

Economies of Promise: On Caesar and Christ

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To breed an animal *which is able to make promises* – is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind?

is it not the real problem *of* humankind? ...

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 38)¹

1. The insistence of the theologico-political.

Our era is one of the resurgence of religion: one of the most significant and enduring transformations of the twentieth century has been the rapid growth of religion – specifically Pentecostalism, Roman Catholicism, indigenous Christianities, and Sunni Islam – throughout the Two Thirds World.² This great transformation has perhaps more lasting significance than the rise of fascism and communism to replace an earlier era of globalisation based on a combination of liberal market economy³ and empire.⁴ Yet the passing of the century has also been characterised by a fresh engagement with religion by some of the most radical, critical and secular of European philosophers: one thinks primarily of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Michel Henry, François Laruelle, and perhaps even Antonio Negri.⁵ While this emergence of a ‘religion without religion’⁶ may seem surprising for those educated into a secular culture for whom traditional religious faith amounts to self-deception, superstition and servitude, such an interest in and attraction to religion follows in a long line of modern philosophers from Pascal and Descartes, through Kant, Schelling and Hegel,

to Bergson, Heidegger and Jaspers. Indeed, what may require explaining is less the 'return of the religious' in critical thought so much as our very element of surprise itself: the assumption of a secular modernity, against much evidence, that it is due to replace earlier religious forms of life throughout the globe.⁷

A secular age maintains its confidence in its superiority on the basis of the achievements of the free and relevant application of reason: one may consider the benefits of progress measured by mortality and literacy rates; the advance of medicine against formerly invincible diseases; the rise in wealth and levels of consumption; the success of science in explaining and predicting events; the management of a productive economy through state-regulated capitalism; the replacement of warfare by diplomacy and negotiation; and the replacement of custom by rational planning. Our age has become secular insofar as politics has become the art of management of all these benefits,⁸ where the guiding criteria are their augmentation alone, apart from religious faith. Secular thought focuses on the real world. Modern philosophy has paved the way for such a secular age by constructing itself out of a rational critique of a religious faith that had formed the basis for morals, customs and practices. For a defining characteristic of a secular age is self-determination, autonomy, or the capacity to regulate our lives by our own promises: this is manifest in the progressive restructuring of all aspects of life, from the landscape, through technology, to forms of employment, the arts, social relations, sexual practices, therapies, and even genetic codes. Human freedom, necessary for self-determination, finds its liberation and perpetual renewal in freedom of thought.

Religious thought, constructed so often as an agent of preservation of a culture and way of life, may have little to offer to pragmatic problems of reconstruction and self-determination. Christianity may have meaning within the self-enclosed frames of reference of provided by Neoplatonic or Aristotelian metaphysics or the narratives of scriptures. In relation to contemporary politics it experiences a crisis of relevance.⁹ For even if, according to Carl Schmitt, political concepts are merely secularised theological concepts,¹⁰ then one response is to regard political theology as thus a part of political thought, and not a part of theology.¹¹ Nevertheless, we do indeed see the emergence of a whole spectrum of political theologies, from conservative Catholicism, through liberation theologies, political Islam, to engaged Buddhism. Religions have sought to reconstruct their own meaning and relevance within the field of the political. Here they encounter strange allies: in a thoroughly secular age, our late modern philosophers have applied the force of radical critique to modern reason itself, exposing its irrationalities, oversights, and ongoing pieties.¹² The element of surprise arises when such critical thinkers turn to the resources of religion to aid in the critique of modern reason. While philosophers mine the religious for its conceptual resources and its collective heritage, political theologians borrow from critical philosophy the tools to question the autonomy of our secular age. We have here the latest stage in an enduring phenomenon: philosophers have recourse to religion in order to do philosophy, while theologians turn to philosophy in order to make theology credible.

Now, instead of mapping existing formulations of the theologico-political from either philosophy or theology, I propose to elaborate a distinctive approach by sketching a genealogy of the secular: not a full historical explanation, but one that treats problems of memory and promise as decisive.¹³ In the first place, the return of

the religious in critical thought is a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon symptomatic of the encroaching end of secular modernity. For the modern global project of self-determination faces insuperable external limits in the form of the finitude of energy supplies, fresh water, fertile soils, minerals, forests, and pollution sinks. Where economic growth is exponential, ecological cycles have finite ranges of stability. In the twenty first century the limits of human self-determination are encountered in the looming catastrophes of abrupt climate change and peak oil. In addition to such external limits, however, the history of financial crises, of which the global credit crunch is merely one in a long series, witnesses to the impotence of human beings to control even their own economic behaviour. There is no rational or natural reason why opportunities for growth should be more limited in 2009 than in 2007; there is merely a problem of confidence or credit. To the extent that modern politics concerns itself solely with human self-determination, then its blindness to obvious external and internal limits is something of a 'log in its own eye' (Matt. 7.3), and it becomes a matter of the blind leading the blind. The religious may be invoked as a critical voice that appeals beyond self-determination.

In the second place, there is also the question of the enduring religious heritage of modern secular thought. It has frequently been noted that secularisation has been the result of an internal dynamic and dialectic within the Christian faith.¹⁴ The full explanation of the origins of our secular age provided by Charles Taylor gives a prominent role to the Reformation in removing the sacred from the broad experience of life, and confining it to scripture, preaching and individual conscience.¹⁵ Only subsequently can the rest of life become subject to human rational self-determination. Where, for the Greeks, the *logos* became thinkable by being projected

onto the order of the cosmos,¹⁶ so that the aim of reason was to live life in accordance with nature, for the Reformers the divine *logos* was encountered in the text of scripture itself, and the aim of religion was to live life in accordance with the will of God. It is important to note the significance, here, of the means for recording, memory and repetition. For the Greeks, the movement of the heavens exhibited the regularity of nature, of the reason underlying the universe. The sacred was present in the cosmos. For the Reformers, the printing press enabled the repetition, recording and distribution of scripture: the sacred is present solely in word and thought. Modern reason has combined both means of recording: the powers of printing, enabling a science that can be recorded, distributed, repeated and tested, with the regularity of nature, as the object of enquiry and modification. In addition to the technologies of recording and memory, however, the subsequent stage is to use such a *logos* as a basis for self-determination. The power of self-determination first emerged in the West as an individual virtue among those philosophers who sought to live life in accordance with reason.¹⁷ It was preserved and developed in the Christian monastic tradition. Freedom of thought and rational critique began with philosophy as a spiritual exercise,¹⁸ before becoming a collective political engagement.¹⁹ It may therefore be possible to view modern self-determination as a collective ascetic practice – one no longer driven by the Stoic goal of self-mastery or the attempt to live according to nature,²⁰ but driven by the collective goal of the production of wealth. One may thus observe how our secular age is heir to the religious. Self-determination requires certain preconditions: the rituals and technologies that allow us to record, repeat and remember, the spiritual practices through which life is perpetually reconstructed, and the collective goals of human endeavour – each of these were formerly developed in religious life. Each of these requires a certain kind of cultural

expression, whether in a specific medium such as writing, or in an actual life and character, or in a pure idea. What has contemporary relevance, here, is not religious origins but the enduring force of cultural expression.²¹

It is therefore necessary to situate the work of self-determination through reason within a wider context of modes of cultural memory.²² Self-determination requires that a meaning must first be condensed into a symbol, sign or medium. The external material, here, has a dual function: if it is first an expression of a preserved meaning, it must then become a criterion that gives shape and form to subsequent conduct. One thinks in and through and with this material of expression. At the most material level, the genetic code records the phenotype of a successful life-form, while providing the means by which it may be reproduced. At the cultural level, bodily markings, speech, religious rituals, chants and astronomical movements may all function as forms of what we might call 'writing'. Nevertheless, while writing may organise life, and grammar may organise writing, the advent of the written word has made possible the sedimentation of a 'writing within writing', a mode of ordering the consistent determination of written signs as concepts. Metaphysics, the order of being, is a 'writing within writing', enabling philosophical reason as the ordering of life in line with the idea. Parmenides' Being, Plato's Idea, Plotinus' One, and the Christian God became fundamental organising categories of experience insofar as they duplicated both the recording of life in metaphysics and the ultimate criterion according to which what is real can be judged.²³ Moreover, even if modern thought has become oblivious to its grounding in metaphysics as objective philosophical presupposition, this does not mean that its grounding is any less firm: subjective presuppositions, embedded in assumptions about what it means to think and know,²⁴

become inscribed within cultural institutions such as the university and in the literary form of the scientific paper. Our 'writing within writing' is embedded in genres and practices, as well as in concepts and practices of truth: it is what we call 'reason'.

The history of reason may therefore be situated within a broader history of cultural memory. There is no reason to privilege reason as such, nor even the written word itself, as the sole vehicles of cultural self-determination. For some, the new predominance of the moving image, of popular music, and of the digital media age seals the fate of a modernity where critical reason was founded on the printing press.²⁵ Critical thought, as found in the pamphlet or treatise, gives way to subjective opinion expressed in the blog. In popular culture, a market-place ruled by subjective gratification takes precedence over the tribunals of critical reason, while the university as an institution is transformed into a multinational corporation. Nevertheless, in addition to the external failures and limits to reason, it is also necessary to observe its internal limits: reason struggles to provide a full, final and definitive account of itself. If the structural revolution disclosed the varied structural forms such as myth that acted as precursors to writing, and thus to reason itself, then the poststructuralist philosophers have pushed reason towards its own autocritique, identifying moments of blockage, aporia, decision or encounter that are beyond reason, or without reason.²⁶ Concepts of difference, the other, the sublime, the event, and the flesh are well known examples. It is hardly surprising that such a dimension, exterior to reason's self-description, should evoke pre-rational forms of cultural memory, even without direct appeals to negative theology or an enduring god of the gaps. For what is at stake here is the difference between reason as a complete system, capable of giving a full account of itself, and that which exceeds reason while being presupposed by it. The

task of critical thought is to raise reason to an encounter with its other. Then the significance of our phenomena may be explained by an engagement with the other determinant writing of modernity, apart from reason.

2. The promise of money.

When Nietzsche raised the problem of humankind as that of forming animal who makes promises, he was concerned primarily with the sovereign individual.²⁷ Forms of cruelty and punishment were devised, on his account, for the purpose of enforcing a memory,²⁸ as if a form of writing upon the soul. Only by reminding oneself of one's promises can one consistently determine oneself and enact one's will. Yet there remains something of an incongruence between promise and memory: where memory records what has been, a promise records what will have been. Where a memory is grounded in the facts, a promise may be grounded in a free invention. Where a memory has simply to be recollected, a promise has to be believed. The human being is the animal who discerns the difference between what is and what may be: it has the capacity to believe promises. If Nietzsche relates punishment back to the primary phenomena of credit and debt, or the ability to keep one's word,²⁹ the capacity to make promises is itself dependent on the belief that counterparties will keep their own promises. It is one thing to record a promise, in memory or in writing; it is quite another to record the credibility attached to a promise. Here we reach the fundamental insufficiency of an immanent system of reason: where reason is linked to recollection, or looking backwards, life, as Kierkegaard remarked, must be lived forwards. Indeed, the problem of living and thinking forwards in time is the essential

problem that exposes the insufficiency of pure reason, as has been shown by Schelling, Bergson and Heidegger. Where a proposition projects an enduring relation into the timeless space of true facts, a promise projects an enduring relation through time.

The persistence of the religious in forms of cultural memory marks the enduring need to preserve and transmit credibility. Trust in promises is the basis of human cooperation and civilisation. To breed an animal that is capable of trusting promises – this is the task that nature has set herself with regard to humankind, and this is where nature employs the services of religion. If human civilization began with the distribution of food, then the rituals of animal sacrifice, including offering to the gods and distribution among the members of the group, were means of ensuring continuity of memory, membership and entitlement. A sacred economy is one of allocation, where the gods apportion shares and fates.³⁰ Piety is the basis for promise. To be a member of a group is to be promised an allocated share. The problem posed by human civilization is not that of a primal herd, from which Nietzsche drew so many inferences, but that of the basis for allocation of resources, cooperation, the division of labour, and the measuring of contracts and agreements. Humans are hunter-gatherers, not grazers.

One may distinguish fundamentally different social phenomena: the religio-economic trust in promised allocations differs from the sovereign political power that extracts tribute before deciding privileged allocations. It is the difference between believing promises and making promises. It is the difference *pietas* and *ratio*, between faith and reason. Each has different modes of cultural memory or ‘writing’.

Perishable offerings to the gods, as a means of recording piety, could be replaced by votive offerings, usually of metal sacrificial tools and vessels, to be stored permanently in temples. Here we find some of the earliest examples of writing as dedicatory inscriptions, where public display and the perpetuation of memory were the explicit goal.³¹ The power of gods was demonstrated by the wealth of the treasures devoted to their temples. At the same time, the allocations made by sovereign powers were recorded in decrees, covenants and laws, while the authority or credibility of such powers could be inscribed by the royal seal. The theological and the political are reunited when the sovereign himself becomes an object of trust, and power is expressed less through the memnotechnics of cruelty and military conquest, and more through tribute and patronage. Nevertheless, it is one thing to have this unity embodied in the institution of monarchy, and in its customs and practices; it is quite another for this unity to be achieved in an actual technology of writing. A pivotal stage in the evolution of forms of cultural memory occurred when these separate functions were merged: when the metal of the temple treasury was minted with a royal seal.³² The invention of stamped coinage by the Lydian tyrants of the 6th century BCE solved the problem of recording and allocating credibility. Money embodies a theological-political unity: it records both trust and sovereign freedom. For the insistence, centrality, and, indeed dominance of the theologico-political in the contemporary world we need search no further than money.

Money itself is a promise. Whether money appears as stamped coinage, as paper currency recording value, as an accounting record or as an electronic bank record, its promise consists in its acceptability by an issuing authority.³³ Money is acceptable in our banks because it is the unit they use to record credits and debits.

Just as food distribution could be centralised by animal sacrifice or tithes of grain to temples, so also can the power to make promises be centralised in the authority that issues money. In the contemporary global economy, the money base of notes and coins in circulation is expanded many times over by the capacity of banks to lend in excess of reserves; yet even the notes and coins themselves are mere promises of value. Every monetary transaction, therefore, consists in a flow of promises – both promises made by central issuing authorities and promises made by those who take out loans, and whose promises themselves then bear the promise of value.

Our modern world is built upon promises. It was not built upon the rational power of self-determination alone. Markings on coins, paper currency, account books, bank statements, credit ratings, performance indicators and price charts have been essential because they record temporal expectations and promises. Human civilization has been constructed on the basis of faith in promises, that is, in terms of powers that are not demonstrable and cannot be subjected to reason. Whether these powers take the form of ancestors, spirits, fates, gods, providence, human authorities, sovereign powers, or even the national debt, human conduct is made predictable when it can rely on the blessings of unseen powers. And human conduct itself becomes worthy of trust when it can become predictable.

The modern world is no exception. The basis for all our cooperation, our contracts and exchanges, is faith in the value of money: money will be acceptable in exchange by others because it is acceptable in exchange by some issuing authority. Money is the mode of writing through which we promise value. Where the meaning of being is central to all rational metaphysical systems as well as to subjective

presuppositions, habits and institutions that guide reason, the value of money is central to all economic transactions as well as to all contracts and agreements. The single principle that unites the conduct and cooperation of the contemporary globalised world is the creation of wealth. While there may be little agreement, and perhaps even less reflection on what constitutes the good life, or the true nature of wealth, there is at least agreement on how wealth should be counted. Economic growth is regarded as the promise of wealth. The price of any good, service, or asset is determined by expectations about what others may be willing to pay for it in future or distant markets. A representation of value, price, takes precedence over value itself. Evaluation is performed from the perspective of the other. It is such a formal structuring of evaluation through money that constitutes the basis for our economic cooperation. Economic growth is counted in terms of an increase in monetary transactions. Yet the value of assets is their exchange value or promise of money, and the value of money is its effective purchasing power: each of these is a promise of wealth.

There is, as we now know all too well, a significant difference between the rational order of studied by economics and the chaotic realities of financial markets. The failure of economic predictions is explained by the difference between reason and promise. While the tendency in economic thought is to reduce economic transactions to the paradigm of barter exchange in a village market,³⁴ composed of a series of instantaneous swaps or exchanges that are settled by the end of the market day, more prominent in real economic life are enduring contractual obligations where payments are made over time. Rents, wages, interest, and taxes are ongoing temporal payments that have to be paid in the form of money. Economic life is not simply the production

and consumption of wealth, for it is driven by the creation, acquisition and spending of money. Money is far more than a ‘wheel of circulation’³⁵: we work for promises and we spend promises. As Schumpeter noted, the entrepreneur is typically a debtor.³⁶ New money is required for investment before there can be a growth in production, so there is always more debt in the system than fresh value produced. When banks issue credit into an account, that credit consists in a promise by the individual or corporation to acquire money to repay the loan as well as a promise by the bank to pay the amount credited when it is transferred to others. Moreover, when the debtor eventually repays the loan with interest, the debt is cancelled, withdrawing the money – hence the system is dependent on others elsewhere taking out further debts to maintain economic growth. In short, the economy of credit capitalism is an extraordinary pyramid scheme, always dependent on an increase in debt to fuel growth.³⁷ In periods of growth, such a debt-based economy can appear to increase indefinitely in a virtuous circle. In periods of decline, such a debt-based economy can contract indefinitely until sufficient confidence is present to induce fresh debts and promises that restart the cycle of growth. For without debt there is no increase in effective demand. Moreover, if the global economy is bounded by ecological finitude, then there will come a point where global economic collapse is terminal for most of the economy, apart from a parasitic remainder that feeds off the destruction.

Since the founding of the Bank of England in 1694, leading to the emergence of a stable economy based on debt-money, the nascent global economy has been enslaved to a cycle of perpetual growth driven by debt. Money, in such an economy, takes on a theologico-political significance.³⁸ First, since money is both the measure of prices and the means of payment, it becomes effective demand, the means for the

realisation of all other values. Whatever is valued in principle, the acquisition of money, or simply preserving the health of a fragile economic system, must come first. Hence one can compare the resources directed towards resolving the credit crisis with the resources directed towards averting the far more serious problem of abrupt climate change. Money becomes the supreme value, since it is that which must be sought first, so that all other values may be obtained. It gives value to all other values.

Second, since money is merely a promise, the value of money is nowhere evident. Its value is transcendent, taken on faith; money is a sign of a value that is never seen.

Third, money measures the prices of assets, and the value of assets are based on speculative projections about their future value. Even when the value of assets crashes, the new value is no more real than the old since it depends on new expectations about the future. Value is composed essentially of speculative projections about the future, faith in the promise of what is to come.

Fourth, if money is created as a debt, then it includes an obligation to expand economic activity to repay the debt. Where common sense tells us that the goal of modern political life is the creation of wealth to improve standards of living, experience tells us that the goal of modern economic life is making profits. It is not a question of greed. All of us are dependent on individuals, corporations and governments who are in debt, and there is a universal obligation to repay debts, and take out more debts, in order to prevent our fragile financial system from collapsing any further. The obligations of debt are the ultimate political obligations.

It is worth pausing to explore the theologico-political significance of this momentous occurrence in human history. Money has displaced religion as the

measure of the value of values. Where religion decrees absolute values, money measures all values in terms of a potential rate of profit, and thus in terms of a production of more money. Money substitutes itself for all evaluation, producing a perspective of evaluation used by all in accounting, but which belongs to no one. The highest values are devalued.

Moreover, in place of the promises made by the gods, money is composed of promises made by people. This is the fundamental gesture of secularisation. Where science gives an ordered account of nature as an immanent ordered system, and where philosophy has sought an account for all things in an immanent system of reason, economics constructs an immanent system in the autonomous workings of the free market. Although the free market is an ideological construct that barely exists in practice, having to be propagated and maintained by state intervention,³⁹ its ideal is trust in the sovereignty of human promises. The promises upon which we base our existence are the promises of others, and no longer hopes for blessing by the gods. One consequence is the liberation of those with wealth from mutual obligations in society. Wealth brings power to make one's desires effective, as well as freedom to choose which desires to exercise. Yet, in reciprocal relations of trade, goods and services are always provided by others. The one with wealth to spend has the power to command the promises of others. Where most people conform their work to the desires of others in order to obtain money, the power of complete self-determination belongs to those with wealth alone. The secular ideal of individual freedom is an ideal facilitated by money. Nevertheless, the freedom conferred by wealth remains an ideological illusion since it is dependent on others to produce and maintain it.⁴⁰

Money easily replaces God as the supreme value, the source of all values, the object

of trust, and the source of universal obligation. Where God offers himself as grace, money offers itself as a loan; where God offers a spiritual reward, money offers a tangible reward; where God requires repentance and true belief, money may be accepted by all who trust its acceptance by others; where God requires conversion of the soul, money lends itself to effecting the heart's deepest desires. While such tangible benefits have led to an extraordinary creation of wealth, when credit falls into crisis, then a civilization based upon money is a house built upon sand.

It is important to analyse the spiritual power of money and observe how it operates on the human soul. While the way in which one spends money expresses and records one's desires, as if a mere tool of self-determination, its temporal nature as a promise conditions and shapes human thought and desire. While possessions are what one already has, and work is what one does, value measured by money is what one is promised. While obtaining money may depend on oneself, as does the way one spends money, the value of money – the fulfilment of its promise – does not. One can only wait and see. The promise of money evokes the passive experience of waiting. It places one in the position of a helpless infant whose cries for attention are embodied in money: for those with money to spend, society itself fulfils the maternal function by providing for one's needs for those with money to spend, yet society becomes an absent or withdrawn parent for those without.⁴¹ The promise offered by money concerns each person intimately: it is hard to remain indifferent to the fulfilment of one's deepest desires. Indeed, the possibilities afforded by money evoke the imagination. For money can only be spent, given or invested. In regard to spending, money evokes the question, 'What do I desire?' In regard to giving, money evokes the question, 'Where are my sympathies?' In regard to investment, money

evokes the question, 'How can I ensure secure growth?' The experience of waiting, while the value of money remains to be realised, focuses attention on pleasures, sympathies and anxieties. An individual self is called into being which consists in imagination and desire.

Thus, on the one hand, money is that which gives mastery, and has the power of making demands effective. On the other hand, money is that which places one in a position of helpless expectation. On the one hand, money is the condition for entrepreneurial innovation, enabling true activity; on the other hand, money works on one's behalf in and through the labour of others. On the one hand, debt is freely created through entering a contract; on the other hand, credit is offered as an advance or opportunity, existing independently of whether the offer is accepted. The power of money, therefore, while it appears to be entirely subject to the human will, is that which calls into being the human will. It emerges from the imagination to become an obligation. Its power consists in a promise of a vision of prosperity combined with the threat of exclusion from a share in society for those without wealth. The one who believes money can do anything for them is the one who may be suspected of doing anything for money.⁴² In imagination, money promises all things; in reality, money delivers itself. The promise of money counts as money, and money itself is the promise of money. If money promises all things, this is only because all things can be exchanged for money.⁴³ Money is an evaluative perspective through which all reality may be seen; as a promise, this perspective imposes itself upon the world. We have a religious name for the structure of such a promise that imposes itself in the present at the same time as it announces a future that is radically other than our present: it is the 'messianic'.⁴⁴

It is credit-based capitalism itself that exhibits a messianic structure. Since the promise of money and its kingdom of prosperity may satisfy any desire, it includes all desires. It is a messianism without intrinsic content, a pure messianicity without a messiah. It is the obverse yet necessary supplement to modern reason, a time of waiting in which the order of the world is suspended yet reconstructed apart from human self-determination. Yet since it is a pure structure of credibility without content, where credibility is built on credibility to compose a universal faith, it fails to address the fundamental problem of human civilization: on what conditions can a promise prove to be credible?

3. The Messianic

The promise of money attempts to solve the theologico-political synthesis by offering everyone the imaginary prospect of becoming Caesar. Those who participate in a money economy render under Caesar the things which are Caesar's. What possibilities are there for an alternative theologico-political synthesis? For this, it may be fruitful to observe a promise that has a rather different economy. A messianism with a messiah may be found in a radical Christian understanding of the messianic, as recorded in the teachings attached to the names of Paul and Jesus.

Paul's proclamation of the messiah, which ostensibly gives so little emphasis to the actual person of Jesus, may help to disclose the logic of the messianic at stake here. Paul ended his account of his gospel to the Romans with the following messianic promise, an ostensible quotation from Isaiah: 'The root of Jesse shall come,

the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’⁴⁵ One is immediately struck by the scandalous inversion: Paul addresses Rome, the seat of Caesar, the Gentile ruler over Jews, and announces a Jewish ruler over the Gentiles. This summative quotation confirms a reading of the opening of the epistle as a heraldic announcement of Jesus as a new ruler, the Christ or messiah, and the call of the Gentiles to loyalty or the ‘obedience of faith’.⁴⁶ Yet if Paul’s messiah differs from both the Isaianic prophecy and a benign Caesar, since no direct conquest of Caesar is expected, this is because the rule of God differs from the rule of Caesar: the shoot from the stump of Jesse has a different character to David, his ancestor ‘according to the flesh’, because he is declared ‘according to the spirit’ to be ‘son of God’. (Rom. 1.3-4) ‘Son of God’ means that the roots of Paul’s messiah are believed to be found in God. When one poses the question of the roots or essence of a phenomenon, such an inquiry may be either *historical*, locating the essence at the origins, *conceptual*, locating the essence in logically required presuppositions, *physical*, locating the essence in causal process, *political*, locating the essence in determining powers, or *theological*, locating the essence in a spiritual or divine significance. For Paul, the essence of the messiah is primarily theological, and that essence is fully revealed only at the end. So if Jesus is declared the messiah by his resurrection as the firstborn from the dead, Paul still awaits the revelation of the power or essence of the messiah in glory. At the coming of the messiah, those who belong to the messiah are raised from the dead, and then comes the end, when the messiah hands the kingdom over to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and every power. (1 Cor. 15.24) Paul’s messiah remains inescapably political: as in the prophecy from Isaiah, he does destroy all other rulers. Yet Paul’s messiah is inescapably theological, since all things are eventually subjected to God, so that God may be all in all – that is,

all is judged theologically. Jesus, the messiah, announces and initiates the eschatological rule of God.

I wish to draw out a few radical characteristics of a Christian messianism from this somewhat commonplace piece of New Testament theology. First, if true judgement comes at the end, and since it is grounded in the spirit rather than the flesh, in the new creation rather than the old, and in the resurrection rather than in this mortal life, then it stands in radical discontinuity with the present order of things. True Christian messianism must be radical; its essence cannot be divined from prophecy, from reason, or existing political institutions – it is neither Hebrew, Greek, nor Roman. Like the resurrection, it cannot be investigated by established historical hermeneutics.⁴⁷ It does not appeal to the perspectives of others, but to an as yet unknown divine perspective. Second, Paul emphasised that his Christians walk by faith and not by sight, live by hope and not by power, and order their lives by love and not by law. Promise takes precedence over reason. Divine judgement and discontinuity with the present order is experienced throughout the fabric of daily life by means of life in the Spirit. Divine power is not confined to the messiah alone, but is distributed among all those who are ‘in Christ’, who are adopted as sons, daughters and heirs of God, the messianic or theological community, and who live in the sight of God. Divine power or the kingdom of God is believed to differ from power in the present order by virtue of both its transcendence, in discontinuity and judgement, and its immanence, in distribution and in the Spirit. Third, this divine power is believed to be actually effective, enacting a creation, revelation and redemption that will displace every other ruler and authority and power. Such characteristics pose the fundamental problem of the messianic: what is the nature of divine power, a power believed to be

at once transcendent, immanent and effective? What is the content that can fill this structural form of the messianic?

For Paul, the essence of such messianic power was exercised through dying and rising, or in the terminology of Michael Gorman, who has to my mind provided the most faithful interpretation of the heart of Paul's epistles, 'cruciformity':⁴⁸ 'I have been crucified with the messiah; it is no longer I that live, but the messiah who lives in me.'⁴⁹ If we are to take Paul at his word in this verse and suppose that he believed that Jesus did in some sense live in him, then we have a licence to interpret the entirety of Paul's thought in reference to the Jesus tradition about which Paul is so silent, and yet some of which he must have known. For this verse directly echoes the gospel call to discipleship: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'⁵⁰ In order to give a little more content to this notion of the messianic, it is therefore to the tradition of sayings attributed to Jesus that we may turn.

The Gospels read as a succession of shocks, offences and surprises. If Heidegger once remarked that Nietzsche's procedure is everywhere one of inversion,⁵¹ much more so does this seem to be true of Jesus. Where money promises the world, the messiah promises to overthrow it. A method of chiasmic inversion characterizes many of the parables (for example, the lost sheep, the good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the tax-collector), many of the sayings ('Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted. '),⁵² some of the stories (the disciples fish all night but catch nothing; they fish in the day and catch a

great haul; the great haul is abandoned on the beach while the disciples leave to become fishers of men),⁵³ and even the literary form of some of the sayings:

Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye,
but do not notice the log in your own eye ...?
First take the log out of your own eye,
then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.⁵⁴

This chiasmic economy, then, characterizes the typical messianic promise of the kingdom:

Blessed are you poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God ...
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.⁵⁵

The extent to which wealth, taxation and money form the focus of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom is remarkable, from the widow's mite to the cleansing of the temple. The source of political power, in Jesus' day, was taxation and tribute: it was in this form that power penetrated the lives of peasants. The system of universal taxation introduced by the Romans was the source of their military power. It forced taxpayers out of a non-monetary subsistence economy into a cash economy based on trade. Jesus' teachings on wealth were a focal point of his opposition to the order of this world:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt. 6.24)

As a saying about mastery or rule, providing the context for the messianic obligation to 'seek first the kingdom of God', this is a messianic saying that again reinforces the discontinuity between the divine order and the order of this world. Moreover, it shifts the focus from mastery to service: whom do you love? It is striking that wealth, personified here as Mammon, is portrayed as a master rather than as a servant. Like the Christian messiah, Mammon's mastery is achieved through service. For wealth is the supreme servant, the universal means, and no one has greater power or freedom than one who possesses wealth. Wealth became the supreme principle of rule: when attacking the central religious authority of his day, Jesus' overthrew the tables of the moneychangers. Jesus' teachings on wealth were a direct assault on the order of this world.

Such an assault is conducted through an inversion of perspective: it is the spiritual significance of material wealth that is given priority in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus inverted the normal relation of mastery between people and wealth – your heart will be where your treasure is, not your treasure where your heart is – by inverting the normal relations of perspective: 'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.' (Matt. 6.22) Service is enacted through time, attention and devotion. The object of one's attention – one's pleasures, one's wealth, one's power – is used as the material for the lens through which the world is to be seen. For wealth, specifically in the form of money, is not simply what is valued, but becomes the principle by which the value of values is

determined. The value of all things consists in its price. Mastery consists in a perspective of evaluation. One is not ruled by the intrinsic values of things, nor by one's own evaluations; one is ruled by a principle of evaluation that bears authority. Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees, denounced by Luke as 'lovers of wealth', exposes the significance of the quintessential charge of hypocrisy: wealth values what is prized in the sight of others. 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.' (Luke 16.15).

The messianic inversion, whether it occurs as repentance in the secret of one's heart, or as the eschatological revelation of all secrets, consists in living one's life in relation to the judgement of God, not in relation to the judgement of others.⁵⁶ Divine power would seem to consist not merely in a perspective of evaluation, but in a perspective that sees and judges without itself being seen. Here we have the most extreme transcendence, the polar opposite to a philosophy that orders life in relation to knowable reasons.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, we have to reckon with a further chiasmic inversion:

Do not judge,

and you will not be judged;

do not condemn,

and you will not be condemned.

Forgive,

and you will be forgiven;

give,

and it will be given to you. (Luke 6.37-8).

The divine perspective, whether of judgement or mercy, seems to be instituted by one's own conduct. One seems to be back within the plane of immanence, the sphere of reason, insofar as the divine perspective that judges the heart is conditioned and effectively produced. The gospel principle, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you,' famously seems to epitomise the universalizability of the Kantian categorical imperative.⁵⁸ One determines oneself and one's fate. There is, however, a notable difference. For where the Kantian criterion is formed by seeing things from the perspective of others, the gospel imperative is formed from seeing things from the perspective of God: one is merciful, as the Father is merciful.⁵⁹ Mercy is a principle of initiative, not response: love of enemies, doing good, and lending without expecting return takes the messianic promise beyond all earthly economy of recompense.⁶⁰ The promised reward is available only to those who 'sell their possessions and give alms',⁶¹ according to the chiasmic structure: those who try to save their life will lose it, while those who lose their life will save it.⁶²

The messianic promise of a heavenly reward, the overflowing measure placed in one's lap,⁶³ is the abundance of treasure of the heart.⁶⁴ The emphasis is placed upon a transformation of perspective, *metanoia*, and belief in the promise. If one can consider an act of repentance as a form of cultural memory, a storing up of treasure in heaven, it is one that has quite a different economy from reason or money. It is an economy of the heart. One gives for alms those things that are within.⁶⁵

What interests me here is not whether Jesus was the messiah, was resurrected, or was the son of God – such affirmations are modes of cultural writing that all too easily proclaim Christ as Caesar – but whether it is possible to make explicit the temporal logic of the heart. It is a matter of taking the log out of one's eye so that one

can act from the heart. What might these strange phrases mean in practice? If the spiritual life is a matter of perspective, and the eye is a source of light that determines what is seen as real, then the 'log', that which obscures vision, may indeed be that which is seen as real. To see wealth as substantial is to have an ontology. One is concerned with who has what, who is what, who does what. The gospel, by contrast, recommends abandonment of economic concerns, of what one will wear, or what one will eat and drink. Instead, the call to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field is a call to observation: just as God counts the hairs of the head,⁶⁶ the disciple is called to observe life. For life, which is more than food, cannot be stored; and worry cannot add a single hour to one's lifespan.⁶⁷ Wealth has no enduring substance; it endures less than the grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven.⁶⁸ For the temporal condition of life is such that time cannot be saved; it can only be spent. You can only give time without hope of reward. You are obliged to give to everyone who begs from you, insofar as they attract attention. Life itself is the giving of alms. Hence the gospel promise is merely an invitation to become what one is.

In a very strange way, therefore, the messianic promise of the gospels can be read philosophically, even if this is not the intention or the most obvious reading. Such a philosophy insists in the messianic, regardless of Jesus' personal authority and regardless of whether it is noticed. In place of the Parmenidean tautology that directs attention to truth as a timeless substance, there is a celestial economy of repetition: the measure that one gives is the measure that one gets. The perspective by which one sees the world is the perspective by which one is judged. A metaphysics of the One, the idea, or substance is replaced by the determinate temporal distribution of attention.

One's own practices of thinking and attention become the writing in one's soul, the cultural memory that makes life possible. Furthermore, in place of the Heideggerean care for and appropriation of Being, the one who seeks to save his life will lose it. One becomes what one is by expending all one's substance. The fundamental religious gesture is one of renunciation of all wealth, all circular returns, all earthly objectives. Breaking with the immanent order of this world, renunciation institutes a celestial economy, the promise of reward in heaven which is also a reward in the heart. To have a rich heart, and indeed a rich life, is to know how to pay attention, to know how to seek life rather than wealth, to know how to spend time.

Conclusion

Let me therefore attempt to recapitulate this somewhat circuitous exposition to observe afresh the profligate way in which I have spent your precious time. While our secular age has paid attention to the possibilities of human self-determination, it has remained blind to its limits: the environmental limit to economic growth, and the religious limit of faith or confidence. For modern reason pays attention only to that which can be objectified and directly manipulated for rational self-determination. It seeks certainty, not trust. A genealogy of the secular explores its dependence on varieties of writing: on the one hand the printed word, which invites one to live one's life in accordance with the book, and the 'writing within writing' of metaphysics, which invites one to live one's life in accordance with reason; on the other hand, the stamped coin, which invites one to compare values in relation to trust in that measure, and the paper debt, which invites one to live one's life in search of wealth, while obliging one to live in order to repay debts. Modern subjectivity has a twin foundation: 'I think therefore I am' and 'I owe therefore I am'. The enduring

significance of trust and obligation as the basis for human civilization is the underlying meaning of the insistence of the theologico-political.

The human animal is one that makes promises, but also one that believes promises. Yet the question remains as to what kind of promise can be believed. The promise of wealth and power, according to which everyone becomes Caesar, remains incredible. It has no true power. There is, however, an alternative synthesis of trust and self-determination, a different theologico-political synthesis as a basis for human civilization: the promise that one becomes what one is by expending all one's substance. To live is to die and to die is to live. The fundamental religious gesture that breaks with the order of this world is renunciation. And it is such costly sacrifice that ensures credibility.

Where the metaphysical age was ordered around the cosmic order of being and meaning, and where the modern age was ordered around subjectivity and doing, perhaps the coming age will be ordered around promise, waiting and attention. For as the natural, economic and political conditions of existence pass once more beyond the limits of human control, and we await the apocalyptic repercussions of the end of modernity, perhaps there is little more to do than await the messianic age by accumulating treasure in one's heart to more richly spend one's life and soul.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001.

⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, London: Penguin, 2004.

⁵ I have omitted from this list explicitly religious philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jean-Yves Lacoste.

⁶ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 49.

⁷ Charles Taylor argues that it is secularity that is the exception and requires explanation. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁸ See Foucault's discussion of the 'police' in 'Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of "Political Reason"', Stanford University: Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1979, 242-52.

⁹ Paul Fletcher, for example, has argued that Christian theology only has meaning within the context of a Neoplatonic cosmology, and without such a metaphysical support, attempts to revive a Christian political theology based on the social model of the Trinity are doomed to both misinterpret the theological tradition as well as misunderstand the nature of the contemporary exercise of political power. See Fletcher, *Disciplining the Divine: Beyond the Social Model of the Trinity*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 36.

¹¹ Erik Peterson cited in Paul Fletcher, *ibid.*, 169.

¹² From David Hume and Immanuel Kant to Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

¹³ Whereas many accounts of the secular are histories of ideas, a genealogy attempts to relate ideas to their conditions that lie outside thought. Even Taylor's full account neglects to explore the economic dimension while gesturing towards it. Many so-called genealogies, however, are histories of ideas, informed by Neoplatonic or Heideggerean accounts of history as a fall from some primal illumination, and treating the truth of contemporary phenomena as though it is disclosed by their ancestry. Here there is a danger of the genetic fallacy as well as a blindness to possibilities opened up by the new.

¹⁴ See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Vintage Books, 1974; Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: the Religion of Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J.T. Swann, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972; Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969; Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2002.

¹⁵ Taylor, *ibid.*

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- ¹⁶ Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 209.
- ¹⁷ Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- ¹⁸ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- ¹⁹ See Foucault, *ibid.*
- ²⁰ See, for example, Epictetus, *Discourses Book I*, translated by Robert Dobbin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
- ²¹ On genealogy as a study that does not privilege origins, see Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, London: Penguin, 1986.
- ²² Nietzsche explains this functional role of history in 'On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life', *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- ²³ This is the role that Kant gives to the ideas of pure reason. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1929, 309-22.
- ²⁴ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London: Athlone Press, 1994, 129-32.
- ²⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- ²⁶ 'Reason is always a region cut out of the irrational – not sheltered from the irrational at all, but a region traversed by the irrational and defined only by a certain relation between irrational factors. Underneath all reason lies delirium, drift.' Gilles Deleuze, in Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, New York: Semiotext(e), 1995, 53-54.
- ²⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 40.
- ²⁸ Nietzsche, *ibid.*, 41-42.
- ²⁹ Nietzsche, *ibid.*, 43.
- ³⁰ Roland Boer, *Political Myth*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, 112
- ³¹ Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, 59
- ³² Seaford gives this account of the origins of stamped coinage in ancient Greece.
- ³³ See L.R. Wray, *Understanding Modern Money*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998, 25.

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- ³⁴ See Karl Menger, 'On the Origin of Money', in Geoffrey Ingham (ed.), *Concepts of Money*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2005.
- ³⁵ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Andrew Skinner, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 385.
- ³⁶ Schumpeter is cited by Richard Arena and Agnès Festré, 'Banks, Credit and the Financial System in Schumpeter', reproduced in Geoffrey Ingham (ed.), *Concepts of Money*, 377.
- ³⁷ See Michael Rowbotham, *The Grip of Death: A Study of Modern Money, Debt Slavery and Destructive Economics*, Charlbury: Jon Carpenter, 1998; Frances Hutchinson, Mary Mellor and Wendy Olsen, *The Politics of Money: Towards Sustainability and Economic Democracy*, London: Pluto Press, 2002.
- ³⁸ For a fuller account of this theology of money, see my *Theology of Money*, London: SCM Press, 2007.
- ³⁹ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*.
- ⁴⁰ This point was explained long ago by Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book III.2, trans. Victor Watts, London: Penguin, 1999, 50.
- ⁴¹ See the very interesting discussion of the formation of consciousness in the relation to the mother as a transitional object, and the role of money as a form of symbolic conversion, in M.D.Faber, *Culture and Consciousness: The Social Meaning of Altered Awareness*, New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981, 48-124.
- ⁴² George Savile, quoted in Kevin Jackson, *The Oxford Book of Money*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 23.
- ⁴³ Karl Marx: 'The capitalist knows that all commodities, however tattered they may look, or however badly they may smell, are in faith and truth money ...' *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976, 256.
- ⁴⁴ See the discussion of the messianic in Hent De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999, 190-7, 327-34.
- ⁴⁵ Romans 15.12. The New Revised Standard Version translates the Hebrew of Isaiah 11.10 as 'On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.' Paul's version is clearly more emphatically political.
- ⁴⁶ N.T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, London: SPCK, 2005.

⁴⁷ While all historical-critical approaches attempt this to some extent, the attempt to reduce the messiah to literary parallels is epitomised by Thomas L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David*, London: Pimlico, 2007.

⁴⁸ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.

⁴⁹ Galatians 2:20, modified translation.

⁵⁰ Matthew 16.24-25, RSV.

⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche Volume 1*, trans. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979, 30.

⁵² Luke 14.11.

⁵³ Luke 5.1-11.

⁵⁴ Luke 6.41, 42.

⁵⁵ Luke 6.20, 24.

⁵⁶ See Jan Pato ka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd, Chicago: Open Court, 1996, 107.

⁵⁷ One should, however, note the extent to which these polar opposites could be reconciled by a Stoic such as Epictetus.

⁵⁸ Note that Kant himself hesitated here. See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1927, 48.

⁵⁹ Luke 6.36

⁶⁰ Luke 6.35.

⁶¹ Luke 12.33

⁶² It is notable that Derrida, commenting on these verses in Matthew, does not reduce the celestial economy to an earthly economy, but emphasizes the necessity of absolute loss. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 103-9.

⁶³ Luke 6.38

⁶⁴ Luke 6.45

⁶⁵ Luke 11.41.

⁶⁶ Luke 12.7

⁶⁷ Luke 12.23-5

⁶⁸ Luke 12.28