

## Meditation on Michelangelo's *Christ on the Cross*

What occupies me in this essay is the meaning of the death of Christ, the question of *what* really dies on the cross, and how to read this event.<sup>1</sup> So I begin with the question of the precise meaning of the death of Christ on the cross and further ask, what is it that dies on the cross? Is it not the case that, for most of us anyway, trying to understand this issue leaves us boggled and confused?

My claim is that, in a sense, our imagination of the picture of Christ dying on the cross assumes a world in which God is up there somewhere, while we are here on Earth. And then God sends a messenger—a son—down to us. But basically the whole thing fails. The failure is proved by what happens in the narrative itself: The son returns up to Heaven so God might be able to try it again. I think the moment we even start to think along these lines, we raise the entire problem of sin as a debt requiring repayment (the doctrine of atonement). This view of the crucifixion in terms of financial dealings—that Christ died to pay for our sins—raises a basic question for us. The question here is: To *whom*? To whom did God pay this debt? In the first centuries of Christianity the doctrine of atonement was debated, and many different positions were taken. One of the Gnostic positions, which looks reasonable in purely rational terms, states that the debt was paid to the Devil who is the lord of earthly life, of fallen life. The idea is that God made a deal with the Devil: “I want humanity back. I’ll pay you the highest price: My very own son.” But the problem here is extremely serious. For example, I have asked traditional theologians a very simple question: “Why did God have to die on the cross?” They say: “To pay for our sins.” Then I ask: “To whom? Was there another guy with whom God had to make a deal?” Then they rejoin: “No, Christ died out of a sense of justice.” Then I say: “Wait a minute, the moment you say this you’re back in the pagan universe, where gods are just higher-level beings much like us, and there is a kind of a cosmic justice controlling them as well. And what you have effectively done is constructed a universe in which God, in all his power and glory, is subordinate to the impersonal laws of abstract justice.” The upshot is that even God cannot violate the impermeable laws of cosmic justice. But the way I see it, the whole point of Christian ethics—the very core of it—is that yes, this can be done: God *can* abrogate the laws of cosmic justice. The whole point of the Gospel’s good news is the subordination of this cosmic law of impersonal justice. In other words, with the traditional view of the meaning of Christ dying on the cross, the entire point of the irruptive logic of the Gospel would be

1 My thanks to Scott Chisholm for preparing a transcription of my lecture on December 4, 2007, at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum of Rollins College, where these ideas were first presented.

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domesticated under the banner of a pagan notion of “Justice.”

This is why I’m skeptical of attempts to unify all religions in the name of “Oneness.” I think that all other religions, with the exception of Judaism, and up to a point, Islam, still rely on the ethics of cosmic justice, in the sense that the good life means fitting into the harmony of the universe. Evil is when a part of the whole excessively attaches importance to itself, and justice means banishing the excessive part so that cosmic balance is reestablished. The most elementary form of this ethics is found in Confucius. When asked, “What is a good life?” Confucius says that it’s found in a proper, well-organized state: Through the rectification of names, when a father is truly a father, when a king is truly a king, and a woman truly a woman. In other words, we participate in the harmony of the universe when each of us fulfills, respects, and fully identifies with our particular role.

The ethics of cosmic justice is—if I may be obscenely blunt—in a sense, proto-fascist. The definition of fascism is an obsession with organic unity. This is why fascists hate liberalism. What fascists hate about liberalism is the idea—the fundamental idea of political liberalism—that you, as an individual, independently of who you are—black, white, man, woman—have a right to direct contact with the universal. This idea, apart perhaps from Buddhism, appears primarily in Christianity, which holds, “I’m not only what I am—man, woman, etc.—but what makes me great, or even immortal, is that I cannot be reduced to what I am in my particular existence.”

I will argue for this thesis by using Michelangelo’s drawing *Christ on the Cross*. The first thing that may be noticed about this drawing is that it’s unfinished, and the very reason why it’s unfinished is interesting. We know that Michelangelo gave it to his close friend, Vittoria Colonna—a passionate, intimate friend, not sexually, but intellectually. Colonna was herself a wealthy woman, a patron of great artists of the time, and in her own way she was an inspiring person. Then something mysterious happened. Michelangelo, immediately after giving Lady Vittoria *Christ on the Cross*, wrote her an urgent message asking—demanding—to be given back the work, since there was something terribly wrong with it. She, in a hypocritical way, pretended to have lost it—“Oh, I must look for it”—but then admitted in a letter that she was aroused by it, and asked him why he needed to have it returned. She stared at the drawing—even resorting to using a magnifying glass, looking at it from every angle imaginable, and putting it beside a mirror—intrigued, hoping to find what might be wrong with it, as if the drawing contained some forbidden detail Michelangelo was afraid would be discovered. And if we look at it now, we can clearly see a few interesting details.

The drawing renders the critical moment of Christ’s doubt and despair, the famous

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“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>2</sup> As far as I know, for the first time in the history of painting, an artist attempted to capture Christ’s abandonment by God the Father. This moment was not one of pure ecstatic rapture but, on the contrary, was a moment of despair. With this in mind we may ask: Why are Christ’s eyes more or less turned upwards? His face does not express devoted acceptance of suffering but simply total raw suffering combined with *what?* Here, if we examine the drawing carefully, we can’t help but notice a series of unsettling details which indicate an underlying attitude of angry rebellion—of *defiance*—and not of devoted acceptance. First, the two legs are not symmetrical. One leg is raised, and here an amateur was already breaking the rules of how this event is to be depicted, as if Christ is caught in the middle of an attempt to rise up. Christ is attempting to liberate himself. But the truly shocking detail is the right hand. This is what perplexed Lady Vittoria. The finger is raised up in a gesture that was commonly understood at that time. The gesture is identified in Quintilian’s *Rhetorics (Institutio Oratoria)*, the standard manual of the era, and a work which was known to Michelangelo. According to Quintilian’s work, this gesture functions as a sign of rebellious challenge. It signifies, “No, I don’t give way. I persist in my rebellion.” So again, Christ’s “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” is not a resigned or even a passive “Why?” that gently questions the Father. It is rather an aggressive and accusatory “*Why?!*”

More precisely, there is in the drawing an implicit tension in the expression of Christ’s face. On the one hand, there is despair and suffering. But on the other hand, we can’t avoid reading the aggressive rebellion in his face, the defiant rebellious attitude signaled by his right hand, as if the hand articulates the attitude the face doesn’t dare to fully express. I would like to develop this idea of the hand, the fist, as an autonomous object of rebellion, a rebellion that asserts one’s freedom. We can relate this to classical fairy tales, mythology, and popular culture. For example, take the film *Fight Club* with Brad Pitt and Edward Norton—a very disturbing film, which is problematic for some. The most fascinating, painful scene is when Ed Norton’s character confronts his boss. Recall that instead of hitting the boss, he starts hitting himself. And consider how this scene is shot: The act is not one of a unified subject. When he’s confronting his boss, his fist starts to act as an object with its own will. He tries to control it but it rebels against his own body. The significance and rebelliousness of the fist might also be seen in other contexts. According to one anecdote, Martin Heidegger—a philosopher for whom I have great appreciation—was visited by another philosopher in Rome when Heidegger was in his pro-Nazi period. The visiting

2      Matthew 27:46; also Psalm 22:1.

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philosopher asks Heidegger: “How can you be for Hitler? He’s such a vulgar guy. Listen to his speeches!” Heidegger replies: “No, no, forget about the speeches. Look at his fist, at his hand, while he’s talking. That is the mystery. There’s something about the movement of the hand: It expresses *more*.” And turning to German mythology, there is a wonderful story, one of the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, called “The Egotistical Child.” In this story, a child was so evil that God punished and killed him. But then, in a scene reminiscent of a Stephen King novel, his fist began protruding up from the grave. They repeatedly added dirt to the grave, but the boy’s fist still protruded. His mother then came with some tools and started hitting the fist, until finally the boy accepted his own death.

This attitude of irrationality—not in the sense of madness, but irrationality in the sense of an inability to justify matters in terms of a rational utilitarian calculation—is crucial. We find it, for example, in *Antigone*. The story is well known, but what may have been overlooked is that if we read *Antigone* with fresh eyes, we should think, “Yes, I am for Antigone...But *why* am I for Antigone?” I will not repeat the story here, but when we read it again, we might see that our reason for supporting her is not so self-evident. What Creon tells Antigone, when he prohibits the funeral of her brother Polynices, is quite rational. From the standpoint of a rationally functioning state power, whose primary concern is to maintain public order, Creon is absolutely right. Creon explains: “Listen, we just had a civil war. If I allow the public burial of Polynices, with all the proper funeral rights, then civil war will erupt again. The whole city would be ruined.” And typically Antigone doesn’t deny this reasoning, but simply insists on carrying out the funeral. My point here is not to condemn her, but to emphasize that every rebellious movement has to begin with such incessant insistence.

Let’s look to a figure that we might see as an American Antigone: Rosa Parks, the hero in the fight against racism, a black woman on a bus who didn’t want to stand up to let the white man sit down in her seat. I can imagine the rational response, thinking: “Yes, African-Americans are suffering, my God. But why do you insist so forcefully here? Resist in a more organized way. You will just cause further trouble.” But isn’t this very rational attitude precisely an illusion? At some point action must be taken, even from a purely utilitarian standpoint. The act of defiance might appear excessive, even when engaging with something that is in itself trivial, because it insists, “No. I will go to the end here.” Another story of fighting racism in the United States is E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. A film based on Doctorow’s novel, made by Miloš Forman, tells a similar story. A white tramp shits on the seat of a car belonging to a successful black middle-class man. A policeman arrives, and

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while he is not racist himself, he just wants to maintain order. The policeman says: “I know this white guy is trash. I know he’s a problem. But please, let’s not make a bigger problem here.” But the black man insists, and practically causes a civil war in the city. This is the attitude I am referring to.

This brings me back to Michelangelo’s drawing. Can we not ask: Doesn’t Christ, even if only for a moment, succumb to the temptation of egotistic rebellion? Who is who in this scene that somehow articulates the formula of Goethe: No one but God himself can stand against God? How can this attitude be read? I think some very interesting theoretical and practical conclusions can be drawn from it, beginning with a wonderful slip that can be found in Hegel’s works. When talking about the difference between Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Hegel makes an interesting slip. It is clearly a mistake because, from reading Hegel’s other texts, we can clearly establish that he knew the mistake he was making. Theologically, one of the great divisions between the two churches pertains to the question of the origin of the Holy Spirit. For Western Christianity, the Holy Spirit originates from God the Father and the Son together. For Eastern Orthodox Christianity, this was thought to limit the authority of God the Father too much, so the Holy Spirit originates only from God the Father. Hegel’s slip, however, states that in Orthodox Christianity the Holy Spirit originates from both Christ and Father, but in Western Christianity the Holy Spirit originates only from Christ, only from the Son—a very curious mistake. I think we may read this as an honest Freudian slip. I think Hegel was right in a way. Why?

Let me present a few quotes from G. K. Chesterton, whom I consider to be one of the best Catholic theologians from Britain. This is how he defines what he calls the central mystery of Christianity—and the link between what he saw as the mystery of Christianity and Michelangelo’s drawing will be immediately clear:

When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion but at the cry from the cross (“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”), the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt, nay, (the matter grows too difficult for human speech) but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.<sup>3</sup>

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3 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (West Valley City: The Editorium, 2006).

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That is Chesterton's key point, which is not to say that he was not a deeply respected Catholic. I think he took the implications of this point to the end, a point that I'll return to below.

Recently at a debate in Vienna, I asked a few bishops a very simple question. They were perplexed and didn't give me a clear answer. I asked, "When Christ says 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' is he bluffing or not?" If he is in fact bluffing—and by bluffing I mean that he is simply saying this aloud but secretly knows that he is God—then the crucifixion is not serious. It is just a spectacle staged for humans. But if we take Christ's statement seriously, then the implication is extremely radical. We must not forget that in Christian theology, Jesus Christ is not thought of in the same way as messiahs in other religions. Christ is not a *representative* of God; he *is* God. This means that God is radically split. A part of God doesn't know what God is doing. There is a kind of inconsistency in divinity itself, which is I think the crucial insight of Christianity. This is why I ask: How can we rejoin God? In other religions God is a simple transcendence: We are here in our sinful, terrestrial life, but if we purify ourselves, it's possible for us to get closer to and be rejoined with God. In Christianity, when it's said that the only way to God is through Christ, I think what's implied is precisely this Christ at the moment of doubt on the cross. This is why for Christianity you can, paradoxically, only reach God through this moment of doubt. As Chesterton put it, God himself becomes, for a moment, an atheist. The idea is as follows: We experience the utmost despair and alienation. We are here, God is there. We are totally abandoned by God. How then in authentic Christianity do we reach God? Not by somehow magically overcoming this gap, but just by means of a shattering insight at the very point when we are abandoned by God. There we occupy the position of Christ. What was thought of only as alienation from God is the position of Christ himself: God abandoned by God.

That is why, for Chesterton, Christianity is terribly revolutionary: "That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already: but that God could have his back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents forever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has held that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king."<sup>4</sup> We could go on tracing out the implications of this in political theology. The film *V for Vendetta* with Natalie Portman may be considered here—although in the end it wasn't radical enough. What I thought would happen in that film simply did not; evidently, the filmmakers were too afraid and didn't want to take it to the end. In the film, Britain is reconstituted as a totalitarian country

4 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.

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with a dictator who is only seen through television screens, and a famous masked rebel fights against him. A series of signs hints at the link between the two. If the film had been courageous enough, in the end, when the rebel dies and his mask is removed, we would have seen that the rebel is none other than the dictator, fighting himself. But unfortunately, the film was not radical enough.

Now Chesterton is fully aware that here we are approaching a matter dark and awful, one that is difficult to discuss, a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers justly fear to approach. In the terrific tale of the Passion is a distinct emotional suggestion in some unthinkable way not only of agony, but also of doubt. Returning to Christ's "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Christ himself commits what is for Christians the ultimate sin: Wavering in one's faith. So again, while in other religions, there are people who do not believe in God, it is only in Christianity that God does not believe in himself. And here Chesterton reports an insightful anecdote when he visited Jerusalem in the early twentieth century. He tried to ask an Arab boy who spoke a bit of English: "Where is the garden?" The boy asked if he meant the place where God himself prayed. Chesterton claims that this is unique: In other religions you pray to God, but only in Christianity does God pray to himself.

The image of a suffering Christ who does not believe in himself brings us back to the Old Testament, to the Book of Job, which is praised by Chesterton as the most interesting of ancient books. But then Chesterton adds that it is also the most interesting of modern books. Now in what, according to Chesterton, does the modernity of the Book of Job consist? I recommend returning to this text and reading it again carefully. I find the Book of Job, if read closely, to be the first example of what we today call the critique of ideology. Why? To begin with it is really a shattering piece, not because of the obscenities that we all know—God and the Devil having a nice after-dinner conversation, with drinks, and God exclaiming, "Oh, I have a sucker who believes in me. No way can you corrupt him. Forget about that." And I wholly buy into the story that the narrative is probably the remainder of some previous pagan mythology. But there is another absolutely crucial thing that happens in the text. We know the story: Things go really badly for Job. He loses—and I always liked this obscenity in the Bible—his children, goats, chickens. Basically things look really bad for Job, but then what happens? Three theological friends come, and each of them tries to convince Job of something. Here we must be very precise: They try to convince him that if things are bad for him, he must have earned it somehow. The reasoning of the first theological friend is that if you suffer, even if you don't know what for, you must have done something to deserve

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it. The second and third give more articulate, refined arguments. For example, one of them replies with something along the lines of, “Maybe God is testing Job.” What the three of them share is the idea that Job’s suffering and misfortunes have a deeper meaning. That is their basic message: It isn’t just a trauma without meaning, there’s a deeper significance to the event. If we read Job’s answers closely, we don’t see him insist that he’s innocent—he doesn’t play the part of the pure, beautiful soul who says, “I didn’t do anything... Why this?” Rather we see him insist, “No matter what I did, I don’t accept that this terrible event has some deeper meaning.” And then comes the big surprise, when God appears at the end, and says that everything the three theological idiots said was wrong, and every word that Job said was true. God directly takes the side of Job. And what is God’s answer? Again, it is usually misread as implying a simple divine absolute otherness: “Who are you even to talk to me? Who are you, miserable idiot? I created this and that, and you must just accept my radical transcendence. Don’t even think—how dare you to think!—that you can even begin to understand me.” This is the usual reading of the Book of Job: “Trust in God, but accept the divine absolute transcendence.” In other words, the final reply of God is usually read as implying that there is a deeper meaning, but that there’s no way we will get it: “Just trust that I know. It’s not yours to know.”

I claim that this is exactly what we shouldn’t do. If the book is read more closely, I think we will arrive at the conclusion of Chesterton. What is his conclusion here? Chesterton states that “the mechanical optimist endeavors to justify the universe avowedly upon the ground that it is a rational and consecutive pattern.”<sup>5</sup> The rationalist points out that the fine thing about the world is that it can all be explained. But this is the one point which God’s reply explicitly opposes—if I may put it so—to the point of violence. God says, in effect, that if there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained. He insists on the inexplicableness of everything. In the Book of Job, the Father—out of whose womb came the ice—goes further, and insists on the positive and palpable unreasonableness of the cosmos. Also in the Book of Job (38:26) God states: “Hast thou sent the rain upon the desert where no man is, and upon the wilderness wherein there is no man.”<sup>6</sup> Again, to startle man, God becomes, for an instant, a blasphemer. One might almost say that God becomes, for an instant, an atheist. He unrolls before Job a long panorama of created things: the horse, the eagle, the raven, the wildebeest, the peacock,

5 G. K. Chesterton, “The Book of Job: An Introduction by G. K. Chesterton,” *Putnam’s Monthly* vol. II (April-September 1907).

6 Chesterton, “The Book of Job: An Introduction by G. K. Chesterton.”

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ostrich, and crocodile. He so describes one that it sounds like a monster walking on the sand; the whole is a sort of solemn rhapsody of the sense of wonder. The maker of all things is astonished at the things he has himself made. Again, here the point is not that God knows the deeper meaning, but it is as if God himself is overwhelmed at the excess of his creation. As Chesterton puts it in wonderful terms, Job addresses God with a question mark, but God does not provide an answer; he merely, as it were, repeats the question, as if you asked me: “Why is this happening?” and I say: “Yes, that’s it.” It is almost a semantic misunderstanding: You ask me a question of contempt—“Why is this?!”—and I take it as a yes or no question, and say, “Yes, so it is.” Which brings us back to the problem of the crucifixion.

I believe that the Book of Job has to be read as prefiguring the death of Christ. What God denies at the end of the Book of Job is the idea that somewhere there is what in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory would be called the Big Other, a kind of a guarantee of global meaning which could be a solace for us: “Things might be terrible and confusing, but at least God knows that all of this has some deeper meaning.” I claim that this is an unsatisfactory reading. And I have many theological friends who agree with me that this God, this Big Other—this guarantee of global meaning on whom we can rely—is precisely what dies on the cross. As Hegel puts it, what dies on the cross is not an earthly representative of God; what dies on the cross is the very God of the beyond—which returns us to Hegel’s slip. This is why, as Hegel points out, what we have after crucifixion, the resurrected God, is neither God the Father nor God the Son—it is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the love between believers; it is the spirit of the community of believers, according to the famous words of Christ: “For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst.”<sup>7</sup> I think this passage should be taken literally.

So what does this mean? Even today, the message is very radical. The temptation to be resisted is the temptation of *meaning* itself. Perhaps the clearest instance—which might be the worst recent example of pseudo-Christianity or pagan thinking—is the infamous reactions of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson to the 9-11 bombings. They said this was divine punishment: “God lifted his protection from the United States because of our sinful way of life.” Incidentally, Falwell and Robertson basically said exactly the same thing that the massing fundamentalists have been saying.

A related metaphor which I have always found offensive is that of evil as a stain on a painting. The idea is one that is endlessly reproduced by theologians and philosophers who attempt to assert the harmony of the universe—the idea that what appears to us as evil

7      Matthew 18:20.

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is just like an apparent stain in a picture. If you look at a picture too closely, you see it as a meaningless stain. But if you withdraw to a proper distance, you see that what appeared as a stain actually contributes to global harmony. Similarly, what appears to us as evil is just the result of our constrained perspective; from a proper distance we would see that it contributes to global harmony; evil has a deeper meaning. But this presents a big problem in considering phenomena like gulags, the Holocaust, and all the horrors of the twentieth century. Can we really play this game, for example, with Auschwitz, and the other concentration camps? Are we ready to say: “Oh, it appears to us as a stain, but if you have true wisdom, you will see how Auschwitz contributes to the harmony of the world”? I don’t know what kind of harmony can be paid with the death of millions in gas chambers.

I claim that Christ died on the cross precisely to reject such attempts at finding a higher purpose or meaning. Rather the message is: “Your standards matter to me. I throw myself into creation, and abandon my place up there.” The conclusions are radical. The ultimate meaning of Christianity for me is a very precise one. It is not: “We should trust God. The big guy’s with me, so nothing really bad can happen.” That is too easy. The message is not: “*We* trust God.” The message is rather: “God trusts *us*.” The gesture of Christ says, “I leave it over to you.” Usually we read religion as the way to guarantee meaning: We are concerned with the small details of everyday life and never know what will come of it all, or how things will turn out; we can only make wagers, and we do this maybe to ensure that God will arrange things in our favor. But the meaning of the death of Christ for me is the opposite: God made the wager on us. It is really a crazy wager, where God is saying: “I leave it to you. Holy Ghost, community of believers, you have to do it!”

Many of my atheist friends say to me: “Yes, so this is atheism: There’s no god up there, we create god in our image, etc.” But it is not that: I don’t think one can translate theology into secular humanism. Not because of any secret, obscure reason, but because there must be a moment of thinking that it is not we who are acting, but a higher force that is acting through us. This element has to be maintained. Here I cannot resist bringing up a metaphor that may be dangerously obscene for some. When people ask me whether I am an atheist, and what I think the Christian rituals of drinking the blood and eating the flesh of Christ mean, I tell them to read Stephen King and they will get it. In films like *The Terminator* and others like it, and in many horror movies, there is sometimes a scene where the hero is possessed. There is a bad guy who is not really bad, but is possessed by an alien. Then the good guys think they’ve destroyed the possessing alien, but some slimy residue of the alien is left lying around. Then comes the standard shot, where the camera slowly

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approaches the residue, and what we thought was just a bit of squashed alien starts to move and organize itself. We leave the film with the alien organizing itself. This is the divine element. I think horror movies are the negative theology of today. I don't think we can understand the logic of negative theology without appreciating good horror movies. It is as if the good guys in such horror movies are like Roman soldiers: They thought they destroyed everything in Christ, but that little bit of alien residue remained and started to organize itself into the community of believers. That is a crucial point. Again, what I'm saying here cannot be reduced to simplistic humanism. I think this is the legacy of Christianity—this legacy of God not as a Big Other or guarantee, but God as the ultimate ethical agency who puts the burden on us to organize ourselves.

This is also reminiscent of a crucial moment in American trade unions and workers' movements. In the film *Woodstock*, Joan Baez performs a classic American working-class song called "Joe Hill." It is wonderful and naïvely theological: A worker dreams of Joe Hill, who was a trade union organizer executed in the 1920s, having been wrongly accused of murder. When Joe Hill appears in the dream, the worker says, "But Joe, you're dead. How can you be here?" But Joe says, "It takes more than a gun to kill a man." And then the dreamer says, "But *where* are you alive?" Joe says, "Wherever you organize a strike, Joe Hill is there." This is a working-class, trade union version of the process of organization, of what happens whenever two or more organize themselves. According to a wonderful formulation, what has power cannot be killed; it only goes on to organize itself.

This link between Christian community and the progressive movement is crucial. And here I'm not playing a cheap game of identifying radical political movements as a kind of religious community; what I'm referring to is the idea of a radical community of believers. The ideal is neither that of blind liberal individuals collaborating with each other, nor the old organic conservative community. It is a community along the lines of the original Christian community: A community of outcasts. We need this today, this idea of an egalitarian community of believers that is neither the traditional heretical community nor the liberal multiplicity. This is why I and many other leftist philosophers, such as Alain Badiou and others, are so interested in rereading, rehabilitating, and reappropriating the legacy of Paul. It is not just a matter of private religious convictions. I claim that if we lose this key moment—the moment of realizing the Holy Spirit as a community of believers—we will live in a very sad society, where the only choice will be between vulgar egoist liberalism or the fundamentalism that counterattacks it. This is why I—precisely as a radical leftist—think

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that Christianity is far too precious a thing to leave to conservative fundamentalists. We should fight for it. Our message should not be, “You can have it,” but “No, it’s ours. You are kidnapping it.”