

## Paul Tillich and the Discourse of Political Theology

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This paper puts the theology of Tillich in contact with the contemporary discourse of political theology. First, I will survey the development of radical theology from Tillich to the present, to show how his theology has influenced and inspired many of these expressions of radical theology. Second, I will sketch an overview of political theology from its classical locus in the work of Carl Schmitt to its contemporary expressions in Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben. At the conclusion, I will return to Tillich, to show how attention to his works on Christian Socialism in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s offers a connection to and supplement of this idea of political theology.

The theology of Paul Tillich exerts a spectral influence on radical theology, from the Death of God theology to the present resurgence of interest in radical theology. In this section, I want to briefly survey the development of radical theology, to construct a somewhat speculative genealogy. In the Preface to *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Thomas J.J. Altizer argues that

Among twentieth century theologians, it was Tillich alone who made possible a way to a truly contemporary theology. While I have been forced to resist and oppose Tillich's theological conclusions, I do so with the conviction that they are not yet radical enough, and the memory of Tillich's words to me that the real Tillich is the radical Tillich.<sup>1</sup>

I agree with Altizer's sentiments, because I think that Tillich's theological conclusions appear clunky and out of date, including much of the language in which he expressed them. At the same time, the spirit of Tillich has inspired much of what later passes for radical theology. From his deep and abiding interest in existentialism to his acknowledgment that theological concepts function primarily as symbols, to his desire to develop a genuine non-imperialist theology of culture, Tillich opens up theology to a becoming-otherwise-than-Orthodoxy. Tillich labored on his three-volume *Systematic Theology* for decades after coming to the United States in the wake of the Nazi takeover of Germany, and this is an impressive synthesis of this thought, but the *Systematic Theology* largely fails to stimulate creative theological thinking beyond itself. We look to other books, including the "popular" *The Courage to Be*, to find truly vital and transformative reflections.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 10.

Even if many of the representatives of the Death of God movement in the 1960s were apparently more influenced by Karl Barth, it was Tillich's theology that allowed them to express this insight in theological and cultural terms. In Tillich's method of correlation, contemporary culture asks questions, whereas theology supplies the answers to these questions in the form of symbols. In his *Theology of Culture*, he says that confronted with cultural questions expressed primarily in terms of existentialism, "theology must confront [culture] with the answer implied in the Christian method."<sup>2</sup> The problem with Tillich's formulation of this correlation is the restriction of theology to providing answers, because radical theology is about asking important and provocative questions. Also, contemporary culture is giving us answers, and this reversal forces theology to ask the question whether God still exists, or if instead God is dead? The first book of what came to be known as death of God theology is by Gabriel Vahanian, and is called *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*. At the end of this book, Vahanian radicalizes Tillich's notion of correlation, because as Vahanian explains, "it does not follow that the question of correlation is included in the question of existence." That is, the question of existentialism has already eliminated the reality of God.<sup>3</sup> Here the model of correlation that Tillich sets out enables the question of the Death of God, while at the same time it ends up deconstructing such that this Death of God theology is forced to radicalize and reject Tillich's conclusions.

In addition to Vahanian and Altizer, other representatives of the Death of God theology include Richard Rubenstein, William Hamilton, Harvey Cox, and Paul van Buren. In retrospect, this movement is viewed as a consistent if marginal articulation of a theological conclusion that God is dead or simply never existed, and in a secular world we need to move on. However, it is perhaps better to view what is called death of God theology as a radicalization of theology, and an insistence on the questionability of theology and its relevance to the world today. In many respects it was Langdon Gilkey, a student of Tillich at the University of Chicago, who consolidated the death of God as a theological movement in his opposition to it. As Michael Grimshaw explains, Gilkey "outlined his position as one of seeking the grounded, defensible reality of Christian faith in God in a secular age; this reality of God being opposed to God's death."<sup>4</sup> To

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: George Braziller, 1966 [1961]), pp. 226-227. In this early book Vahanian laments the loss of the reality of God, but he later develops a robust and affirmative secular theology. See *Anonymous God: An Essay on Words*, trans. Noëlle Vahanian (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Grimshaw, "Did God Die in *The Christian Century*?" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6.3, 2005, p. 11.

simplify these theological works and perspectives under the heading of the “Death of God” was already to distort and dismiss it.

Tillich had less direct influence on liberation theology as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s, including black liberation theology and feminist liberation theology. His theology, while seen as part of the dominant European theological tradition, was less viewed as less of an obstacle and sometimes offered tools for liberation. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone singles out Reinhold Niebuhr as a problematic representative of white Christianity, but he barely mentions Tillich, affirming his language of “the courage to be” in the struggle of blacks for hope and salvation.<sup>5</sup> Tillich had the most explicit influence on Mary Daly’s work, including *Beyond God the Father*, which makes extensive use of Tillich’s language and concepts. Daly ends up endorsing Tillich’s affirmation of love, power and justice as “The Most Holy and Whole Trinity,” even though Tillich’s analysis does not go far enough in its failure to consider the harm done by socialization into sex roles.<sup>6</sup> In his insightful chapter in *Retrieving the Radical Tillich*, Christopher D. Rodkey demonstrates how Daly “pirated” many of Tillich’s ideas and they informed her feminist analysis, even while she lamented that Tillich’s systematic theology “is not radical enough” due to its emphasis on self-affirmation.<sup>7</sup> Daly saw Tillich’s personal manifestations of sado-masochism as linked to this perverse self-affirmation. In a more ambivalent way, Marcella Althaus-Reid laments less Tillich’s expressions of deviant sexuality than the need to keep it a secret. In *Indecent Theology*, she claims that “what is to be condemned regretted is not that Tillich was a sadomasochist, but the fact that he did not find ‘the courage to be’ out of the closet of his sexuality.”<sup>8</sup>

A more open, Tillichian perspective on the development of radical theology affirms the continuity from Tillich to the death of God theologians and some strands of liberation theology to the American postmodern theology that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s in the work of Carl A. Rashke, Mark C. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist and others, including Edith Wyschogrod and Robert P. Scharlemann. This movement never achieved the cultural exposure that the death of God theology did, being largely relegated to the academic world, and it did not express the explicit political engagement

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<sup>5</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (New York: Beacon Press, 1984 [1973]), p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Rodkey, “The Nemesis Hex,” in *Retrieving the Radical Tillich: His Legacy and Contemporary Importance*, ed. Russell Re Manning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 65-80, quote p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 88.

that occurred in most forms of liberation theology. Carl Raschke and Mark C. Taylor were students of Gordon Kaufman at Harvard University, and Raschke wrote the first book of theology that combined the insights of the death of God movement with the newer ideas of French poststructuralism and deconstruction that were being taken up and read in the US. This was called *The Alchemy of the Word*, and it was republished in 2005 as *The End of Theology*. Raschke also edited a book on *Deconstruction & Theology*, which included chapters by Taylor, Wink, Scharlemann, and Altizer. In his contribution to the book, Raschke states that deconstruction “is in the final analysis *the death of God put into writing*, the subsumption of the ‘Word’ by the ‘flesh,’ the deluge of immanence.”<sup>9</sup> Mark C. Taylor’s work ended up being more influential, in particular his 1984 book *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. In *Erring*, Taylor sets out four themes of this postmodern a/theology, including the death of God, the disappearance of the self, the end of the history, and the closure of the book.<sup>10</sup> Wink, author of *Epiphanies of Darkness* and *Desiring Theology*, was a student of Langdon Gilkey and Schubert Ogden, who came to the University of Chicago in 1965 to study with Paul Tillich, but Tillich died of a heart attack that fall. In his work, Wink interrogates theology as a discourse formation, and asks about its ability to signify for contemporary humans outside of the church.

Again, I claim that Tillich’s theology exerts a kind of spectral influence, sometimes acknowledged and other times not, on radical theology through the end of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, due to what has been widely discussed as the “return of religion,” many English-speaking Continental philosophers of religion took up the works of Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion. Here religion is analyzed as a pervasive and polyvalent phenomenon, in thought, in culture, and in politics, as a counter-argument to the presumptions of the secularist hypotheses about its demise by scholars, scientists and even theologians in the 1960s and 1970s. The most well-known representatives of this movement were Merold Westphal (at Fordham University), Richard Kearney (at Boston College), and John D. Caputo (at Villanova University). Most of the philosophy programs that featured significant Continental philosophy of religion scholars and programs were at Catholic institutions. Starting in 1997, Caputo brought Derrida to Villanova for three conferences over six years on Religion and Postmodernism. This Continental philosophy of religion was not yet radical theology, but it offered insights for radical theology and in some cases, especially that of Caputo, it transformed itself into a kind of radical theology.

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Raschke, “The Deconstruction of God,” in Altizer et. al., *Deconstruction & Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

There has been a renewal of interest in the tradition of radical theology in the twenty-first century, and much of this work has been done in terms of political theology. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9-11, and the ensuing wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the USA Patriot Act, many theologians took up more explicitly political themes. It was Jeffrey W. Robbins who articulated the most concise indictment of radical theology. In an essay called "Terror and the Postmodern Condition," he argues that "while the interests of the radical and postmodern theologians were characteristically broad and far-ranging,...the political was marked by its absence."<sup>11</sup> He calls instead for a "truly radical political theology...that puts both the political and the theological order in question."<sup>12</sup>

Paul Tillich's theology would not necessarily appear to be a resource for a radical political theology, but again, Tillich has been an underground inspiration for radical theology from the start. The problem is that Tillich's American theological work, including the *Systematic Theology*, is largely apolitical. On the one hand, he resisted the temptation that Reinhold Niebuhr did not, when Niebuhr lent his theological reputation to Cold War politics and ideology in the form of "Christian Realism." At the same time, after the end of the Second World War, Tillich retreated from political issues and concerns. To really engage with a political side of Tillich, we have to look at his works in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, culminating in *The Socialist Decision* against Nazism.

Today we can see a renewed interest in Tillich as precursor to radical theology, in the efforts of Russell Re Manning in the AAR Tillich Group and his edited book *Retrieving the Radical Tillich*, as well as Caputo's book *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional*, which crosses Tillich with Derrida. Tillich's theological language of being came to be seen as hopelessly outdated in the 1980s and 1990s, as concerns with language came to the fore in hermeneutics, structuralism, and poststructuralism. Theology was viewed as a discursive formation of writing rather than a way to disclose the being of the universe. Many theologians would agree with Catherine Keller's statement that she was "indebted to the spirit if not the ontology of Paul Tillich's classical redefinition of faith in terms of courage, in *The Courage to Be*."<sup>13</sup> Today, however, there has been a return to ontology in many discourses, including the mathematical ontologies of Badiou and Meillassoux, the New Materialisms inspired by

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey W. Robbins, "Terror and the Postmodern Condition," in *Religion and Violence in a Secular World*, ed. Clayton Crockett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 293.

feminist and science studies, and British Speculative Realism, which makes the language of being more relevant.

I want to think about the connection of Tillich's thought to the discourse of political theology, and in some ways to cross the theological tradition of radical theology with the philosophical conception of political theology. Political theology is a topic of discussion and debate in recent Continental philosophy, and it traces its roots to the influential work of the German jurist Carl Schmitt. Its most noted recent representatives are Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida, and to a certain extent Slavoj Žižek. In 1922, Schmitt published his book *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Schmitt claims that sovereignty consists essentially in a decision—the power or ability to decide what counts in an exceptional situation, to apply or not apply a rule or a norm to a case of exception. For Schmitt, human political sovereignty, along with all of our fundamental Western legal concepts, derives originally from theology. According to Schmitt, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>14</sup> The sovereignty of God becomes the resource for thinking about the sovereignty of man, first in European absolute monarchy and later in terms of a kind of popular sovereignty.

For Schmitt, the question is what happens when we try to govern our politics in liberal, procedural terms. All of our rules come up against limits, where someone has to decide when these rules need to be enforced and when they have to be suspended. In much of his works from the 1920s and 1930s, Schmitt wrestled with the tensions and contradictions in the Weimar Republic Constitution, especially Article 48, that gave the President the power to suspend the Constitution under certain exceptional conditions. Schmitt foresaw that this would lead to a dictatorship, and he worked to prevent the Nazi takeover of the state until it was inevitable, at which point he joined the Nazi party and became one of their main academic jurists. The fact that Schmitt became a Nazi makes his entire work incredibly controversial, but in recent decades philosophers and theologians have come to appreciate his clear and incisive analyses of politics, law, and war. He was a conservative critic of modern liberal democracy, and he was Roman Catholic in spirit, but his ideas have come to influence many other scholars who have thought hard about the ways in which our politics are implicated in a theological or quasi-theological worldview, and also how profoundly political are all of our theological conceptions.

If we cannot simply or sharply delimit the religious from the secular, then we cannot completely separate philosophy and theology. The opposition between religious

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 36.

and non-religious phenomena deconstructs. The return of religion to the public sphere in neo-fundamentalist terms as well as the awareness of the intrinsically religious or theological nature all our political concepts means that we must grapple with the notion of political theology, whether we are liberal or conservative, radical or reactionary.

One way to read Derrida's later philosophy in the 1990s and 2000s, is to see it as developing and critiquing Schmitt's thought. Derrida also attends to the ways in which secular political ideas and practices are implicated in religious and theological ones. Derrida is profoundly critical of Schmitt, most explicitly in his book on *The Politics of Friendship*, where he shows how Schmitt's opposition of friend and enemy deconstructs. Derrida does not use the term political theology, since it is tainted by Schmitt's legacy, but he tries to articulate a thinking of religion and politics together that avoids resorting to the idea of sovereignty. If sovereignty is the ability to decide on the exceptional case, then the problem for Derrida is that there can never be only one decider.

We are always already constituted by an irreducible plurality, and any decision is never singular or absolute; it is always with and against the *other*—not only the other person but more profoundly the other who inhabits and haunts my deepest self. Derrida argues that Schmitt's theory of decision presupposes a free and willful subject, but "*a theory of the subject can never account for the slightest decision.*"<sup>15</sup> An event exceeds the confines of a subject's willed decision, and therefore Schmitt's decisionism is incoherent. An exceptional case most of all exempts the subject, it excepts the subject from the rule, in the name of responsibility for an other. The fact that the self is inhabited by the other means that sovereignty is never absolute. Sovereignty for Derrida is a fantasy, a projection onto a situation that is always an illusory sovereignty.

In his book *Rogues*, Derrida envisions a form of democracy to come that would be without sovereignty. He says that "as soon as there is sovereignty, there is abuse of power and a rogue state."<sup>16</sup> The idea of democracy to come consists of a democracy that is not an actually existing democracy, and it cannot be characterized in terms of sovereignty or sovereign decision. Derrida implies that every commitment to a particular political principle includes some sort of "unavowed theologism," and of course even this notion of a democracy to come involves a certain kind of messianicity, although it is a messianicity without any determinate or specific messianism or Messiah. In the course of his discussion of democracy and sovereignty, Derrida refers to Heidegger's posthumously published interview in *Der Spiegel*, called "Only a God Can Save us." Derrida is intrigued by this notion of 'a god,' that "is not the One God" nor is

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 102

it the plural gods: "A god is neither the One God nor gods."<sup>17</sup> Here for Derrida invoking Heidegger, God is neither simply One nor many. The God that can save us, that Derrida links to democracy, is a god who exceeds the alternative of the One sovereign God or the plural multiple deities. A god is without sovereignty.

For the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the state of exception defined as sovereign by Schmitt can be generalized in our modern and contemporary world. In his important book *Homo Sacer*, Agamben shows how sovereign power hides its inner workings while relegating humanity more and more to the category of "bare life." Bare life is a term derived from the Greek term *zoē*, which means life without any determinate qualities, and this word is opposed to the Greek *bios*, which is a kind of politically inflected life. According to Agamben, *homo sacer* refers to a human who cannot be sacrificed in a religious ritual, but who can be killed with impunity. The term *homo sacer* gets conflated with *zoē*, whereby the human becomes an animal subject to biopolitics who can no longer be sacrificed but may be experimented on, controlled, and even killed. Biopolitical sovereignty treats the human as a form of bare life stripped of any power and dignity, who is put into confined spaces like camps and prisons.

According to Agamben, modern biopolitics has been dedicated "to producing a single and undivided people" in the form of bare life.<sup>18</sup> The analysis and comprehension of this project is informed by Schmitt, and Agamben in a later book, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, shows how theological concepts of early Christianity inform the constitution of modern economics and governmentality. Agamben wants to examine the interconnection of these ideas of biopolitics, theology and metaphysics at work in human politics, and offer a way out. His solution is a radical withdrawal from being, a kind of non-being or impotentiality that frees itself from the opposition between potentiality and actuality. Sovereignty is always the power to allocate and adjudicated between the potential and the actual, and only a kind of impotentiality can subtract from this entire opposition. Agamben offers a version of negative ontology that is also a counter-politics.

In a provocative article on "Critique and Promise in Paul Tillich's Political Theology," Gregory Walter shows how Tillich's theology offers an answer of sorts to Agamben's political theory. Walter focuses on the idea of the prophetic as expressed in Tillich's 1929 essay "Protestantism as Critical and Creative Principle." He explains how the rational aspect of Tillich's critique is a form of modern reason that gets stuck in the biopolitical framework that Agamben analyzes, but the idea of the prophetic as an

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 179.

immanent political critique is valid for the kinds of reflections that Agamben undertakes, even if it does not exhaust Tillich's theology. For Tillich, "there is no prophetic critique that is not immanent critique," and yet this prophetic critique opens up a kind of promise or gift, not just as another potential promise, but a pure gift beyond potentiality.<sup>19</sup>

I think the most productive way to read Tillich's theology is to read his later theology of being and non-being back into his earlier theology of *kairos* and crisis. The *kairos* is an event, and for the Tillich of the 1920s and 1930s, the event is the possibility of deciding for genuine socialism and against National Socialism. The German Tillich possesses a political edge that the later Tillich lacks, although some of the language of being, non-being, and God beyond God associated with being-itself is useful if fully articulated and thought through in new terms. In *The Socialist Decision*, Tillich makes a last ditch effort to persuade the German people to renounce fascism. Bourgeois modernity believes in the harmony of liberalism and democracy in their interpenetration, but this "harmony is shaken" in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Socialism represents the form of "prophetism on the soil of an autonomous, self-sufficient world."<sup>21</sup> The prophetic principle Tillich identifies in the Hebrew prophets and the Protestant Reformation recurs in contemporary socialism and its promise and expectation. Socialism is the only thing that can save Europe in 1933, and we know that it did not. But the principle is still valid, the idea that the prophetic principle is aligned with the proletariat and not with the bourgeois. Tillich imagined and called for a Christian socialism that did not really or fully exist, and it never possessed the potential to stop the march of barbarism in the twentieth century, but his analysis is still significant. He concludes *The Socialist Decision*, writing:

The hegemony of the myth of origin means the domination of violence and death. *Only expectation can triumph over the death now threatening Western civilization through the resurgence of the myth of origin. And expectation is the symbol of socialism.*<sup>22</sup>

In contemporary political theory, using a more sophisticated language, the Marxist philosopher Kojin Karatani also evokes socialism in a religious context. He argues that we need to construct a socialism without the state, that would institute a

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<sup>19</sup> Gregory Walter, "Critique and Promise in Paul Tillich's Political Theology: Engaging Giorgio Agamben on Sovereignty and Possibility," *Journal of Religion* 90.3, 2010, p. 464.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1977), p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

different mode of economic exchange.<sup>23</sup> This mode of exchange does not fully exist, but it is closely related to the conception of the gift that has been of much interest to anthropology and theology. Furthermore, Karatani associates this mode of exchange based on reciprocity originally with religious movements.<sup>24</sup> So Tillich's expectation of socialism is not necessarily as naïve as it may appear.

As Slavoj Žižek affirms, there is no neutral being or political existence; existence is always one-sided. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* he claims that the phrase "'man is man' indicates the noncoincidence of man with man, the properly *inhuman* excess which disturbs its self-identity."<sup>25</sup> And this idea applies also to nature and to God. Tillich's idea of God beyond God is a disruption of classical sovereignty, because being is always inhabited and disrupted by non-being. Being-itself exceeds and eludes the simple opposition of being and non-being, or actual and potential.

There is no simple sovereign God as One, and sovereignty is an idea that is human, political, and suspect. All theology is implicitly political theology, and says as much about us and our interests as it does about God. Theology at its best is prophetic, in the form of immanent political critique, not because there exists a transcendent realm outside our political arena, but because it allows us to envision our world and our lives differently. Genuine theology issues from the depths of our being to try to signify God, who always exceeds signification but never simply do so. This is because God is not a being or an object but a name we give to what cannot be said or shown completely in human terms, or as Caputo calls it following Derrida, *an event*.

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<sup>23</sup> Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, trans. Michael K. Bourdaghs (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 143.