Michael Neu (eds), *Exploring Complicity: Concepts, Cases and Critique*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 53–64.

——, 2018, 'Knots', *An und für sich* (blog), 8 November, https://itself.blog/2018/11/08/knots/ (accessed 02.01.2023).

——, 2019, 'Holy Mothers of God: Sex work, inheritance and the women of Jesus' genealogy', *Theology & Sexuality* 25.1–2, pp. 1–20.

Rose, Marika and Anthony Paul Smith, 2019, 'Hexing the Discipline: Against the reproduction of continental philosophy of religion', *Palgrave Communications* 5.2, pp. 1–10.

Ross, Kristin, 2015, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, London: Verso, ebook.

Ruden, Sarah, 2010, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, New York: Image Books.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford, 2010, 'Augustine: Sexuality, Gender and Women', in Judith Chelius Stark (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 48–64.

Saini, Angela, 2019, *Superior: The Return of Race Science*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Sexton, Jared, 2008, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

——, 2014, 'The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign', *Critical Sociology*, pp. 1–15.

Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, 2017, 'SWOU Statement on Poverty, Sex Work and the Swedish Model: "Poverty is Objectifying, Demeaning and Coercive"', 19 March, www.swarmcollective.

org/blog/statement-on-poverty-sex-work-and-the-swedish-model-poverty-is-objectifying-demeaning-and-coercive1 (accessed 14.03.2023).

Singh, Devin, 2016, 'Debt Cancellation as Sovereign Crisis Management', *Cosmologics* magazine, 18 January, https://web.archive.org/web/20170409185425/http://www.cosmologicsmagazine.com/devin-singh-debt-cancellation-as-sovereign-crisis-management (accessed 10.03.2023).

——, 2018, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Smith, Adam, 1977, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Anthony Paul, 2013, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

——, 2020, 'Provincializing Theodicy', *Contending Modernities*, 29 September, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/decoloniality/provincializing-theodicy/ (accessed 03.03.2023).

Smith, Molly, 2015, 'The Problem with the "Swedish Model" for Sex Work Laws', *The New Republic*, 8 June, https://newrepublic.com/article/121981/northern-ireland-sex-work-law-based-wrong-model (accessed 14.03.2023).

Smith, Molly and Juno Mac, 2020, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, London: Verso.

Snediker, Timothy, 2016, 'Theodicy of Money: The Scene and Subject of Forgiveness', *Religious Theory*, 18 May, http://jcrt.org/religioustheory/2016/05/18/theodicy-of-money-the-scene-and-subject-of-forgiveness/ (accessed 15.03.2023).

Sohn-Rethel. Alfred, 1978, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

Sorentino, Sara-Maria, 2019, 'Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness', *Theory and Event* 22.3, pp. 630–73.

——, 2019, 'The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx's Method', *International Labour and Working-Class History* 96, pp. 17–37.

Stone, Ken, 2014, 'Marriage and Sexual Relations in the World of the Hebrew Bible', in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 173–88.

Stopes, Harry, 2014, 'Five Thoughts on the Killing of Mark Duggan', *LRB blog*, 9 January, www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/january/five-thoughts-on-the-killing-of-mark-duggan (accessed 09.03.2023).

Stovall, Taylor, 2021, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Taubes, Jacob, 2003, *Occidental Eschatology*, David Ramotko (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

——, 2003, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Dana Hollander (tr.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Donut Man, 'The Donut Hole: Jesus Shows us God's Love', on Youtube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHiM1cWt2D8&t=210s (accessed 08.03.2023).

Tilley, Lisa, 2021, 'On Resigning from Birkbeck Politics', 31 August, https://litilley.medium.com/on-resigning-from-birkbeck-politics-3681 c0f65a91 (accessed 15.03.2023),

Turner, Denys, 1995, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications.

Warrior, Robert, 1989, 'Canaanites, cowboys and Indians: Deliverance, conquest, and liberation theology', *Christianity & Crisis* 49.12, pp. 261–5.

Weber, Max, 2001, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (tr.), London: Routledge.

Wenders, Wim, director, 1987, *Wings of Desire*, Road Movies.

West, Edwin G., 2003, 'Property Rights in the History of Economic Thought: From Locke to J. S. Mill', in Terry L. Anderson and Fred S. McChesney (eds), *Property Rights: Co-operation, Conflict and Law*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 20–42.

Wilderson, Frank III, 2003, 'Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society', *Social Identities* 9.2, pp. 225–40.

Wohlleben, Peter, 2017, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, Jane Billinghurst (tr.), Glasgow: William Collins.

Wynter, Sylvia, 1984, 'New Seville and the Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de Las Casas Part 1', *Jamaica Journal* 17.2, pp. 25–32.

——, 1984, 'New Seville and the Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de Las Casas Part 2, *Jamaica Journal* 17.3, pp. 46–56.

——, 2003, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3, pp. 257–337.

Yancy, George, 2012, *Look, A White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Yong, Ed, 2016, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes within Us and a Grander View of Life*, New York: HarperCollins.

Žižek, Slavoj, 1996, '"I Hear You with My Eyes"; or, The Invisible Master', in Renata Salacl and Slavoj Žižek (eds), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

——, 2008, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, New York: Picador.

——, 2009, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso.

——, 2010, 'What is the Left to do?', *Counterpunch*, 15 October, https://web.archive.org/web/20101019031133/https://www.counterpunch.org/zizek10152010.html (accessed 14.04.2023).