

THE MARRIAGE OF PREAH THONG AND NEANG NEAK: ON CULTURAL MEMORY, UNIVERSALISM AND ECLECTICISM

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ABSTRACT

The momentum of globalization and universalism, operating through the media, information technology and politics, has steadily diminished the importance of cultural diversity. It has even threatened to erase many of our cultural traditions, or extinguish our diverse experiences of the sacred. Yet the sacred which seems to be lost is often still encased in our cultural objects, stories and religious rituals. This paper will discuss how the memories of the sacred can be both preserved and reawakened. This paper will focus on three scholars who develop alternative approaches to the universal. Franz Rosenzweig saw universal historical progress as oppressive. He believed that the practice of his Jewish religion offered a resistance and a possible correction to the general movement of history. Walter Benjamin saw the forgotten 'ruins' of history encase memories of the sacred and the silenced voices within history. For Benjamin, the role of interpretation is to awaken these hidden memories and voices which are encoded within our objects, images and commodities. This led him to a particular idea of a momentary messianic redemption in relation to greater flow of time. And finally, Jacob Taubes read St. Paul as offering a revolutionary model on how to live one's particular faith within a wider political order. In general, each writer developed an idea of redemption which involves a kind of remembrance of what has been obscured by the more general universal movement of history itself. This is especially relevant for the various religious and cultural communities within Cambodia. The paper will begin and end by discussing the origin story of Cambodia – the marriage between Preah Thong, the Indian prince, and Neang Neak, the Naga princess. I will additionally try to demonstrate that the story and its various reenactments is important because it represents a regenerative process rooted in the

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eclectic character of South East Asian culture in general. Various forms of memory within the syncretic or eclectic context of Southeast Asia can operate to preserve the sacred in an age of universalization and globalization. It also illustrates how the performance of memory can also offer an antidote to the "trauma" of Cambodia's past.

Keywords: Universalism; Cultural Memory; Preah Thong and Neang Neak; Franz Rosenzweig; Walter Benjamin; Jacob Taubes

Marriage part 1: Anchoring

I wish to structure my presentation by anchoring it in various places and concerns. First of all, we are 'here' meeting in Cambodia. If we wish to speak of the identity of Khmer culture and its memory, we must first examine the origin myths concerning the 'place' where we are meeting.

Next, we are a group of international scholars attending a conference sponsored by an institution connected to Catholic university, an institution named after St. Paul. And St. Paul has generated much philosophical attention in the past years by Christian philosophers like John Milbank to secular philosophers like Alain Badiou. They have particularly been interested in the concept of 'universalism.' As the information age continues to cast its net over the surface of the globe, many cultures face the crisis of how to balance local tradition with the innervation and interconnection with people around the world. We are faced both with the problem of universalism, and the reaction to universalism. In light of this, what does it mean for us international scholars to speak of the identity of Cambodian culture and memory?

Finally, is my own experience of living and teaching in various places. I have often wondered how my experiences of living in various cultures have given a 'place' to my thinking. If I am attracted to cultural difference or cultural memory, it is due to who I am or what I have become? And if I speak from these gaps between cultures, what kind of philosophical or theological logic does it entail?

And so, why begin a presentation with an anchoring? I feel that the greatest dangers associated with globalization involves a drifting and a forgetting of physical reality. And so, this is what I wish to explore today – here in Cambodia, at the St. Paul Institute, in front of an audience of Khmer and international scholars.

And so, where are we? We are holding this conference at a special spot of the earth which was given as a gift by the Naga King to his daughter and son-in-law. So, my Khmer audience knows well the story of the marriage between Preah Tong and Neang Neak. It is

² Moura, J. *Le royaume du Cambodge*, Paris: Leroux, 1883, quoted by Paul Cravath. Cravath, Paul Russell. *Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia*. UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1987, 50

³ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020, 107

the origin story of Khmer people or Khmer culture. The following is the early description of J. Moura.

According to the oral tradition recorded by the Chronicles, Preah Tong was the son of a north Indian king who was banished and came to Kok Thlok where he drove out the Cham ruler prior to his courtship of the beautiful daughter of the king of the Naga called Neang Neak (nana naka) or “Lady Serpent.” Following a grand marriage, the Naga king created a kingdom for his son-in-law by drinking the waters covering a vast area on which he then formed houses and a palace. This kingdom took the new name of Kambuja, and Preah Thong was the first Khmer king.²

There are many versions of this myth concerning the marriage of Preah Tong and Neang Neak, but all express the process of the founding of civilization. The naga princess represents feminine forces of life, earth, and water, while the Indian prince represents the masculine solar and spiritual principle. Civilization results through the marriage of these two principles.

The scholar Boreth Ly in his book *Traces of Trauma*, points out that this story also provides the roots of the word ‘Khmer.’ He cites an inscription found in the Angkorian temple Abaksei Chamkrong,

Honor self-created Kambu whose glory (like a star) rose at the horizon, and whose superior descendent, having obtained the conjunction of the Solar and the Lunar races, disperses ignorance [. . .], and is perfectly complete, accomplished in all the arts. I implore Mera, the most glorious of celestial women, whom Shiva, guru of the Three Worlds [. . .] gave from on high as queen to this wise man.³

He goes on to observe that this version of the marriage becomes the identity of the Khmer people:

First, the coupling of Kambu and Mera gave birth to the word Khmer. Second, Mera

² Moura, J. *Le royaume du Cambodge*, Paris: Leroux, 1883, quoted by Paul Cravath. Cravath, Paul Russell. *Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia*. UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1987, 50

³ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020, 107

is a celestial dancer, suggesting that dance was and still is the primary artistic mode of expression in Cambodian culture. Third, Mera came from the lunar race and Kambu belonged to the solar race: the couple thus founded the lunar and solar dynasties in ancient Khmer dynastic genealogies. Last, although it is hard to make a clear distinction between “myth” and “history” in ancient Khmer definitions and notions of the past, it is clear that the story of Preah Thong Neang Neak had entered the Khmer historical imagination by the tenth century. The figure of Kambu supplanted Preah Thong, the Brahmin prince, and Mera became Neang Neak, the celestial dancer whose genealogy harkened back to the king of the nagas. These two serpent princesses, Mera and Neang Neak, are one and the same. More important, they are the mythical mothers of the Khmer ethnic group.⁴

This marriage is not only the founding myth of the Cambodian people but was ritualistically reenacted by the early Khmer kings. A form of this reenactment takes place to the present day in the rituals surrounding marriage. Boreth Ly writes:

Not surprisingly, the story of Preah Thong Neang Neak is also reconstructed and reenacted at Khmer weddings. For example, the bride gives some snakeskins to the groom to symbolize his visit to the underworld, the kingdom of the naga. In addition, one of the ritual reenactments in Khmer weddings is called Preah Thong (kann) Sbay Neang Neak, which translates as “Preah Thong holding onto the sbay, his serpent bride’s tail.” In it the groom holds onto his bride’s sbay from behind while the couple walks clock-wise in a circle three times to symbolize their entering into her naga realm.⁵

What is interesting are the reenactments of myths. Certainly, Mircea Eliade points out that myths are not merely intellectual but also need to be performed through rituals. For him it counteracts the deterioration of profane time by a cyclic return to the events which occur in sacred time.

But what of today? The media, the internet, global information systems have their own projections of reality and time. What can a belief, a minor ritual or the physical reenactment of cultural memory preserve in the face of the overwhelming movements of

⁴ Ibid, 107

⁵ Ibid., 107

global culture? The conflict as it has been developing seems to involve the choice between universalism and traditionalism, or between liberalism and conservatism. Not only are people encouraged to take a side with one extreme, these extremes have been carefully packaged and weaponized.

We are well aware of the liberal critique of conservatism, nationalism or traditionalism. But what of the critique of universalism? Those skeptical of universalism and its abuses are often labeled as reactionary and dangerous. In his essay "Hegel and the Nazis" from 1943, Georg Lukacs denounced not only the National Socialist movement but all the philosophical approaches that denounce the onward movement of the rationalist Hegelian and Marxist version of history. Any philosophy which supports a mystical view of reality beginning with Romantics, is considered suspect.⁶ This suggests that to overcome the violent destructive aspects of history, to avoid the irrational eruptions of history, all of history must be brought in line with universal reason. Certainly, in our time, through the power of our information technologies, this push towards the codified-rational-universal is steadily becoming realized. There are many divergent voices in cyberspace, but the rationality of our cybernetic technologies steers and manages these voices according to the logic of capital. And here is the problem. We can recognize the benefits of defining and universalizing our various values and ideals. But ultimately, in the rationality of the market, universal reason itself becomes a strategy for the exploitation of the world's resources for profit.

And you can see how disquieting this would be to various cultures around the world. For a culture to have a direction and an identity, there would need to be a practiced connection with its past, as well as an insulation to the more destructive practices of universal or instrumental rationality. But can there be a more nuanced view of the spiritual resistances to universalism that does not fall into the traps of fascism, religious fundamentalism, bigotry, or racism? The trick would be to reconsider the idea of the universal in a way which does not permit its abuse. I wish to call your attention the three writers.

Franz Rosenzweig

How can we hold a 'global conference' on cultural memory which would respect a

⁶ Georg Lukacs, "Hegel and the Nazis," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1943/hegel-nazis.htm>

culture's unique identity, its rootedness in the past, its projections into the future and its continued self-determination? Is not our very presence as global scholars speaking a universal language of philosophy or theology a serious obstacle? One way we can begin is to ask about the possibility of minor practices of identity and redemption to preserve themselves within the flows of a broader universal history. The writer who approaches this from a metaphysical perspective is Franz Rosenzweig. He was a German Jewish writer who was famous for his work *The Star of Redemption*. The work is partly a reaction to the idea of history based upon progress and universality which he associated not only with Hegel but with Christianity as well.

Any nation which tries to persevere in its identity, from Hegel's perspective, would be considered decadent because it resists the movement of universal history.⁷ But for Rosenzweig, such a movement of Christian/Hegelian universal history is itself decadent. Near the end of *The Star of Redemption*, he writes:

But in this prospect of a future unified and universal world, without oppositions, of a day where God will be all in all, Christianity again confronts a danger, the last of the three great ones that are inevitable because inseparable from its greatness and its power: deification of the world or secularization of God, which, on account of the all in all would forget the One above all, and for which, on account of the lovingly active uniting of what is separated by the world in the one and universal edifice of the Kingdom, the pious trust in the inner, free, self-renewing strength of the soul, and in God's Providence that goes its own ways beyond human understanding, would disappear.⁸

Rosenzweig therefore resists the universalizing tendencies of such previous writers as Kant and Hegel. On one hand, Rosenzweig wants to emphasize the ability of the 'self' to transcend the particularity of its individual character which is rooted in a particular culture.⁹ And yet, on the other hand, the culture in its particularity gives the resulting expression its own imprint. Truth is always related to the setting. The universal only emerges through the particular. This is rooted to the act of creation itself. The universal (the Creator) creates the particularity in the world, and so all the particular things in the

⁷ See for example Rosenzweig's work *Hegel and the State*, 369

⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*. translated by Barbara E. Galli. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, 424

⁹ See for example the section in *The Star of Redemption* entitled 'Laws of the World,' 84.

world, and so all the particular things in the world possess a trace of the universal. So, each expression of the universal always contains a “contagion of the particular.”¹⁰

Any emphasis on the universal movement of history shifts the emphasis from the individual’s experience. But much in the manner of Schelling’s later philosophy or Kierkegaard’s philosophy, this returns the focus to the living individual and the presence of the ‘Creator within.’¹¹ Rosenzweig describes this in relation to the reflections of Moses Maimonides.

[The] divine understanding of being does not happen in the Creation that took place once and for all, but momentarily; it is, of course, universal providence, but one that is renewed in every tiniest particular moment, for all existence of the sort that God “renews from day to day the work of the beginning.” This providence renewed every morning is thus what is really meant in the idea of the creature.¹²

He also describes this in relation to Islam when he speaks of a “universal in miniature”:

An essential particular, that is a particular which is as it were a universal in miniature, a particular which, although particular, is nevertheless “always and everywhere” as far as it itself is concerned... So, Allah is required at every moment to create every singular thing, exactly as if it were itself the universal. So, providence now consists in an infinite multiplicity of splintered creative acts which, unconnected among themselves, each have the span of an entire Creation.¹³

This choice to push back against Christian/Hegelian universal history and support for a “momentary” or monadic “universal in miniature” leaves open a space for the experience of the sacred within the movement of time itself. It leaves open the possibilities for individuals and communities to preserve their own experiences of redemption within the larger movement of global history.

¹⁰ Rosenzweig writes: “This essence that encloses in itself all particularity, but is itself universal and recognizes itself at every moment as a whole is existence. In contrast to being, existence means the universal, full of the particular and not always and everywhere, but—affected by the contagion of the particular—must perpetually become new to preserve itself,” 132

¹¹ For instance, in Schelling’s *Ages of the World*, the human will is not subordinate to reason as it would be in St. Augustine, but the will is identified with God.

¹² Franz Rozenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 133

¹³ *Ibid*, 134

During the period of the First World War Rosenzweig exchanged letters with his friend Rosenstock who converted to Christianity. He was forced to defend his adherence to Judaism which his friend now considered to be backward and not in line with the flows and aims of universal history. In Stéphane Mosès summary of this exchange, he concludes that for Rosenzweig:

Every person, every society, and every nation attest to the aspect of truth revealed through their specific condition and vocation. But the multiplicity of situations experienced is ultimately subsumed in the duality of the two great religious cultures of the West, Judaism and Christianity. Each of them embodies a particular relationship to Redemption. That there are thus two paradigms of Redemption rather than only one conveys the ultimate finitude of the human condition.¹⁴

The experience of the individual and their particular religion is a form of resistance. A conception of time and redemption which is different than the mainstream of history. In contrast to the extension of redemption to the end of history, the Jewish experience situates redemption within a particular lived experience and religious practice. According to writers like Mosès, it is a stopping of time. He writes: “Only an absolutely synchronic time can allow the actualization of the most distant future in the flash of the present instant, in other words, anticipating Redemption.”¹⁵ And according to the interpretation of Dana Hollander it is a “contraction” of time.¹⁶ But the effect of this resistance is that it not only preserves a particular experience of redemption, it is also complementary to general history and provides the possibility of correction. He asks:

Who might raise such objections against a faith that goes its way victoriously through

¹⁴ Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 34

¹⁵ Stéphane Mosès writes: “In most religious societies, stopping time functions to abolish the gap separating the present from the mythic past, from the time of origins. The identification of the believer with the founding events and the return to the primordial order are central experiences of religious life. In the case of Judaism, stopping time also, and perhaps mainly, has a completely different object: to annul the distance—no matter how incalculable—that separates the present from the extreme future, that is, from the ideal end of the historical process. Only an absolutely synchronic time can allow the actualization of the most distant future in the flash of the present instant, in other words, anticipating Redemption,” 59

¹⁶ Dana Hollander in the book *Exemplarity and Chosenness* writes: “All secular history deals with expansion /extension/spreading out [Ausdehnung]. The reason power is the fundamental concept of history is that in Christianity revelation has begun to spread over the world, and thus every will to expand, even that which is consciously purely secular, has become the unconscious servant of this great movement of expansion... Judaism continually sheds un-Jewish elements [Unjüdisches] from itself, in order to produce out of itself ever new remnants of archetypically Jewish elements [Urjüdisches].” Dana Hollander, *Exemplarity and Chosenness*, 71

the world and to which the gods of the peoples—national myths, national heroes, national universes—do not stand firm. Who might do this? And yet: the Jew does it. Not with words—what good would words be here in this region of seeing! But with his existence, his silent existence. This existence of the Jew forces upon Christianity in all times the thought that it has arrived at neither the goal nor the truth, but always—remains on the way.¹⁷

The very presence of the Jew reminds Christian history of its incompleteness. It is the reminder that the world is not to be understood as an empty universality but as something alive and incomplete.

The world must become fully alive. Instead of several centers of life, like raisins in a cake, the world must become fully alive. Existence must be alive through and through. That it is not yet so means simply, once again, that the world is not yet finished.... It is not the generation of a dead being from a universal law derived from thought, but only the plastic cosmos in its very colorful factuality that can reverse itself to become the Kingdom.¹⁸

This fact that the world is not yet complete turns our attention to the possibility of multiple forms of redemption, seeded within individual selves and local communities. This whole spectrum is the truth. And what connects this diverse spectrum of truth and provides the basis for these minor forms of redemption is our relationship to our neighbor.

If a “not yet” is written above all redemptive union, the only result can be that, for the end, it is, at least to begin with, the present moment precisely that occurs, whereas for the universal and the highest reality, it is, at least to begin with, the neighbor who is precisely there. The bond of the complete and redemptive tie between man and the world is, at first, the neighbor, only and constantly the neighbor.¹⁹

Certainly, we can question the broad brushstrokes that Rosenzweig paints with when he characterizes the movement of secular history as Christian or Hegelian. But the underlying recognition of the limits of a certain idea of universal history or progress is crucial. The universal can never be a goal. Such a goal would be the extinguishing of the life of the world. The universal instead exists prior to the diversity of the world, and

¹⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 240

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 240

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 252

therefore, it can only be expressed in particular forms. This includes particular understandings of time and destiny.

Walter Benjamin and the Ruins of History

Benjamin's famous invocation of the Angel of History also addresses this momentum.

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.²⁰

The movement of history or 'progress' has a powerful and destructive momentum. While many scholars interpret this through Benjamin's affinities with the tradition of Jewish mysticism, Benjamin in my opinion, also draws deeply from the work of Friedrich Hölderlin. In Hölderlin's poetry, the movement of humanity through history is compared with the course of a river. It represents a continuity, and yet an inevitable movement away from the divine. Benjamin sees history in a similar manner. Benjamin's early essay on Hölderlin also borrows the idea of a horizontal and vertical plane. As we move through history, we modify it unknowingly. We walk on the temporal 'horizontal plane' of history as if on a carpet, and with each step we unknowingly leave our mark. We are also unconscious of the eternal vertical plane where we are held "upright as if by golden strings" by God. So, we are both unaware of the way we have imprinted our dreams and desires on history, and we are unaware of the divine in an age where the gods have retreated. It is the role of the poet for Hölderlin, and the philosophical interpreter for Benjamin, to connect these two planes and give people a momentary awareness of where they are.²¹

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 257-258

²¹ Walter Benjamin, "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin." in *Selected Writings vol 1 1913-1926*. Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press, 1996

In other words, we need to examine the marks and paths to recover the sacred. In Benjamin's early work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, he speaks like Hölderlin of a fundamental shift from the ability to access the divine through symbols, to the indirect access of the divine through allegory.

In the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator... In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting... Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.²²

And so, we see in this early work a theme which he returns to in his passage on the Angel of History. The angel can only look back at the wreckage of history. So, the interpretation of this wreckage and ruin is the only possibility of changing history, of bringing an awareness to it. This is the importance of remembrance, it is a re-membering or restoration of what the passage of time breaks and scatters.

Standing here in Cambodia, we are especially aware of how deeply culture can be shattered, again and again, so that what remains are often pieces, fragments, monuments and ruins. We know that Pol Pot envisioned resetting Cambodia to the 'year zero' which involved erasing its memory of its past, its traditional knowledge and arts, and its influences from other cultures. So, Benjamin's idea of recovering the identities hidden in these remaining ruins and fragments resonates with ours concerns for the memory and identity of Cambodian culture.

For Benjamin, redemption would be the recovery of the past, what has been hidden and suppressed, an awakening of the whole spectrum of truths. This is similar to Rosenzweig where redemption would be making the world fully alive. The past surrenders its meaning only when the time is right. In his late writing on "The Concept of History," Benjamin speaks about a particular conception of messianism which is connected to remembrance. He writes:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and

²² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. trans. John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977, 178

the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For ever second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.²³

Stéphane Mosès points out that this creates a particular understanding of Messianism which Benjamin shares with Franz Rosenzweig and Gershom Scholem. It is a messianism not projected to the completion of history, but focused on the lived moment.²⁴

And this connects to what Rosenzweig had also discussed about the imperfection of history. If history is always measured by its progress, *bildung*, or advances in knowledge, this diminishes every life in the past – or lives in the past are only measured according to their anticipation of the future. And of course, this means that with time our present lives will be diminished as well. The momentum of progress overlooks the struggles and moments of grace within every individual life. It overlooks how every life is a universal in miniature. It leads to an empty universal which is essentially involves the extinguishing of all human life.

Taubes on Paul's new covenant

We wish to continue to anchor this presentation in its place and time. So, since we are at St. Paul Institute it is important to deal with St. Paul. And of course, St. Paul is sometimes credited with the very idea of universalism.

There has been much discussion in recent philosophical literature about the idea of universalism in Paul. From John Milbank to Alain Badiou, they all have their own interpretations and agendas. But the writer who got this recent discussion started was the Jewish writer, Jacob Taubes. Taubes considered himself a Pauline Jew and focused primarily on the radicality of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1969, 264

²⁴ Stéphane Mosès writes: "Messianism is no longer conceived as waiting for an apotheosis that will materialize at the end of linear and continuous time, but rather as the possibility offered at each moment of time of the advent of the new." Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 125

murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does not wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.²⁵

For many commentators this marks Paul's idea that faith must eclipse the obedience to law. But Taubes interprets it differently. According to Taubes, the Jewish Paul is a new Moses creating a new covenant, one that opens to the redemption of non-Jews, and in doing this he creates a 'jealousy' among the Jews and the conditions for their redemption. We have a play of identity with respect to the tension between religious law and the broader community. In a way, the surpassing of the identity of a people calls attention to that identity. Law is both eclipsed and preserved through the universality of love.²⁶

Taubes established a dialogue with Carl Schmitt the famous Catholic political theologian and law theorist who was associated with the National Socialists. Schmitt in his early work attempted to show that the idea of the 'political' is based upon the 'friend/enemy' distinction and its preservation through the 'state of exception.' Of course, for National Socialism, the Jews were considered the 'enemy' of the state, and therefore a mechanism of German self-identity. Yet Taubes, was still an admirer of Schmitt's work and so he sent letters to Schmitt attempting to engage him in a discussion to try to fathom the reason for Schmitt's support for the National Socialist movement. Taubes finally met with Schmitt and convinced him that Paul is both affirming and denying the distinction between Jew and Gentile. On one hand, Paul sets them as advisories, but on the other he unites them as adversaries against the Roman state. Taubes reflecting back on his discussions with Schmitt writes:

And now comes this powerful sentence about which I deliberated with Carl Schmitt ... That is when we came to the sentence: “As regards the gospel they are enemies” – enemies of God! Enemy is not a private concept; enemy is *hostis*, not *inimicus*, that's not my enemy. When it says, “Love your enemies” – yes perhaps, I'm not sure what it means there in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, in any case, we are not dealing with

²⁵ Romans 13:8–10 cited in Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of St. Paul*. translated by Dana Hollander. Stanford: University of California Press, 2004

²⁶ See Samuel Goldman's discussion. "Paul's rejection of the law is, paradoxically, an affirmation of the law. After all, if he did not believe in the law's significance, Paul could merely recommend its adaptation to changing circumstances, like the Hellenizers of the ancient world or the liberal Jews of the 20th century. The fact that Paul insists on liberation from the law, Taubes holds, makes him at once a Christian and a more faithful Jew than any liberal compromiser. Paul perceived that a choice was necessary between law and grace—and he picked the latter." Samuel Goldman, Samuel. "The Apocalyptic Visions of Jacob Taubes and Meir Kahane," in *Mosaic Magazine*.

private feuds, but with salvation – historical enemies of God. “Enemies for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their forefathers [II:28]. And this is the point I challenged Schmitt on... that he adopted not a text but a tradition, that is, the folk traditions of church antisemitism, onto which he, in 1933-36, in his uninhibited fashion, went on to graft the racist theozoology. That is something that he, the most important state law theorist, did indeed receive as a lesson. “That I did not know!”²⁷

In this reading, there can be no basis for a Christian Anti-Semitism. Paul undermines the friend/enemy distinction between Jew and Gentile and sets them against a greater foe, the Roman state. Taubes convinces Schmitt that they are on the same page so to speak.

Taubes, of course, differs from Schmitt. Schmitt through the state of exception must act as a *katechon* and delay the apocalypse through an act of power. Taubes instead takes refuge in Benjamin. He writes: “Schmitt’s fundamental vocabulary is here introduced by Benjamin, made use of, and so transformed into its opposite. Carl Schmitt’s conception of the “state of exception” is dictatorial, dictated from above; in Benjamin it becomes a doctrine in the tradition of the oppressed.”²⁸

So, Taubes in his Jewish reading of Paul describes a kind of universalism which resists a larger, more oppressive, and empty universal. It affirms a universal love which does not reduce everything to sameness, and preserves spiritual diversity.²⁹

In the early letter that called Taubes to the attention of Carl Schmitt, Taubes wrote: For the law is not the first and the last, because there are “even” relations between man and man that “exceed,” “infringe” the law – love, pity, forgiveness (not at all “sentimental,” but “real”) could not go one step further in my poor and often crooked life (and I have no idea how to go one step further) without holding fast to “these three,” and that always leads me, against my “will,” to St. Paul.³⁰

And so, through the universality of love, pity and forgiveness, religious identity is preserved in the face of the erosive effects of a more powerful universal order.

²⁷ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of St. Paul*, 51

²⁸ Jacob Taubes. *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*. translated by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 52

²⁹ See for example the interpretation of Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*.

³⁰ Jacob Taubes. *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, 56

Cultural Diversity and the Global Universal (Derrida's Uneasiness)

And so, we recognize in these three writers a recognition of how the drama of history and redemption plays itself out in particular situations. It is the resistance to an empty over-arching universalism, and a turn instead to a lived universalism rooted in the sanctity of the individual life and connected with others through love, pity, and forgiveness. But how can we consider this centering of redemption in the individual while considering the movement of history itself? How can we balance the dignity and freedoms of an individual life with their rootedness in the broader community?

This is the problem of the global situation we are now in. On one hand power has colonized our ideals concerning human rights, freedoms and democracy. These liberal ideals are now often weaponized and used as a means to uproot human beings from their local cultures, traditions, and religious identities. The aim is to individuate human beings so they no longer find their "meanings" in their older identities and so can more easily be controlled through media and information. As a result, culture and religion now become the mystical 'Other' of universal reason, and a threat to a global order.

Yet the reaction to liberalism is also extremely destructive. An authentic grassroots liberalism remains crucial as the manner in which human beings continue to adapt to their society and their environment, the manner in which past injustices are corrected, diversity is respected, and rights are established. And it is an important part of the language through which we communicate with one another as global neighbors. So, how can we in the manner of a Rosenzweig, a Benjamin or a Taubes, navigate between the secular universal on one hand, and religious and cultural belief on the other?

One interpretation of Benjamin which I struggle with is one presented by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority." Derrida refers to the tensions which we discussed above, that is, between the secular global version of the universal and the more minor practices of religion and redemption. He sees in Benjamin the recognition of the possibility of a compromise between these two dimensions or languages. He frames it as follows:

This does not mean that one must simply renounce Enlightenment and the language of communication or of representation in favor of the language of expression. In his *Moscow Diary* in 1926-27, Benjamin specifies that the polarity between the two languages and all that they command cannot be maintained and deployed in a pure

state, but that “compromise” is necessary or inevitable between them. Yet this remains a compromise between two incommensurable and radically heterogeneous dimensions. It is perhaps one of the lessons that we could draw here: the fatal nature of the compromise between the heterogeneous orders, which is a compromise, moreover, in the name of the justice that would command one to obey at the same time the law of representations [Aufklärung, reason, objectification, comparison, explication, the taking into account of multiplicity and therefore the serialization of the unique) and the law that transcends representation and withholds the unique, all uniqueness, from its reinscription in an order of generality or of comparison.³¹

Derrida then goes on to refer to Benjamin’s idea of “divine violence.” At the end of his essay “The Critique of Violence,” Benjamin imagined a “divine violence” that would finally break the history of humanity out of its cycles of law creating violence and law preserving violence, that is, out of the arbitrary cycles of authority. At the end of that essay Benjamin wrote: “But all mythic lawmaking violence, which we may call “executive,” is pernicious. Pernicious, too, is the law-preserving, ‘administrative’ violence that serves it. Divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred dispatch, may be called ‘sovereign’ violence.”³² Derrida responding to this, writes:

What I find, in conclusion, the most redoubtable, indeed (perhaps, almost) intolerable in this text, even beyond the affinities it maintains with the worst (the critique of Aufklärung, the theory of the fall and of originary authenticity, the polarity between originary language and fallen language, the critique of representation and of parliamentary democracy, etc.), is a temptation that it would leave open, and leave open notably to the survivors or the victims of the final solution, to its past, present or potential victims. Which temptation? The temptation to think the holocaust as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence insofar as this divine violence would be at the same time nihilating, expiatory and bloodless, says Benjamin, a divine violence that would destroy current law through a bloodless process that strikes and causes to expiate.³³

He goes on to explain that for him, the text is still “too Heideggerian, too messianico-marxist or archeoeschatological.” and that there is a responsibility to “think,

³¹ Jacques Derrida. "Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority,"" 61-62

³² Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 252

³³ Derrida, "Force of Law," 62

know, represent for ourselves, formalize, judge the possible complicity between all these discourses and the worst (here the final solution)."³⁴

Derrida wishes to both deconstruct and yet 'preserve' the language of representation which was provided by the enlightenment. Just like Lukacs, he rejects the possibilities of a political upheaval originating from a dimension outside of the universal. And this is completely understandable when we consider the dangers of fascism, authoritarianism, nationalism, and theocratic governments. He has a 'responsibility' to distance himself from such radical disruptive possibilities which might lead to an event like the final solution.³⁵

Yet it appears to me that Benjamin is considering only the 'possibility' of a divine violence. He is merely asking if there might be some way beyond the mere cycles of violence in history; asking if there is a way for the Angel of History to turn to face forward. And in doing so, Benjamin seems to almost push the idea of divine violence out of reach into the future and instead focuses on the recovery of the multiple expressions and silenced voices of history.³⁶ What can be the importance of a divine violence when the 'messiah' can emerge within each life at any moment?

But this does bring up a problem. There is of course a serious contradiction between Benjamin's mystical messianism and his 'messianico-marxism.' And so, this contradiction pits the universal and the religious diversity as opponents. The problem both in Benjamin, and in Derrida's reading of Benjamin, it seems to me, involves the way they consider the polarity or "compromise" between the languages of the sacred and universal reason.

And yet, this is precisely what is for the most part avoided in Southeast Asian culture. Here is something which goes beyond 'mere' compromise, that is neighborly coexistence.

Marriage part 2: Eclecticism

There is a shifting logic to my own experience and concerns. When I first began

³⁴ Ibid, 62-63

³⁵ It seems to me that Derrida fails to consider the way power has colonized the languages not only of the enlightenment but even deconstruction itself.

³⁶ I believe that this is an important aspect in al-Farabi's conception of the virtuous city, his reading of Plato's Republic, where the idea of perfection which is always placed out of reach from the imperfections of human societies.

writing influenced by my various cultural experiences, I followed a strategy of affirming various cultural myths and practices as offering a kind of wisdom not recognized by the institutionalized thinking of the West. And the underlying hope would be one of a counter-balance, a correction, which does not have to be created out of thin air, but one which has always existed.

But as information technology, social media and online education, have become a more powerful influence on the consciousness and habits of people from various cultures, it is becoming clear to me that cultural wisdom does not in itself possess the power of arresting the momentum of global history, and in many cases is even vilified. But these myths also have a curious habit of expressing themselves at unexpected times. So, they are sometimes preserved until the time is right for them to have an effect, and provide the possibility of some transformation. But what is it that can preserve the ruins of history until they are given a chance to truly speak?

In other words, what kind of contract or 'covenant' does this marriage between Preah Thong and Neang Neak involve? It is a marriage between a stranger and a local. It is a marriage involving identity and difference. These combine to create a sense of 'place.' This is the very character of both culture and religion in Southeast Asian. It is a factor in how it spreads and takes root. In the book *The Ramayana in Indonesia*, Saran and Khanna describe the process of religious and cultural influence.

By whatever name we choose to call the phenomenon of the arrival and absorption of Indian culture, it becomes so much more comprehensible if we see it not in terms of sudden and dramatic discontinuities but as a gradual and creative interaction between Indonesia's own beliefs, institutions and preferences on the one hand and the exciting opportunities offered by Indian experience on the other. There was no clash of civilizations, with one overwhelming the other. In fact, there was considerable similarity between the manner in which 'Sanskritic' ideas spread in the Indian subcontinent itself over the centuries, merging into rather than displacing the vast variety of local cultures, and the way this process extended across the seas to Southeast Asia.³⁷

³⁷ Saran, Malini and Vinod C. Khanna. *The Ramayana in Indonesia*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004.
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We know the history of Cambodia was shaped by both influences and resistances with the Srivajaya kingdoms in Indonesia, both borrowings and wars with the Champa kingdom in Vietnam and the Thai kingdoms. Can we speak of a friend or of an enemy? That distinction is undermined by the fundamental currents which pass through Southeast Asian cultures. Identity is established in a manner which involves both borrowings and resistances.

Both Taubes in his dialogue with Schmitt, and Derrida in his work *The Politics of Friendship* attempted to call into question the ability to make such distinctions. And yet in Southeast Asia this is not an intellectual exercise, it is a matter of history. Different religions and cultures have lived together relatively peacefully as neighbors.

My Thai Buddhist colleague Veerachart Nimanong used to have many Western friends who would ask him to arrange vipassana meditation courses for them at various Buddhist temples. He once asked me if I could explain why Western people would desire to 'perfect' Buddhist meditation in this lifetime. He explained to me that Thai people believe that they have many lifetimes to perfect their spirituality. They can balance the development of their spirituality with their duties to their career and their families. I have often reflected on this conversation. It does seem that Western thought is preoccupied with perfection, completion and the reduction of the world to a kind of logic. We can see how the friend /enemy distinctions and even various forms of messianism emerge out of this desire for 'completion.' But what characterizes Southeast Asian attitude is a different conception of time, fortune, and the making of merit. Cultural relationships and human relationships are embedded in a larger flow of time which allows contradictions and resonances to exist side by side. This involves cultural identity and cultural difference, memory and forgetting.³⁸

Syncretism is often looked down upon as the contamination of the canonical teachings of religion by heretical additions. But syncretism seems to actually be a significant feature of religion here in South East Asia.³⁹ It is clear in history the manner in which religious syncretism, tolerance and co-existence took place.

³⁸ What would remain to be examined is how the 'exceptions' to this eclecticism and accommodation in Southeast Asian history occur. For instance; the outside ideologies that have permeated the Khmer Rouge, and the current messianic Maitreya Buddhist movements that have arisen in the aftermath.

³⁹ There are many interesting examples of instances of syncretism, often involving gender considerations. For example, the syncretism of Buddhism and animism in Thailand, Nat worship in Myanmar, Guanyin worship in Thailand and Vietnam, and the shrines to the Walisong in Java.

We can broaden this by expanding syncretism to a condition of ‘eclecticism.’ This would involve the co-existence of not only religious beliefs, but also secularist and scientific beliefs. An individual can function in several registers. The breaks of logic are also a preservation of beliefs, forms, and objects from a more universal logic. This also allows for the possibility of reactivating and reinterpreting these beliefs, forms, and objects, leaving a space open for acts of redemption.

As we pointed out, in the present media age, the political aim is to individuate human beings and rule them through the flows of information. It is important for this ruling and coordinating to uproot them from their local environments. It is primarily disruptive. But the history of eclecticism is the spread of cultural ideas in such a way that they can take root. And once rooted, they can assimilate new cultural ideas. The older ideas live on although partly obscured. And interpretation, reinterpretation, artistic transformations are the manner to reawaken them at the right time. This reactivation of older forms in newer guises goes hand in hand with a more authentic grass-roots liberalism which allows a culture to adapt. Memory, identity and change move together.

We can return to the Cambodian born scholar Boreth Ly. He believed that stories and art are important ways to heal the Trauma of the Cambodian past, to heal what he calls the “broken body.” This broken body represents both the real lived bodies who have been traumatized in Cambodia’s history, and the mythical matrilineal body of Cambodia’s past.⁴⁰ With reference to Derrida’s discussions of the pharmakon, Ly writes:

Like the serpent who is poisoned/poisonous but also capable of shedding its old skin, it is possible for the once-poisoned (traumatized) Cambodian nation to reinvent its identity in the aftermath of the genocide. In other words, the experiencing of trauma is neither poison nor cure but can contain both poison and remedy. I believe that the same is true of the traumatic experiences that artists expressed in their works produced in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia and its diaspora—they are poison cures.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ly Writes: “I have pointed out that the broken body, especially the broken female body, is the site and sight of trauma in the Cambodian cultural context... Cambodia is arguably a matrilineal culture, and thus the female body comprises elements of water and land; the nagi is the embodiment of the Khmer kingdom,” 124

⁴¹ Ibid. 123

This positive ability of art to heal through the telling of stories is related to the negative underlying trauma. What Ly is presenting is extremely important. But what remains to be examined is how traumatic disruption provides an authenticity to art which resists the prefabricated propaganda which often attempts to pass itself off as memory.

And why root this presentation in site, myth, institution, and religion? It is because culture, identity and remembrance are the ways human lives are anchored to both nature and the sacred. A life which is solely subject to information and media becomes detached from its environment and from its past. Such a life becomes a kind of death.

A reflection which generates itself from its anchorings, can perhaps sidestep the distortions of the media age that threaten not only cultural diversity. It can lead to an appreciation of the 'inscape' of human life in its particular manifestations, not only in the present, but in the distant past and the future. In this spirit, I wish to end with a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

As kingfishers catch fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins 1844-1889)

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