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## VERNACULAR FUNDAMENTALISM AFTER ŽIŽEK: SOME ETHICAL CONCERNS ABOUT RELIGIOUS ONLINE COMMUNICATION

### INTRODUCTION: INSULARITY AS A CHALLENGE FOR MASHUP PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

In this essay I compare Slavoj Žižek's nuanced promotion of "authentic" fundamentalism to Robert Glenn Howard's examination of so-called "virtual ekklesia" in his case study *Digital Jesus*. The latter traces a new form of religious online collective, whose non-institutional discourse invokes a biblical vision of the end times in the idiom of vernacular fundamentalism. Howard worries that such decentered communication may foster ideological isolation and intolerance. By contrast, Žižek promotes certain forms of insularity, that is, certain venues of religious discourse removed from the mainstream media and their dictates of political correctness. While these two approaches appear almost too remote to yield a fruitful exchange, I argue that mashup philosophy of religion provides a frame for constructive argument regarding religious language use at the intersection of faith and democratic politics. As William Connolly, Scott F. Aikin, Robert B. Talisse, and Jonathan Haidt have stressed, the point is not to diffuse tension through some awkward synthesis between religious authority and political liberty, but to reshuffle the coordinates for civic engagement so that competing social visions and alternate codes of civility for public reasoning can be assessed afresh. In this context of debating insularity, mashup philosophy of religion opens new vistas for questioning common places like the presumed nexus between literalism, dogmatism, extremism, and immoralism.

### "AUTHENTIC" FUNDAMENTALISM AND POLITICAL AFFECT

Slavoj Žižek is on record, first, for distinguishing "good" from "bad" fundamentalism and, second, for delivering a partial defense of the former while rejecting the latter.<sup>1</sup> In *The Parallax View* he expands this argument and suggests with his usual dose of provocation that "[w]e should ... dare to look for an ally in what often looks like the ultimate enemy of multi-culti [sic] liberalism: today's crucial 'sites of resistance' against global capitalism are often deeply marked by religious fundamentalism."<sup>2</sup> He hastens to add that this proposal is *not* intended to advertise an unqualified return to religious fundamentalism. But then, what is Žižek's alternative, and what exactly is the lesson one can learn from "good" fundamentalism without giving in to its "bad" variants?

<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 68–69. See also: Slavoj Žižek, "A Lacanian Plea for Fundamentalism," *Slought Foundation*, lecture on Sep 18, 2000, accessed on July 5, 2014 at:

[https://slought.org/resources/a\\_lacanian\\_plea\\_for\\_fundamentalism](https://slought.org/resources/a_lacanian_plea_for_fundamentalism).

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 365.

Žižek answers this question in a subsequent exchange with John Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ*.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, Žižek merges elements from Immanuel Kant and St. Paul into a radical version of cosmopolitanism tied to the notion of Pauline “political love,” which in turn is associated with an “apocalyptic community of believers” who “live[s] in the emergency state of a ‘permanent revolution’” ungoverned by the institutional frame and “ethico-religious rules” of the official church. He endorses the “self-organization” of such “authentic fundamentalists” as opposed to “Western Christian fundamentalists” who are afflicted by envy or fear toward the nonbelievers’ way of life.<sup>4</sup> This plea for taking (some forms of) fundamentalism seriously puts Žižek in the vicinity of commentators like William Connolly and Sharon Crowley who also appreciate the complexity of fundamentalist discourse, but don’t go as far as to view any particular strand of fundamentalism as a candidate for political alliance.<sup>5</sup>

Connolly, for his part, is willing to grant that “[a]ll of us have strains of fundamentalism flowing through us” and “no component of cultural life automatically escapes colonization by fundamentalist impulses.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, it is a fine line that separates fundamentalism from other “doctrine[s]” such as, for instance, “individualism, the pride of those who define America through the vocabulary of ‘exceptionalism.’” Yet what makes full-fledged fundamentalism distinct and dangerous is that it bleaches the “contingent forces that enter into the constitution of every self” from its purview in favor of an “overbearing” assertiveness.<sup>7</sup> In light of these considerations Connolly offers the following definition:

Fundamentalism, then, is a political formula of self-aggrandizement ... It converts stresses and strains in itself into evidence of deviation and immorality in the other; and it conceals the political dynamic of this strategy of self-protection by enclosing it in a vocabulary of God, nature, reason, nation, or normality elevated above the possibility of critical reflection. It is marked by the *stringency of its exclusionary form* and its insistence upon treating the putative sources of exclusion into certain, unquestionable dogmas. [Italics added]<sup>8</sup>

What is suggestive about Connolly’s definition is that it construes fundamentalism in terms of certain formal features and not in terms of doctrinal or religious content. That is to say, the difference between fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists pertains to *how* each party holds certain beliefs and not to *what* they believe. However, there is a certain ambiguity running through Connolly’s present commentary. On the one hand, we noted his concession that every doctrine (e.g. American individualism) has the potential to turn

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity*, 246, 272, 282–83. As Žižek points out in this context, he adopts the phrase “political love” from Terry Eagleton as a felicitous translation of *agape*.

<sup>5</sup> William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995). Sharon Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Connolly, *Ethos*, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Connolly, *Ethos*, 106–107.

<sup>8</sup> Connolly, *Ethos*, 106.

fundamentalist. On the other hand, he submits that “there are important differences of degree,”<sup>9</sup> and once the adherent to a particular doctrine denies the historical contingencies operative in the process of her own belief formation, she becomes fundamentalist, authoritarian, and staunchly exclusivist. Yet what Connolly’s characterization glosses with respect to fundamentalism and the “stringency of its exclusionary form” is the possibility that there might be benign forms of exclusivism that not only accept, but even emphasize the sort of contingency he is concerned about—a possibility that Žižek will explore at great length, as we shall see later on.

What is more, based on his assumption of an unqualified link between exclusivism and the denial of contingency, an important corollary of Connolly’s definition is that fundamentalism is bound to generate a pernicious *political affect*: an unsavory mixture of arrogance and anger, intimated by Connolly’s previous remark about “self-aggrandizement.” Prompted by Connolly’s insights on the subject, Sharon Crowley has explored the rhetorical underpinning of fundamentalist productions of affect in interesting detail.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on authors like Nancy Ammerman, Linda Kintz, and Lawrence Grossberg, Crowley examines how fundamentalist rhetoric engenders a climate hostile to democratic deliberation and to civil discourse writ large.<sup>11</sup> In particular, she quotes Ammerman’s suggestion that prior to World War II the designations “evangelical” and “fundamentalist” were nearly interchangeable, but more recently “evangelical Christians ‘saw benefits in learning to get along with outsiders,’ while fundamentalists insisted that ‘getting along was no virtue and that active opposition to liberalism, secularism, and communism was to be pursued’.”<sup>12</sup>

This last observation spells one of Crowley’s central worries, namely, that American fundamentalist discourse has become aggressively *insular* and increasingly *militant*—a condition summed up by George Marsden’s quip that a fundamentalist is “an evangelical who is mad about something.”<sup>13</sup> Considered from this angle, fundamentalism feeds on “visceral belief,”<sup>14</sup> that is, a form of belief in which the *intensity* of political affect trumps the civic obligation to

<sup>9</sup> Connolly, *Ethos*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Following Connolly and Crowley, I use the term “affect” to flexibly refer to any emotional charge (or set of charges) animating the communication among certain individuals and groups. Affect so understood may well cover situations where such emotional charges are at odds with each other and where the communicating parties are partly or wholly unaware of the affective qualities that inform their discourse. Accordingly, speaking of “fundamentalist productions of affect” does not necessarily entail intentional pursuit. At the same time, this phrase is meant to accommodate the strategic exploitation of political affect as a concrete possibility.

<sup>11</sup> Crowley, *Civil Discourse*, 8–9, 86, 103. Nancy Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” in *Fundamentalism Observed*, eds. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Vol. 1 of The Fundamentalism Project (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991). Linda Kintz, “Culture and the Religious Right,” in *Media, Culture and the Religious Right*, eds. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998). Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Crowley, *Civil Discourse*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1. Cited in Crowley, *Civil Discourse*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Crowley, *Civil Discourse*, 87.

answer to political reality and to listen to demands made by people who speak from outside of one's own ideological compass or faith. The decisive clue comes once again from Connolly<sup>15</sup> whose findings Crowley summarizes thus:

If Connolly is correct, the very fact that some beliefs are common enhances their affect, ... Widely shared beliefs appeal to the visceral register. This explains why the ideologic [sic] underlying hegemonic commonplaces can literally 'go without saying,' why the repetition of timeworn slogans is effective although their immediate, specific relevance is virtually nil.<sup>16</sup>

Very similar in orientation to Connolly's and Crowley's concern with fundamentalist political affect as a threat to civil discourse, the political philosophers Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse have drawn attention to the phenomenon of "group polarization" catalyzed by certain forms of insideniteness or "groupthink."<sup>17</sup> Yet the procedural remedy they propose to keep the political affect mobilized by visceral belief systems in check proves problematic, and some of their basic assumptions have been contested by the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his influential book *The Righteous Mind*.<sup>18</sup> Against the backdrop of Žižek's plea for authentic fundamentalism next to Connolly's and Crowley's *caveats*, pinpointing where exactly Aikin and Talisse part ways with Haidt helps clarify the theoretical as well as practical challenges engaged by Howard's case study, *Digital Jesus*, within the ongoing controversy over the problem of insularity in public discourse, where the tense relation between religious commitment and political secularism threatens to unravel the notion of democratic citizenship.

#### "GROUP POLARIZATION" AND "PAROCHIAL LOVE"

Short of exhaustive treatment we can identify one central line of argument in Aikin and Talisse's account, which is most relevant for preparing my subsequent examination of Howard's inquiry into vernacular fundamentalism. At the heart of their book lies an analogy between physical health and cognitive health. Achieving and maintaining *cognitive health* they argue, is to do not only with figuring out certain truths about us and the world but also with being in control of our cognitive lives.<sup>19</sup> That is to say, we don't simply want for our beliefs to be true, we want to *own* them in a more profound way. "When it comes to our lives, we do not want to be merely lucky winners."<sup>20</sup> One of the greatest risks to our cognitive health, Aikin and Talisse submit, is posed by "insulation"<sup>21</sup> which gives rise to the previously mentioned phenomenon called "group polarization":

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<sup>15</sup> William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), 26.

<sup>16</sup> Crowley, *Civil Discourse*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, *Why We Argue (And How We Should): A Guide To Political Disagreement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 25–26.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 21, 28, 47–49.

<sup>20</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 20.

The phenomenon is this: *When one exchanges reasons about an issue only with those who agree, one's beliefs regarding that issue imperceptibly shift to more extreme versions of themselves.*<sup>22</sup>

The important feature of group polarization is that the shift towards more extreme versions of one's pre-discussion beliefs is not caused by the introduction of new or better reasons. Group polarization is caused by group dynamics, not reasons. ... The group polarization phenomenon threatens our cognitive command, even if it may be that one reaches the truth by means of it.<sup>23</sup>

What is crucial about these passages is that they reveal Aikin and Talisse's account as largely *proceduralist*. The authors do not claim that extreme beliefs are by definition false or inferior.<sup>24</sup> Rather, they argue, *on principle*, that it is bad argumentative practice for anyone to let him- or herself get caught in currents of extremism. The key to Aikin and Talisse's proceduralism is the following distinction between *public argument*, based on *public reasons*, and other forms of argument. At a crucial juncture of their study, they summarize their position when they emphasize the seminal role of public argument within a democratically organized polity as follows:

To put the matter in a nutshell, when we engage in public argument, we are looking to evaluate the reasons that *democratic citizens can share*. These are reasons whose force derives from the moral and political commitments of democracy as such, reasons that speak to the demands of equality, liberty, justice, and citizenship. Although religious citizens are certainly free to announce and profess reasons deriving from their religious convictions in public settings, they are bound as dutiful democratic citizens to look towards public reasons when arguing with their fellow citizens about public matters.<sup>25</sup>

Upon scrutiny, this statement sounds conciliatory but seems to amount to little more than saying that religious commitment is fine, as long as the believer keeps it private. For what is the significance of being permitted to "announce and profess ... religious convictions in public settings" when those convictions do not count as public reasons? This apparently vacuous concession of free speech will be cold comfort to many believers, and here one is reminded of the long-standing debate between Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas on this subject. In this debate Habermas routinely tries not to offend religious sensibilities, but when the chips are down he will always insist against Taylor that democratic procedure trumps religious content.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 27–28.

<sup>25</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> For one of the most recent rounds in this long-standing debate, see the exchange between Habermas and Taylor in the multi-authored volume: Judith Butler et al., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

What is more, Aikin and Talisse's previous list of core values for healthy democratic citizenship (equality, liberty, justice) appears unnecessarily limited, and this is where Jonathan Haidt's intervention via moral psychology comes into play. As with my consideration of Aikin and Talisse, I have to confine my commentary to a very selective sketch of Haidt's multi-faceted inquiry. Of special interest for assessing Aikin and Talisse's warning about insularity and group polarization in the name of democratic health is Haidt's claim that—especially since Ronald Reagan's 1980s campaign and the subsequent "culture wars"<sup>27</sup>—American Republicans have had a "conservative advantage"<sup>28</sup> over their liberal Democratic counterparts. For better or worse, Republicans, Haidt submits, have been more adept than Democrats at stimulating the public's various *moral taste buds*.

The background for this claim consists in Haidt's expansion of Hume's theory of *moral sentiment*, based on the assumption that morality, in its first instance, is not a matter of abstract reasoning, but is grounded in "moral perception" comparable to sense perception. Specifically, Hume "thought that morality was based in a variety of sentiments, which give us pleasure when we encounter virtue and displeasure when we encounter vice." According to this Humean starting point, as Haidt sees it, "[m]oral judgment is a kind of perception, and moral science should begin with a careful study of the moral taste receptors."<sup>29</sup>

Among these moral taste receptors and their concomitant foundational virtues or core values, Haidt distinguishes six: Care (contra harm), Liberty (contra oppression), Fairness (contra cheating), Loyalty (contra betrayal), Authority (contra subversion), and Sanctity (contra degradation).<sup>30</sup> These foundational values are taken to be operative universally, i.e. across cultures, with the following qualifier couched in Haidt's Mencius-inspired analogy between morality and food: "In this analogy, morality is like cuisine: it's a cultural construction, influenced by accidents of environment and history, but it's not so flexible that anything goes. ... Moral matrices vary, but they all must please righteous minds equipped with the same six social receptors."<sup>31</sup> Haidt's provocative thesis, then, consists in the following "three versus six" diagnosis for the contemporary American political landscape:

Liberals have a three-foundation morality, whereas conservatives use all six. Liberal moral matrices rest on the Care/harm, Liberty/oppression, and Fairness/cheating foundations, although liberals are often willing to trade away fairness (as proportionality) when it conflicts with compassion

<sup>27</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 176, 181, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 180.

<sup>29</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 134–135.

<sup>30</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 133. As Haidt notes later on: The first two foundations on his list "support ideals of social justice, which emphasize compassion for the poor and a struggle for political equality among the subgroups that comprise society. ... (This is why there is no separate equality foundation. People don't crave equality for its own sake; they fight for equality when they perceive that they are being bullied or dominated, as during the American and French revolutions, and the cultural revolutions of the 1960s)" (Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 211–212).

or with their desire to fight oppression. Conservative morality rests on all six foundations, although conservatives are more willing than liberals to sacrifice Care and let some people get hurt in order to achieve their many other moral objectives.<sup>32</sup>

What connects Haidt's moral-psychological analysis to Aikin and Talisse's account of competent argument is a "deep concern about the polarization and incivility of American political life," which is why Haidt and his colleagues "wanted to use moral psychology to help political partisans to understand and respect each other."<sup>33</sup> Without taking sides, Haidt calls for Democrats to broaden their moral palate for more fruitful discussion. However, Haidt parts ways with Aikin and Talisse when it comes to the question how the discursive gulf between the liberal and conservative moral universes can be bridged most effectively. While Aikin and Talisse's Habermasian proceduralism tends to bar religious values from entering into debates over public policy, Haidt emphasizes how liberals' negligence of the sixth foundation, Sanctity, has been particularly detrimental to bipartisan American politics. Here he detects a "sacredness gap."<sup>34</sup>

Sanctity for Haidt, as I read him, is a promising Humean virtue that exercises its power for social organization alongside the standards of secular moral reasoning. As such it is clearly religious, but not bound to denominations and institutions. Hence it can be valued, in principle, by believers and non-believers alike. "Whether or not God exists, people feel that some things, actions, and people are noble, pure, and elevated; others are base, polluted, and degraded."<sup>35</sup> In this vein, Haidt proceeds to claim that sanctity is relevant, beyond the bounds of organized religion, to anyone who is willing to "hear the sacred overtones in America's unofficial motto: *E pluribus unum* (from many, one)."<sup>36</sup> Thus sensitivity to sacredness *per se* does not require membership in an official religious group or institution. As Haidt elaborates: "By 'sacred' I mean ... the Sanctity foundation ... . It's the ability to endow ideas, objects, and events with infinite value, particularly those ideas, objects, and events that bind a group together in a single entity."<sup>37</sup>

Here Haidt aligns himself with the political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell, whose claims in *American Grace* he associates with the teachings of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and his vision of "society at its best."<sup>38</sup> With contemporary atheist critics of religion in mind—especially Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and to a much lesser extent Daniel Dennett<sup>39</sup>—Haidt notes: "Putnam and Campbell reject the New Atheist emphasis on belief and reach a conclusion straight out of Durkheim: 'It is religious belongingness that matters for neighborliness, not religious believing'."<sup>40</sup> This emphasis on *religious belongingness* rather than belief content puts a different spin

<sup>32</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 214; cf. 182–87.

<sup>33</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 186.

<sup>34</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 194.

<sup>35</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 174.

<sup>36</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 193.

<sup>37</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 192. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 288; cf. 437n10, 439n50.

<sup>40</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 311.

on Aikin and Talisse's account of earnest and responsible belief management, including their express concern over insularity.

In keeping with the previous claims, Haidt argues that American democracy cannot afford to ignore values like sanctity, based on standards of rationalist proceduralism or otherwise. This is because a broadly religious, non-institutional sense of belongingness is a powerful factor in efforts at achieving high degrees of social cohesion and human flourishing. Most relevant for the conversation between Žižek and Howard about "good" and "bad" fundamentalism, Haidt suggests that an increase in "parochial love"<sup>41</sup> may be a price worth paying in order to heighten a sense belonging that could close the "sacredness gap" which keeps afflicting American political discourse. In making this point Haidt is prepared to invoke politically controversial figures like the eighteenth-century social conservative Edmund Burke, whom he quotes as follows: "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind."<sup>42</sup> To this Burkean dictum, Haidt appends the following comment:

I don't think that Burke was right that the love of one's platoon leads, in general, to a love of humanity. But it does seem as though increasing the love of one's in-group usually doesn't lead to an increase in hate for out-groups (see Brewer and Campbell 1976; de Dreu et al. 2011), so I'd be content to live in a world with vastly more parochial love and little or no decrease in love of humanity.<sup>43</sup>

Compared to Haidt, Žižek's plea for "authentic" fundamentalism on the way to Pauline-Kantian cosmopolitanism can be seen as the next step in Burke's "series." Here, paradoxically, the shortest way to "love for humanity" leads through an increased love for one's in-group, which is bound by a shared religious vision (of the end times) and not by ethnic substance. The question thus becomes whether Žižek can make a good case for such Burkean progression in ways that would assuage Aikin and Talisse's as well as Connolly's and Crowley's worries over group polarization—which are the kind of worries that drive much of Howard's discussion, too. At the same time, examining the ethical import of Howard's case study will allow us to add much needed detail to some of the general remarks by Aikin and Talisse concerning the relation between the "structural features of the Internet" and dangerous insularity in public discourse.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "It would be nice to believe that we humans were designed to love everyone unconditionally. Nice, but rather unlikely from an evolutionary perspective. Parochial love-love within groups—amplified by similarity, a sense of shared fate, and the suppression of free riders, may be the most we can accomplish" (Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 284).

<sup>42</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 359.

<sup>43</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 448n70. Haidt's sources are: Marilynn Brewer and Donald Campbell, *Ethnocentrism and Intergroup Attitudes: East African Evidence* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976). Carsten De Dreu et al., "Oxytocin Promotes Human Ethnocentrism," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 108, no. 4 (2011): 1262–66.

<sup>44</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 132. While Aikin and Talisse are quick to make the proper disclaimer that "[l]ike all things in life, the Internet is a mixed bag," they do worry

#### VERNACULAR FUNDAMENTALISM AND LEVELS OF LITERALISM

To see how Žižek's plea for a radically cosmopolitan kind of political love may be brought to bear on Howard's inquiry into virtual ekklesia, it is expedient to start with Howard's "phenomenology" of vernacular fundamentalism and online fellowship. Hinted at by the quotation marks, "phenomenology" is here taken in the rather flexible sense of grounding one's investigation in empirical fieldwork by way of analyzing specific traits of concrete phenomena in order to identify larger trends of societal significance.<sup>45</sup> More specifically, Howard approaches vernacular fundamentalism from the vantage point of communication studies in that his study proffers an engaging combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, as he tracks statistical data about different uses of participatory media on the Worldwide Web, accompanied by transcripts of personal interviews with actual participants in these online communications.

Further, Howard spells out the political stakes of such communicative phenomena in terms of a variant of ideology critique that is overtly indebted to the work of Louis Althusser and Terry Eagleton. In this vein he subscribes to a general understanding of ideology as "a habit of thinking based on shared beliefs," and he elaborates: "From this perspective, a communication can be seen as participating in fundamentalism whenever specific definite traits are observed—whether or not the person expressing them is self-identified with a specifically 'fundamentalist' group."<sup>46</sup> Expanding on these "definite traits," Howard offers a list of *four core beliefs*, which go to qualify an online discourse as "fundamentalist," regardless of whether the participants accept that label for themselves or not. In Howard's account, these core convictions include beliefs in (1) biblical literalism, (2) the experience of spiritual rebirth, (3) the need to evangelize, and (4) the end times interpretation of biblical prophecy. Generally, then, "when these four beliefs are expressed in a noninstitutional communication, that communication participates in vernacular Christian fundamentalism."<sup>47</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, I treat (1) and (4) as primary, while (2) and (3) are understood as secondary. This reading accommodates the fact that vernacular-

that the "interconnections between webpages not only allow, but positively foster insularity, as the links featured on any site tend overwhelmingly to carry one to like-minded sites, rather than sites where one can find intelligent opposition" (*Why We Argue*, 132, 137).

<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, there is no direct affinity between Howard's case study and Edmund Husserl's philosophically involved prototype version of doing phenomenology, for which Simon Critchley has provided a succinct summary. In this context, Critchley's way of aligning his own position with the work of Merleau-Ponty strikes me as generally compatible with Howard's approach. See Simon Critchley and Reiner Schürmann, *On Heidegger's Being and Time*, ed. Steven Levine (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 43.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (New York and London: New York University Press), 8. This construal is generally compatible with Žižek's insistence on the continued relevance of ideology critique, contrary to those theorists who would jettison ideology as an outmoded Marxist category. See the editor's introductory essay "The Spectre [sic] of Ideology" in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 1-33.

<sup>47</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 8.

fundamentalist Christians share certain basic features with other Christian groups, without implausibly classifying all Christians as covertly fundamentalist. For example, various Christian groups display features (2) and (3), but this does not automatically entail their participation in vernacular fundamentalist discourse, online or elsewhere. To be sure, this selective emphasis does not render (2) and (3) unimportant. Thus core belief (3) points to a general form of *religious activism*, which makes Christian discourse an urgent endeavor both inside and outside institutional channels. Accordingly, vernacular fundamentalists, like many other evangelical Christians, feel the missionary impulse to reach out and change the world by spreading the word, i.e. the “good news.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, core belief (2) is appealing to a broad range of evangelicals who place a strong emphasis on personally witnessing the ongoing bestowal of the gifts of the Spirit.<sup>49</sup> This notion of the continued outpouring of the Spirit, in turn, opens the door to vernacular, religious initiatives writ large, which grant the individual believer a spiritual, even prophetic authority based on immediate experience, independently of church offices or clerical hierarchy.

In light of these considerations, (2) and (3) may go a long way to show how vital strands of the Christian tradition were always already sympathetic to some kind of vernacular detachment from overly institutionalized forms of worship.<sup>50</sup> As for the *fundamentalist* aspect of vernacular fundamentalism, the crux really lies with (1) and (4) and the complicated relation between these two, if we are to follow Howard’s lead here: “Vernacular Christian fundamentalism only emerges when a literal interpretation of the prophetic texts gives rise to online ritualized deliberation based on a belief in the ‘End Times’.”<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, it is with respect to (1) and (4) that Howard’s and Žižek’s shared interest in apocalyptic thought comes full circle. Here everything hinges on how ritualized deliberation is borne out by way of what Howard terms “second-level literalism”:

This form of interpretation generally assumes that, even in translation, the Bible has a *single, simple, and direct* meaning. In cases like those presented by the complex symbolic language of the Book of Revelation, this literalism occurs at a secondary

<sup>48</sup> For a *locus classicus*, see the pithy comments on the inherently activist and transformative orientation of Christianity, proffered in the third chapter of Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), 64, 70–71.

<sup>49</sup> Cf., for example, the passionate opening remarks in a recent study by Kenda Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 10–11.

<sup>50</sup> As Stephen Prothero has documented for an US American context, such forms of revering and politically mobilizing Jesus as a social rebel against the establishment gained popularity among “Jesus freaks” and “street Christians” ever since the 1960s, with some special resurgence during the 1990s (incidentally the decade when contemporary Christian music gained major momentum and mass appeal). Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 126–57. More recently, the street Christian ethos has been associated with the Occupy Wall Street movement along comparable lines. Ray Downs, “Occupy Wall Street: Christians Debate if Jesus Would ‘Occupy’ With Protesters,” *The Christian Post*, October 10, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/occupy-wall-street-christians-debate-if-jesus-would-occupy-with-protesters-57707/>

<sup>51</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 9–10.

level. . . . As a result, the emphasis on a literal interpretation assumes that there is a *single and correct* meaning even if the language itself is figurative and obscure.<sup>52</sup>

Howard's textual examples point to descriptions of the messiah's return "smiting the nations" with a "sharp sword" coming out of His mouth (Revelation 19:15).<sup>53</sup> Treating the "sword" as a reference to "modern weapons" of war may strike many as metonymic rather than literal, but Howard is prepared to locate such equations still on the first level literalism. The image of the sword "coming out of His mouth," however, belongs on the second level, because here we confront "a greater range of possible literal meanings."<sup>54</sup>

These early remarks in passing on Howard's part prove somewhat problematic. In the above quote, he introduces second-level literalism as based on the assumption that the Bible has a "single, simple, and direct meaning." But then, as we just saw, he goes on to characterize such literalism as compatible with a "range of possible literal meanings." This perplexing merger of claims about singular and multiple meanings raises two concerns. First, Howard does not pause to explain how *any* literal reading of the "coming out of His mouth" passage could be credible. Are we to imagine that the Lord, literally, spits out "guns, tanks, and so on"?<sup>55</sup> Second, assuming (for the sake of argument) that not only one but several such literal meanings are indeed available, is this "range of possible literal meanings" subject to definite decoding, or are we confronted with a case of *persistent undecidability*? To make things worse, even if we assume that decoding is possible in principle, the very notion of a provisional range of possible literal meanings already gainsays the idea of simplicity and direct access.

In other words, according to Howard's own explication of second-level literalism, biblical texts like the Book of Revelation may have a single, but not a simple and direct meaning, since some interpretive detour appears inevitable by way of decoding apparently polysemic passages. Upon scrutiny, Howard's charitable approach to second-level literalism does *not* extend to believers who insist on taking each and every word of the Bible as literally true such that literal truth entails a "single, simple, and direct meaning." Rather, the kind of literalism that Howard presents as a candidate for serious consideration is restricted to claiming only a "single and correct meaning" for figurative passages in the Book of Revelation or anywhere in Scripture.

The decisive clue for corroborating the preceding qualifier about second-level literalism is provided by Howard's previous hint at an intimate connection between literal interpretation and ritualized deliberation, based on a belief in the

<sup>52</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 8, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> In this particular passage, the text of *Digital Jesus* is not as transparent as it could be, for it is not completely apparent which version of Scripture (KJV or NIV?) Howard wishes to cite. Also, in the sentence quoted Howard does not put quotations marks around the phrase "coming out of His mouth," though it is clear from his very next sentence that he means to treat it as a direct biblical reference.

<sup>54</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 8. Of course, an alternate reading could take the phrase "coming out of His mouth" quite literally, while treating the "sword" part as metaphorical, namely, as referring to a "verbal sword" in the sense of an *incisive message* that "cuts deep" in that it alters our religious vision.

end times as the signature trait of vernacular Christian fundamentalism. Howard returns to the aspect of ritual later in his book where he devotes an entire section to the relation between ritual deliberation and a phenomenon he dubs “topical community formation.”<sup>56</sup> This relation, I submit, interlocks with Žižek’s provocative claim that “good” fundamentalism can be liberating by pulling us out of our life-worldly comfort zone. However, while Žižek sees positive potential in such gestures of discursive detachment, Howard worries that increased communicative distance from “real-world communities”<sup>57</sup> can have detrimental effects for participants in vernacular fundamentalism and their future interactions with religious others in the arena of public deliberation, which fundamentalists cannot avoid altogether.

#### DANGEROUS “ENCLAVE COMMUNICATION”: EXTRAPOLATING AN ARGUMENT

Under the section heading “The Dangers of Enclave Communication,” Howard signals his final verdict when he presents vernacular Christian fundamentalism as a mixed bag, in which the presumed disadvantages *tend* to outweigh the presumed advantages. Thus, Howard does not issue any heavy-handed moral objection to such fundamentalist discourse as inherently bad. Yet he perceives a general downside tendency. Bringing out the primary focus of his concern requires the reader to put Howard’s most pertinent remarks in logical order, which he himself does not do. By formally stating his central claims, one can extrapolate the following argument from his text:

**Premise 1:** “Today’s [participatory] media [like blogs and forums] offer individuals more opportunities to construct *personalized systems of belief* than ever before . . .” [Italics added].<sup>58</sup>

**Premise 2:** In the case of vernacular Christian fundamentalism, the construction of such personalized belief systems is crucially informed by three features:

- (a) with respect to interpreting current events and integrating them into the end-times narrative, *vernacular authority replaces central authority*.<sup>59</sup>
- (b) the use of “self-sealing argument[s]”<sup>60</sup> which jointly produce “self-sealing worldviews.”<sup>61</sup>
- (c) the presence of “strong moderators” like *Rapture Ready*’s Todd Strandberg and his website administrator “BuzzardHut” (presumably an alias for Strandberg himself).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 58.

<sup>57</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 145.

<sup>58</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 156. The parentheses in square brackets are drawn from the following sentence on the next page, where Howard specifies the media effects he has in mind as follows: “The rise of participatory media like blogs and forums, . . . fuels the feedback loop between individual expression and individual consumption [of ideas]” (*Digital Jesus*, 157).

<sup>59</sup> “There is no central authority to rein in the diversity of individually expressed interpretations other than everyday users and creators of these media themselves in the form of their aggregate vernacular authority” (Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 156).

<sup>60</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 153; cf. 35.

<sup>61</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 155.

<sup>62</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 138–39.

**Premise 3**, implied but not expressly stated in Howard's text: In the ongoing expansion of vernacular Christian fundamentalism's online discourse, the ideologically isolating features (b) and (c) *tend* to outweigh the liberating feature a), as listed in Premise 2.

**Conclusion:** "With its enclave aggregation [of information], vernacular Christian fundamentalism demonstrates . . . [the] danger . . . that individuals will construct virtual communities where it is acceptable to maintain intolerant beliefs to which a larger audience would offer resistance. . . . Vernacular Christian fundamentalism's enclave communication clearly presents a potential danger for those against whom such intolerance is directed."<sup>63</sup> Primary examples of such danger are calls for "spiritual warfare" against American Indians qua religious others.<sup>64</sup>

Except for the understated Premise 3, all items of this reconstructed argument are readily available, if not logically ordered, in Howard's text. However, something like Premise 3 is needed for Howard's argument to be minimally coherent. Clearly, Howard is not opposed to personalized systems of belief, on principle. As a case in point, he is willing to grant positive (viz. creative and spiritually sustaining) potential to the hermeneutic labor that informs the ways in which apocalyptic believers personalize their Christian belief system via topical community formation. Instead of subjecting its adherents to passive resignation or even depression, the apocalyptic outlook constitutes a constantly renewed interpretive challenge to gather clues and incorporate them into the end times narrative, which functions as the thematic anchor for ceaseless "detective work" by all the faithful.<sup>65</sup> Generally, this notion of hermeneutic collaboration among equals casts a favorable light on feature a), in Premise 2, namely, the vernacular de-centralization of discursive authority.

As far as feature (b) is concerned, Howard seems to consider it self-evident that "self-sealing arguments" inducing "self-sealing worldviews" are ideologically pernicious, since they are both logically fallacious and aggressively exclusivist. Howard doesn't pause to elaborate on these aspects, but I think most readers (Žižek included) would accept this objection to self-sealing arguments without

<sup>63</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 158. In a previous passage, Howard summarizes his findings thus: "In the continual trickle of Internet traffic, the volition of thousands merges. In aggregate, their choices have etched the ideological paths that serve as the primary authority in vernacular Christian fundamentalism. Here, participants give electronic substance to a movement that is diffuse, wildly diverse, and yet staunchly intolerant of any who stray from its four definitive beliefs" (*Digital Jesus*, 147).

<sup>64</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 154–55. Cf. also the related observations concerning the stigmatization of Jewish people as "demonic," next to other expressions of intolerance including those directed against representatives of "alternate lifestyles such as gay and lesbian people" (*Digital Jesus*, 151–52).

<sup>65</sup> In Howard's words: "Ritual deliberation proceeds in precisely this fashion. It enables individuals to continually locate the minute details of biblical writings in everyday news events. However, it seeks no 'general' conclusion. Instead, it ritually constructs the movement's virtual space. . . . Maybe the most famous passage expressing this idea is the one from the Gospel of Matthew: 'Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is' (Matthew 24:36). Any facts about the End Times beyond the truth of the Bible and the certain unknowability of that exact truth are strictly in the realm of possibility. *This attitude keeps the end of times near, but never too near*" (*Digital Jesus*, 60, emphasis added).

further ado. In terms of logical fallacy, perspicuous commentators like Elliott Sober have shown how self-sealing arguments generally rest on a basic deceptive move, namely, a tacit shift from evidence-based discussion keyed to *probability* judgments onto concept-based speculation about mere *possibilities*.<sup>66</sup> In terms of aggressive exclusivism, the same fallacious logic is at work when certain ideologues resort to the technique of *scapegoating*, in order to “support” their conspiratorial claims concerning the agency of a particular group of people featured as representatives of absolute (social) evil. Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre’s seminal essay “Portrait of the antisemite” [sic], Žižek has repeatedly referred to Nazism’s figuring of “the Jew” as a primary example of this sort of ideological manipulation in its darkest form.<sup>67</sup>

Howard’s moral concern over feature (b) in Premise 2, then, is well justified. The only problem is that the insidious character of such self-sealing worldviews seems to cut across all discourses, online or offline. Long before the inception of the internet, Nazism used the mass media of its time to the fullest extent in order to spread its propagandistic messages, but those “traditional” mass media are not the target of Howard’s ethical concern. But then, what is the decisive feature of the kind of online communication, which renders the vernacular mobilization of the Digital Jesus morally worrisome? By default, the whole moral weight seems to fall on feature (c), namely the censorship Howard associates with the presence of “strong moderators.”

Among Howard’s prime illustrations for such strong moderation is the practice used by Todd Strandberg and his website administrator named “BuzzardHut” on the end-times oriented forum site *Rapture Ready*, next to Michael Mickey who is managing *RaptureAlert.com* and its associated text-based blog. Overall, Howard prefers Mickey’s more “balanced” moderator style, insofar as he appears to be more willing to include outsiders’ contributions on his blog.<sup>68</sup> Mickey’s approach emerges as more sensible, according to Howard, because, unlike Strandberg, Mickey polled his audience before starting his blog, asking them whether the blog should be “open for anyone to post their thoughts.” Apparently the majority of respondents supported a “Christian forum on the web” comparable to *BibleForums.org* and *MyChurch.org*.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Mickey differs from Strandberg in that he chose not to require participants to register prior to posting comments on his blog. This feature can be an advantage, Howard observes, because many of the *user agreements* of comparable websites use starkly exclusivist diction, which may be off-putting to the uninitiated.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Elliott Sober, “Testability,” *Proceedings and Address of the American Philosophical Association* 73, no. 2 (1999): 47–76, especially 61.

<sup>67</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Portrait of the antisemite,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1989), 329–45. For one of Žižek’s earliest expositions of this ideologically sinister featuring of “the Jew,” see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 96–99.

<sup>68</sup> In this way *RaptureAlert.com* surpasses *Rapture Ready* by achieving a “balance between the individually produced blog entries and the carefully managed comments sections which demonstrates how blogging software can be used to elicit robust ritual deliberation” (Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 141).

<sup>69</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 143.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, “[t]he site administrators [of *BibleForums.org*] were blunt about it: This board is for an exploration of the Christian Protestant faith, and not the faith of other religions” (Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 140). Now, Howard doesn’t dismiss exclusivist

In short, Howard's main concern is neither soteriological exclusivism as such nor censorship as such.<sup>71</sup> Being an exclusivist Christian does not obviously make you a (vernacular) fundamentalist. Consider, e.g., *BibleForums.org*'s "definition" of Christianity, which Howard cites as follows: "Christians believe Jesus to be the only Son of God, who lived a sinless life. He is eternal, uncreated God, and has always been and will always be God . . . Christians further believe that Jesus alone offers salvation, and that it is only possible through and by Him. Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no salvation."<sup>72</sup> This mini-creed is clearly exclusivist, centered on the claim that following Jesus Christ is the only way to being saved. Importantly, though, being an exclusivist does not *ipso facto* commit any Christian to personally condemn or even persecute non-Christians. Some will think, of course, that the other party is headed in the "wrong direction," so to speak, while leaving the *final judgment* to God, who can see in people's hearts in ways fellow humans cannot. Most often cited in this context is the famous injunction from the Gospel of Matthew: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1).

By the same token, there is no direct (logical or causal) connection between being an exclusivist in one's faith and being intolerant in one's day-to-day practices. Moreover, leaving the judgment to God does not imply moral apathy or lack of conviction on the believer's part. From a sophisticated reformed evangelical platform, this point has been made in D.A. Carson's recent book *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. Here Carson reminds the reader that passages like Matthew 7:1 must not be taken out of context. Rather, they have to be assessed along with accompanying statements such as Jesus' sharp rebuke (stated six times in Matthew 23): "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" This leads Carson to conclude: "In its context, this much-quoted passage [viz. Matthew 7:1] condemns judgmentalism—a self-righteous condemnation of others—not humble and moral alignment with what God himself graciously discloses."<sup>73</sup>

As for censorship, we should note that Mickey, too, censors the comments section of his blog and in so doing he reserves the right to ban members, especially when they seem to make the majority of other forum participants "uncomfortable."<sup>74</sup> From this we can infer that Howard is sensitive to the dual claim that, first, some form of censorship may well be necessary for minimal group cohesion, independent of societal context; and, second, for that very reason Christian and non-Christian communities given to a "liberal" ideology are also bound to rely on some version of censorship or other, in order to

convictions out of hand, but he worries that this filter mechanism, by way of strongly worded registration criteria, keeps divergent voices out of these online forums and thus decreases the frequent participant's respect for religious others. Cf. Howard's remarks on "heavy users" (*Digital Jesus*, 144).

<sup>71</sup> According to soteriological exclusivism broadly conceived, non-believers will not reach salvation and so be kept out of "heaven" or the "new creation." In the present context, censorship refers to mechanisms for blocking or terminating individuals' participation in the online exchanges among the members of a particular virtual ekklisia.

<sup>72</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 140.

<sup>73</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 103.

<sup>74</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 143–44.

promote and protect their political-theological agenda.<sup>75</sup> Instead of hastily stigmatizing either exclusivism or censorship as such, Howard's main concern pertains to advanced forms of *impoverished religious language use* or, if you will, religio-linguistic monoculture, to coin a somewhat ugly phrase. Accordingly, frequent visitors and long-term participants of more rigidly censored forum sites, like *Rapture Ready*, run the risk of letting their spiritual vocabulary degenerate within "enclaves of like-minded communication."<sup>76</sup> Aikin and Talisse would second this claim, in keeping with their previously mentioned objection to insular language use as contributing to "groupthink."<sup>77</sup>

Howard's most considered view, then, amounts to the claim that vernacular Christian fundamentalism as a new powerful trend of online religiosity is ambivalent: On the one hand, it may foster practices of "robust ritual deliberation"<sup>78</sup> which are conducive to interfaith dialogue and the kind of hermeneutical "charity" that Howard in but a few paragraphs traces back to St. Augustine.<sup>79</sup> Such charity is guided by the general idea that despite our most deeply felt personal experiences religious dissenters might be onto something in their diverging soteriological outlooks. On the other hand, vernacular Christian fundamentalism takes a turn for the worse, if individuals get caught up in a tight-knit web of more aggressively managed forum sites that are often linked to personal video blogs, where individuals tend to speak in more authoritative and hostile voices and sometimes even issue disturbing calls for spiritual warfare.

While Howard's overarching plea for preventing atrophied religious language use and spiritual parochialism remains suggestive, the present version of his moral critique seems to boil down to the rather vague recommendation for people to include a broad range of voices in their preferred forum sites. Such polyphony, so the suggestion goes, would enable the site participants to retain *dialogical dexterity* in dealing with religious (and non-religious) others and keep "engage[d] in the larger deliberations taking place in the society around them."<sup>80</sup> This proposal, however, seems to put the cart before the horse, because one of the main motives for people to look for alternative religious forums is precisely the incipient sense that the "official discourse" managed by a limited number of media conglomerates is either deaf or strategically opposed to their own vital concerns.<sup>81</sup>

If so, Howard's advice, well intended as it may be, is likely to strike many would-be vernacular fundamentalists as nearly cynical, for it advises them to

<sup>75</sup> To draw on Carson, again: "My concern is to show that those who claim the moral high ground of (the new) tolerance are in fact no less opinionated than those they criticize, but about other topics" (*Intolerance of Tolerance*, 82).

<sup>76</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 145.

<sup>77</sup> Aikin and Talisse, *Why We Argue*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 141.

<sup>79</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 168–69.

<sup>80</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 145.

<sup>81</sup> As a self-staged aggressive conservative, Ann Coulter has been prolific on the subject. Among her numerous volumes, the following title offers a synopsis of her critique of the liberal media's bias as she sees it. Ann Coulter, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002). For a critical discussion of Coulter's "backlash" rhetoric, see Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 114–37, especially 128.

stay close to those very institutions from which they sought to gain critical distance. In fact, its numerous merits notwithstanding, this strikes me as the Achilles' heel of Howard's analysis, namely, his one-sidedly positive characterization of the cultural mainstream:

Traditional kinds of media like newspapers, broadcast radio, and network television function as general interest intermediaries because they seek to collect and present content in ways that appeal to as broad an audience as possible. . . . As a by-product of this effort, mainstream media has increasingly rejected the overt expression of intolerance. Over time, these general interest intermediaries have created the most inclusive fields of public deliberation in history.<sup>82</sup>

Based on these statements, Howard seems to infer that traditional media's (financial) dependence on mass appeal functions as a *de facto* warrant of social inclusivism in public discourse, which rejects explicit statements of intolerance. As we will see, in the absence of substantial qualifications Žižek would dismiss such a judgment as stunningly naïve.

#### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND RHETORICAL DISAVOWAL

As a striking counter example of general significance for assessing Howard's appraisal of traditional mass-mediated inclusivism, consider Žižek's perceptive reference to a statement that William Bennett made on his call-in radio program *Morning in America*, on 28 September 2005:

. . . But I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could, if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossibly ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down.<sup>83</sup>

Traditional broadcast radio may well cater to public mainstream sensibilities by filtering out statements of *overt* discrimination. Yet this does not at all block the possibility of *covert* or coded discrimination. More specifically, traditional radio was never fully immune to what one is tempted to call a *rhetoric of strategic disavowal*, or of "de-negation" (in Žižek's phrase),<sup>84</sup> where the speaker ventures an outrageous proposition only immediately to denounce it as clearly unacceptable. Still, the very act of publicly making this claim already injects its content into the space of public deliberation or, if you will, into the space of the audience's political imaginary. After all, for it to be rejected—regardless how quickly—the proposal has to be pondered first.

Using the rhetoric of disavowal in this manner amounts to a cunningly backhanded communicative gesture, because it manages *effectively* to offer a proposition as food for thought, while *formally* denying its propositional content. Of course, the obvious question to ask someone like Bennett would be: If he

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<sup>82</sup> Howard, *Digital Jesus*, 157.

<sup>83</sup> Cited in Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 101.

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 100.

thinks that no one would (or should) take such a crassly discriminatory statement about African American babies seriously, why mention it at all? In other words, the *performative* aspect of the speaker's communicative act stands in persistent contrast to his accompanying "official" disclaimer.<sup>85</sup> Unsurprisingly, the strongly adverse reactions by many listeners (and the White House!) prompted both Bennett and the radio station to issue an apology of sorts, in which all parties were careful not to own the content of the discriminatory message, but to stress the moral proviso already embedded in Bennett's original statement.<sup>86</sup> According to Žižek, the discursive workings of warped statements like Bennett's illustrate "the limitation of standard political correctness" which Howard seems to rely on.<sup>87</sup>

On my interpretation, Žižek shares Howard's general concern over atrophied religious language use and its practice-oriented repercussions. Yet Žižek would take issue with Howard's hints at possible remedies. If neither salvific exclusivism as such nor censorship as such is the root cause for withering religious language skills, then the solution to this problem cannot consist in simply attenuating the detachment from the cultural mainstream sought by vernacular Christian fundamentalists. This is because the rhetorical ruses routinely deployed by participants in the traditional mass media are not at all innocent—by definition or otherwise—if we consider cases like the William Bennett incident as exemplary of long-standing and rather widespread tendencies in mainstream discursivity.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Howard's rudimentary reference to Augustinian charity is not enough to dispel the impression that his

<sup>85</sup> One may wonder whether Bennett could deflect this charge about the cunning use of rhetorical disavowal by holding that his original statement as quoted by Žižek was meant as a hyperbole of sorts, i.e. as an intentional overstatement for the sake of provoking public discussion over sensitive issues. After all, Žižek himself appears to invite politically incorrect statements to expose the real stakes of ideology critique. Distinguishing hyperbole from strategic rhetorical disavowal might be difficult in some cases, but I would argue that Bennett's present diction clearly exceeds mere hyperbole. The reference to "every black baby in this country" rhetorically conjures the image of African Americans as "naturally born criminals," and the final "but" in Bennett's pronouncement tends to emphasize practical "solutions" over moral qualms. Considered in this light, it is not clear to me how Bennett's formulations could fail to fan the flames of racism by way of backhanded communication.

<sup>86</sup> William Bennett: "I'm sorry if people are hurt, I really am. But we can't say this is an area of American life (and) public policy that we're not allowed to talk about—race and crime." Cited in Jake Tapper, "William Bennett Defends Comment on Abortion and Crime," *ABC News*, September 29, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Politics/story?id=1171385>.

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 100. For more illustrative material regarding the moral tangle surrounding traditional media in a politico-theological context, cf. also Paul Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross: Adorno and Christian Right Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). Among other phenomena, Apostolidis pays special attention to the complex political efficacy of James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*, a leading media conglomerate of the Christian right, which since its inception in 1977 keeps exerting a powerful influence in the evolving American cultural landscape.

<sup>88</sup> To be clear, this is not to say that self-professed Christian forums in the traditional media terrain did not contribute their fair share of morally questionable Bennett-style maneuvers. Cf., for example, the previous reference to *Stations of the Cross*. Rather, the point I am attributing to Žižek is that there is no ready-made contrast between the traditional mass media and the new participatory media, from which the traditional ones would emerge as clearly morally superior.

liberal ideal of public deliberation rests on an overly intellectual notion of tolerance, which upon scrutiny amounts to a fairly elusive attitude of exegetical open-mindedness. From this vantage point, Howard's moral premonition at the very end of his study appears problematic, for it seems to aim at watering vernacular fundamentalism down to some kind of inoffensive hermeneutic guessing game.

By contrast, from Žižek's perspective virtual ekklesia do not receive their proper "real world" anchor by way of re-adjusting themselves to officially sanctioned dictates of political correctness. Rather, the end-times focus of vernacular Christian fundamentalists becomes politically relevant, if its unabashed topical "obsession" with the apocalypse is joined to a decidedly this-worldly Christian ethics. Such ethics focuses on a particular element that Žižek detects in radical Protestantism, namely, the unsettling conception of a suffering God. This conception is laid out most forcefully in Žižek's recent book, *God in Pain*.<sup>89</sup> Here Žižek translates the figure of a suffering God into a program for Christian non-triumphalism.

#### REVELATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Non-triumphalism remains integral to the "authentic Christian legacy" that Žižek thinks is worth fighting for and which he deems "too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks."<sup>90</sup> At the heart of this legacy we find a specific understanding of the *scandal of Christ*, the meaning of which, in turn, depends on Žižek's approach to the central theme complex of revelation. In this theological context Žižek draws on Franklin Sherman, when he places his own God conception at a clear distance from the triumphalist notion of God as a transcendent unaffected Master of the universe.<sup>91</sup> Žižek's God is a "suffering God," a deity fully and painfully immersed in history:

This brings us to . . . a suffering God—not a triumphalist God who always wins in the end, . . . ; not a God who exerts cold justice, since he is by definition always right; but a God who—like the suffering Christ on the cross—is agonized, who assumes the burden of suffering, in solidarity with human misery.<sup>92</sup>

. . . Because God's suffering implies that he is involved in history, affected by it, not just a transcendent Master pulling the strings from above: God's suffering means that human history is not just a theater of shadows, but the place of real struggle, the struggle in which the Absolute itself is involved and its fate is decided.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Story Press, 2012). In this volume, each chapter belongs to a single author. Here and in the following, I am exclusively referring to Žižek's contributions.

<sup>90</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 2.

<sup>91</sup> For the reference to Sherman, see Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 156, note 1.

<sup>92</sup> Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 156.

<sup>93</sup> Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 157.

This emphasis on God's self-exposure to suffering within the violent to and fro of history is absolutely crucial for Christian self-understanding tied to the notion of living "in Christ" (a Pauline phrase frequently used in the *Epistles*).<sup>94</sup> For living in Christ or becoming a follower of Christ now entails a formidable responsibility implied by God's revelation through Christ's death:

Therein resides the terrible *risk of revelation*: what 'Revelation' means is that God took upon himself the risk of putting everything at stake, of fully 'engaging himself existentially' by way, as it were, of stepping into his own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing himself to the utter contingency of existence.<sup>95</sup>

We are thereby at the very core of Christianity: it is God himself who made a Pascalian wager. By dying on the cross, he made a risky gesture with no guaranteed final outcome; . . . Far from providing the conclusive dot on the 'i', the divine act rather stands for the openness of a New Beginning, and it falls to humanity to live up to it, to decide its meaning, to make something of it.<sup>96</sup>

While any sweeping generalization remains suspect, it stands to reason that many Christians remain committed to some form of divine triumphalism or other, since for them the essence of the "good news" is that God through Jesus Christ has atoned for humanity's sins, which guarantees a happy and just outcome for salvation history.<sup>97</sup> Most (American) mainstream Christians will be hard pressed to let go of the pivotal idea that God will *definitely* right the wrong in the end by way of moral transparency, so that there will be *accountability for all* as well as complete *comfort for all* the victims of history.<sup>98</sup> Recall that even a non-

<sup>94</sup> The *Letter to the Romans*, in particular, is replete with this phrase or variations thereof. Perhaps most representative is the opening of chapter 8: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2) (NIV). Of similar importance is the following passage from chapter 6: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Cf. also: Romans 5:21 and Romans 6:11.

<sup>95</sup> Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 40.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 39–40.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995). Soelle herself, like Žižek, expressly departs from the triumphalist conception of God, but the opening pages of her study survey differing views, many of which hint that triumphalist visions of God are alive and well in many Christians quarters, especially but not only in the United States. Similarly, the progressive liberal Protestant theologian and Jesus scholar Marcus Borg has provided an intriguing alternative to the triumphalist conception of God. Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). Yet, announced by his title and in the Introduction, Borg's commentary on the novelty of his approach rests on the concession that the triumphalist understanding of God still constitutes the backdrop against which any progressive alternative has to be situated. From this angle, Christian triumphalism remains the biggest, though not necessarily the best game in town.

<sup>98</sup> For a theologically sophisticated account of this *topos*, written from a traditional Christian platform, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of*

mainstream or, if you will, “renegade” Christian like Thomas Jefferson thought that without a robust expectation for divine justice in the afterlife, a civil society based on secular moral standards alone would come apart.<sup>99</sup> And from a decidedly more conservative angle, Stanley Hauerwas certainly represents the view of many professed believers apropos the “wounds of history,” when he insisted that God doesn’t forget.<sup>100</sup>

Now, Žižek’s characterization of a suffering God in history does *not* entail that divine justice will not be served or that salvation history will remain unfulfilled. Instead, his preceding considerations concerning the meaning of revelation do imply the terrifying possibility that such salvific victory *may not* occur. On this truly radical reading, the terror in one of Žižek’s favorite Johnny Cash songs, “The Man Comes Around,” obtains a somewhat different sting.<sup>101</sup> In the “Southern Baptist” optics which Žižek attributes to Cash’s musical narrator, fear is fueled by uncertainty concerning our *individual* fate—the scare notion that, for all you know, you may not make it to heaven despite your sincere best efforts. His God is not the kind of affable and predictable deity who is potentially open to bargaining over rewards for presumably good deeds. At the same time, the fulfillment of God’s plan, i.e. the realization of God’s Kingdom, is never in question. The only question is which zone (heaven or hell) you will find yourself in, when “the man comes around.”

By contrast, Žižek’s interpretation of “the terrible risk of revelation” places a question mark over the realization of the Kingdom of God itself. Clearly, Žižek’s suffering God is not the proverbial God of deism, where the Creator withdraws into the distance and leaves creation to its own devices. Never is God a deserter. As we saw, Žižek’s Creator remains painfully engaged to the point of “stepping into his own picture” by entering into the dynamics of history marked and marred by human struggle.<sup>102</sup> As liberation theologians like Rubem Alves and

*Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Independent of McCord Adams’s account, apocalyptic believers are likely to invoke central passages from Scripture, for example: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4) (NIV).

<sup>99</sup> For a snappy summary of Jefferson’s controversial Christianity, see the first chapter titled “Enlightened Sage” in Prothero, *American Jesus*.

<sup>100</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), particularly chapter 9. To be sure, theoretically the claim “God does not forget” does not necessarily imply a full-fledged theodicy. Yet in keeping with my previous remark about moral transparency as joined to final accountability, I assume that the mainstream Christian sensibilities engaged by Hauerwas do posit a rather robust notion of theodicy.

<sup>101</sup> Žižek returns to this song repeatedly, devoting significant space to its analysis. For an earlier treatment of this song, see Žižek’s concluding essay “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence” in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a subsequent treatment, see Žižek, *Parallax View*, 186–87.

<sup>102</sup> In this regard, one can detect interesting parallels between Žižek and W.H. Vanstone, *Love’s Endeavor, Love’s Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977). Vanstone’s little book was well recognized in certain circles in the 1970s but has fallen into undeserved oblivion. In terms of their respective sources, the proximity of Žižek’s and Vanstone’s views is not surprising, since both authors are outspoken about their debt to German Idealism, in general, and to the thought of F.W.J.

Dorothee Soelle have emphasized, one can glean substantial (and perhaps sufficient) comfort from the conviction that God suffers with us, giving meaning and value to our pain by witnessing and even sharing it.<sup>103</sup>

Still, this leaves the community of believers with the fearful possibility that salvation history will remain incomplete, if they don't rise to the challenge, since Christ's death on the cross is the ultimate signal that God has put the ball firmly in their court. By way of revelation, God through Christ has opened up the space for a "New Beginning," but He will not win the battle for us.<sup>104</sup> "There is no guarantee of redemption-through-love: redemption is merely given as possible."<sup>105</sup> And it is this sense of ultimate responsibility signaled by Christ's death that Žižek finds operative in Paul's understanding of *agape* rendered as political love.

#### PAULINE POLITICAL LOVE AND SCANDALOUS SOLIDARITY

To bring Žižek's plea for authentic fundamentalism to bear on Howard's inquiry into the Digital Jesus phenomenon, then, we can say that Žižek's approach to Pauline *agape* as political love focuses on two closely related characteristics. First, in search for the meaning and revelatory power of *agape*, we are returned to the leitmotif of the suffering God sketched in the previous section. Second, Pauline Christian love manifests most decisively in scandalous solidaric action with social outcasts, i.e. ethnic-cultural others deemed unacceptable according to the normative standards or *mores*, which constitute the evaluative horizon of a community's life-world. As Paul puts it with unminced provocation in the First Epistle to the Corinthians: "We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:13) (ESV). In short, Pauline *agape* is fueled by radical egalitarianism culminating or even "exploding" into enactments of unpredictable scandalous solidarity. This is one of the central insights that Žižek takes over from Alain Badiou's *St. Paul* study, other differences regarding their respective interpretations of Paul's importance notwithstanding.<sup>106</sup>

Badiou points to Paul's relentless exposure of "the vanity of places," which he explains in terms of Paul's staunch universalism: "This is the driving force behind Paul's universalist conviction: that 'ethnic' or cultural difference, . . . , is no longer significant."<sup>107</sup> This dictum, in turn, is associated with Paul's famous

Schelling (1775–1854), in particular. In Vanstone's case, his reception of Schelling is informed and mediated by his reading of Paul Tillich.

<sup>103</sup> Rubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1969).

Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>104</sup> Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 39.

<sup>105</sup> Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 39.

<sup>106</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For Žižek's most extensive discussion of Badiou's approach to St. Paul, see Žižek's first essay "Paul and the Truth Event" in John Milbank et al., *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 74–99. For a concise commentary on the overall relation between Badiou's work and Žižek's politico-theological thought, see Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 72.

<sup>107</sup> Badiou, *St. Paul*, 56–57.

pronouncement that “[t]here is no distinction between Jew and Greek” (Rom.10:12). Similarly, this destitution of ethnic differences marks the center of Žižek’s featuring Paul as the hero and militant spokesperson for an unflinching cosmopolitan stance, which requires that we “unplug” from our life-worldly context with all its preferences and prejudices:

And do not Christ’s scandalous words from Saint Luke’s Gospel point in the same direction: ‘If anyone come to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple’ (14:26)? Here, of course, we are *not* dealing with a simple brutal hatred demanded by a cruel and jealous God: family relations stand here metaphorically for the entire socio-symbolic network, for any particular ethnic ‘substance’ that determines our place in the global Order of Things. The ‘hatred’ enjoined by Christ is not, therefore, a kind of pseudo-dialectical opposite of love, but a direct expression of what Saint Paul, in Corinthians I 13, with unsurpassable power, describes as agape, the key intermediary term between faith and hope; it is love itself that enjoins us to ‘unplug’ from the organic community into which we were born—. . .<sup>108</sup>

Such “unplugging,” then, is key for the kind of authentic fundamentalist cosmopolitanism that Žižek endorses, and which he finds vividly present in the faith communities of apocalyptic believers. The latter convert the holy terror associated with Judgment Day into a form of political activism, which invokes the name of Jesus as a disruptive power that tears apart the fabric of their life-world and makes them free for scandalous solidarity. Badiou makes the same point, when he writes: “For Paul . . . , Christ is *a coming* [*une venue*]; he is what interrupts the previous regime of discourses. Christ is, in himself and for himself, *what happens to us.*”<sup>109</sup> But how do the preceding remarks about the signature traits of political love jive with Howard’s moral apprehension of vernacular Christian fundamentalism’s potential harms? Can Žižek’s authentic fundamentalist answer Howard’s call for communicational responsibility in our era, where online religion has become a force that cannot be ignored?

#### EXTENDING KANT: RUTHLESS COSMOPOLITANISM AND “PITLESS SELF-CENSORSHIP”

In terms of scandalous solidarity, the examination of Žižek’s promotion of Paul as the prototypical evangelizer and advocate of *agape* led up to the claim that people’s “becoming in Christ” requires tangible participation in current events (e.g. an ongoing political struggle). This conception entails a specific understanding of Christian ethics, at a clear distance from *meritocratic* reasoning, in general, and afterlife ethics, in particular. At this last critical juncture, Kant’s thought assumes its full relevance for Žižek’s approach to apocalyptic thought and its political ramifications. In this regard, Žižek offers some of his most poignant remarks in the little volume *On Belief* where he underscores Kant’s role as follows:

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<sup>108</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 120–21.

<sup>109</sup> Badiou, *St. Paul*, 48.

[A]fter his [Christ's] death, there is no place for any God of Beyond: all that remains is the Holy Spirit, the community of believers onto which the unfathomable aura of Christ passes once it is deprived of its bodily incarnation . . . This reading has radical consequences for the notion of an afterlife. . . . As it was already noted by, among others, Kant, such a notion of Christianity which involves the just payment for our deeds reduces it to just another religion of moral accountancy, of the just reward or punishment for our deeds. If one conceives of the Holy Spirit in the consequent way, there is simply NO PLACE [sic] in the Christian edifice for an afterlife.<sup>110</sup>

Here Žižek's discarding of the afterlife, in my judgment, is *not* issuing a negative prophecy or "dysprophecy" to the effect that the dead will definitely not be raised. Rather, he proposes an altogether different *catechetic paradigm* for prophetic discourse, where catechesis flexibly refers to instructions for *spiritual discipline*. In the present case, Žižek's Kant-inspired catechetic advice for politically charged enactments of Pauline *agape* amounts to this: The more we focus on the future dimension of personal salvation, the less likely we are to actually help realize the kind of "new creation" that Paul was talking about in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and in Galatians 6:15.<sup>111</sup> We must not think of salvation as a "prize" for sacred-law-abiding behavior. As Paul repeated over and over: love exceeds the law, even as it fulfills it.<sup>112</sup>

Žižek pushes this principle to the extreme when he implies that the best spiritual technique (the key principle of our Pauline Protestant catechism, so to speak) for avoiding meritocratic distractions is to block out the future dimension of salvation history altogether. The authentic Christian fundamentalist should enact *agape* according to general Scriptural guidelines for scandalous solidarity<sup>113</sup> without calculating how this will count in their favor, once all the salvific chips are down. Thus, to repeat, Žižek is *not* committed to the dysprophetic claim that Armageddon will not happen in the future. Rather, he is making the catechetic claim that the futural dimension of Armageddon must be extirpated from our eschatological vision without residue, if we are to become uncompromising practitioners of political love, in the spirit of Christ as the divine disrupter of the

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<sup>110</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 91. For a very similar observation about Kant, see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 65–72. The crucial passage reads: "A morally transparent world would preclude the possibility of morality. . . . Not knowing whether our good intentions will be rewarded is essential to our having them. If we knew the world was the world we long for, human nature would change beyond recognition. Kant thinks our behavior would improve. Who would dare commit a crime if he were certain that the cosmic order actually worked? Some version of eternal damnation would suffice to deter almost anyone from almost anything. *But good behavior is not the same as moral behavior*, and the struggle to achieve the latter, which makes up human decency, would simply disappear. Like puppets pulled by a master, we would do nothing but move for carrots and sticks" (Neiman, *Evil*, 68, emphasis added).

<sup>111</sup> Cf. also Paul's remarks on "the new man" in Ephesians 4:24.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Romans 13:8; and Galatians 5:14.

<sup>113</sup> Among the most well known passages is Matthew 25:40.

present.<sup>114</sup> Differently put, Žižek doesn't have to rule out the apocalypse as a "future fact." Rather, his point is that Judgment Day may well occur but, as a matter of spiritual discipline, one must never *think* of it in futural terms. Instead one has to perform *agape* in the present by way of scandalous solidarity.

On my interpretation, this kind of catechetic self-discipline is precisely what Žižek has in mind, when he endorses Badiou's notion of "pitiless self-censorship."<sup>115</sup> The point is that we must not allow ourselves to be lured by the spiritual comfort afforded by "moral accountancy." According to Žižek, reading St. Paul's *Epistles* through the prism of Kant's theological writings points us to a very different kind of Christian eschatology whose ethical-political message consists in a call for *ruthless cosmopolitanism*.<sup>116</sup> The latter is not at all reducible to the kind of formalist moral algorithm that many critics of Kant have gleaned from his *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, next to his controversial essay "On the Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns."<sup>117</sup> On the contrary, the joint reading of St. Paul and Kant exactly emphasizes the need for the Holy Spirit to manifest itself in concrete struggle for solidarity. Since, for Žižek, God is neither a moral meritocrat nor a

<sup>114</sup> Stated in more general (i.e. not specifically Pauline) terms, Robert C. Solomon draws Bernard Williams to his side, when he puts his finger on the paradoxical relation between seeking and achieving salvation: "This is a familiar paradox in discussions of the virtues: We trust without regard for our long-term advantage in order to gain a long-term advantage. A person is generous because she is so moved by the plight of another, or because she feels an obligation to help out. But if she thinks too much (this is what philosopher Bernard Williams calls 'one thought too many') about how this will enhance her reputation or how this will make the recipient grateful and indebted, then it is no longer generosity. This paradox has wreaked special havoc in the realm of religion. On the one hand, believers are told to have faith in God in order to reap the benefits of salvation and, sometimes, other more worldly advantages as well. But if one has faith in God just *in order to* reap the benefits, that is considered something less than faith. On the other hand, it is perhaps asking too much to require believers to have faith without the promise of such benefits" (Robert C. Solomon, *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52).

<sup>115</sup> Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard, *The Neighbor*, 134–35, 142, 145.

<sup>116</sup> Here my findings with respect to Žižek's ruthless cosmopolitanism tie in with Rey Chow's astute commentary on Žižek's "ruthless" universalism. See the third chapter in Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory–Culture–Ethnicity–Reading* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998). The pivotal passage reads: "This fearlessness vis-à-vis speaking 'the universal'—a fearlessness that is firmly grounded in an understanding of the dangers of essentialism and metalanguage—is one of the most crucial traits in both Spivak's and Žižek's ethics. Both are, in the sense described by Marx, "ruthless" (*Ethics after Idealism*, 41). For some select passages where Žižek's recent use of the expression "ruthless" goes to confirm Chow's account, see Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard *The Neighbor*, 157; and Žižek *Violence*, 116, 139.

<sup>117</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002). Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* with *On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. James Ellington, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). For details concerning this familiar but questionable charge, see Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99; and the subsection *Two Hegelian Objections* in Christine Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1–2 (1985): 24–47. For the persistent controversy surrounding Kant's essay "On the Supposed Right to Lie ...," see Neiman, *Evil*, 73.

spiritual legalist, Christianity does not offer a “safe bet” or “safe place” to the believer, in terms of an afterlife narrative or otherwise.

The flipside of the same coin is that, for Žižek, one cannot be a “Christian in general,” since living-in-Christ is a process driven by the recurrent challenge to realize one’s Christian stance through the outrageous alliance with outcasts. Insisting on this essential link between *becoming* Christian and tangible actions of solidarity has important consequences for the critical assessment of Christian self-representations. In this regard, the political lesson that comes out of Žižek’s re-envisioned Christian ethics, via St. Paul and Kant, emerges as thoroughly compatible with Cornel West’s recent plea for radical solidarity across all life-worldly ethnic barriers. Arguing from a platform of unabashed Christianity, West captures Žižek’s politico-theological sentiment well when he states: “OK, you don’t have a cognitive commitment to God. Fine. I see you still love justice.”<sup>118</sup> And West goes even further by saying:

I’m in solidarity with Churchill. That’s a rare thing for me. He’s fighting fascism. He believes black people are subhuman, supports colonialism in India and Africa, but he’s fighting Hitler. I’m in his army, because I’m fighting Hitler, too. I just got some other white-supremacist matters to attend to once the war is over.<sup>119</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In terms of vernacular Christian fundamentalist discourse Žižek thinks that forums, which allow us to “unplug” from the accustomed dictates of partisanship, have the salutary potential to steer us away from forms of pseudo-inclusivism that remain vulnerable to techniques of rhetorical disavowal à la William Bennett. At the same time such authentic fundamentalism can move us toward genuine inclusivism—for the greater good—articulated by Cornel West’s self-consciously scandalous declaration of solidarity with an advocate of colonialist-racist politics.

With an eye on the rapid permutations of the Digital Jesus phenomenon, Žižek’s train of thought critically shows that none of vernacular fundamentalism’s four core beliefs, as featured in Howard’s discussion, separately or jointly establish any direct link to immoral faith practice. What is more, in a complex effort to harness the positive political resources of authentic fundamentalism, Žižek can be read to suggest that Christians add a fifth core belief to Howard’s list, namely, the catechetical principle that properly Pauline apocalypticism is performed best, if people’s concerns for their own future salvation are completely banned from their eschatological outlook. As far as I can tell, there is nothing in Howard’s case study that indicates any incompatibility of his four core beliefs with Žižek’s catechetical tenet.

In fact, *pace* Howard, Christianity practiced responsibly may need even more censorship than is already witnessed by contemporary online religion, namely,

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<sup>118</sup> Cornel West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in Butler *et al.*, *Power of Religion*, 96.

<sup>119</sup> “Dialogue: Judith Butler and Cornel West,” in Butler *et al.*, *Power of Religion*, 108.

more self-censorship. For this is where Žižek draws the line between “good” and “bad” Christian fundamentalism: Bad fundamentalists will insist on reading the Biblical Armageddon motif as a mantra for moral meritocracy and spiritual legalism, whereas good fundamentalists will insist on keeping religion terrifyingly “unsafe” but all the more solidaric, thus paying homage to the scandal of Christ.

The preceding comparison of Howard and Žižek as my “odd couple” of choice shows the creative potential of such mashup work for generating new impulses within the broader compass of contemporary philosophy of religion. The aim is to break up preconceived notions about supposed compatibles and incompatibles. As a case in point, co-engaging Howard and Žižek suggests that self-imposed discursive insularity and responsible faith practice are not necessarily incompatible, if they are framed by certain catechetical principles of non-triumphalism. By the same token, the emerging notion of “good” vernacular fundamentalism signaled that attachment to particular dogmatic contents (like the end times) does not *ipso facto* put the believer on a slippery slope heading down toward pernicious exclusivism. Be it in the context of online communication or elsewhere, mashup philosophy of religion issues a creative challenge to revise our critical vocabularies and further explore our moral taste buds (in Haidt’s sense) underway to a religious literacy fit for negotiating the many tensions between our evolving political sensibilities and faith commitments.

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