COMMENTARIES

Networked Religion: Metaphysical Redemption or Eternal Regret?

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> Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe free?
>
> President Ronald Reagan (1980)

From Reaganomics to Reaganligion

I'd like to set the tone of this commentary commenting upon the above quotation by Reagan: Can we doubt that war criminals in your administration, under the tutelage of your 'Reagan Doctrine,' transformed the country into a harrowing neoliberal horror show starring the nomenklatura of corporate America? They achieved this world-historical assault on the working-class through foreign and domestic policies and acts of clandestine military outlawry that can only provoke a rational mind to contemptuously scoff at your use of the word 'refuge' and 'freedom' to describe the USA.

Reagan was a religious man who believed in the prophecy of the Apocalypse and Armageddon, who used technology to destroy the lives of thousands of innocents and who normalized the stigmatization of the poor, mostly people of color, whom he gleefully condemned as welfare cheaters, creating an atmosphere linked to what Lifton (2019) calls 'malignant normality'—an atmosphere intensified by those who feel entitled and superior enough to claim ownership of another's reality, a toxic milieu that Trump has expanded exponentially through his primal scream presidency.

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Technology and religion are not incompatible, they are not inevitable disputants in a social universe divided between the Word of God (now accessible through our transactive memory banks we call databases) and the world (as it is processed into being by computer programmers, search engines and stored in the Wikiverse). In fact, religious impulses and technology have a fierce synergistic potential. But in a social universe where protagonists are fighting for socialism, this synergism can have dangerous consequences. Socialism is an antiquated and blighted term in contemporary parlance throughout the USA and one drenched in political controversy; it's a term carefully stage-managed by the corporate media who have made it the pale object of unsparingly wicked manipulation by right wing pundits. The term socialism has become a widely knowable trigger term by those who would all too gleefully compare it to Soviet Union style communism or the National Socialist party in Germany whose nefarious architects were the Nazis. We can only speculate as to how we can implement socialism, whether through meticulously monitored increments or full-blown communal councils, sectoral councils, or grand experiments in participatory democracy, direct democracy, and worker cooperatives. What is clear, however, is that we must keep trying to develop the idea as we become more securely locked into a world of uberized industrial complexes using data analytics, mobile apps and new advances in artificial intelligence to help ensure you remain uploaded as a hard working, church going, productive consumer.

While mainstream Democrats are decrying the possibility of an intrepid socialist candidate for the presidency of the USA, there barely is any observable deterioration of the term among youth activists and the coordinates for a socialist future are shifting more toward the realm of possibility than at any other time in recent history. Despite the unvarnished countervailing powers in the media pitching a 'better dead than red' attack on socialism, the subterranean yearnings for a socialist future remain inexorably palpable among our young. They appear to be in this struggle for the *longue durée.* Trump embodies the *Führerprinzip* (leadership principle), that stipulates that he, as president, should rule with absolute white- knuckled power and authority, emphasizing a raw, jaw-jutting masculinity that commands unflinching deference and that frequently goes to absurd lengths of personal presidential depravity.

Even from those members of the Senate whom he has ridiculed and humiliated in the mainstream media, Trump demands that they repeatedly 'kiss the whip' to the point of exhibiting a frictionless compliance and bubble-headed obsequiousness which often ends up in spectacles of fawning adoration and unvarnished glorification. His supporters must demonstrate their ardent loyalty by flattering Trump in the most cringeworthy ways, such as promoting the spiritually audacious idea that Trump was called by God to rescue America from assured destruction by liberals, socialists, feminists, pro-immigration advocates, and those journalists whom he has described as 'enemies of the people' (which boils down to any journalist who dares to criticize Trump). Is there anything that will satisfy his toxic narcissism? Mike Pence does not need any reminders from Trump since this fundamentalist Christian seems naturally transfixed in the presence of Trump, ready at any moment to drop to his knees and pepper Trump's fleshy and dimpled buttocks with impassioned kisses, secure in the knowledge that his farts will not smell (or perhaps might carry a celestial perfume, even an 'odor of sanctity' reserved only for saints), and all the while weeping profusely and

crying out, 'Let me praise you my gloriously sun-tanned lord, how shall I worship thee? How might I serve thee forever my ruddy American king?'

The Master of Chaos

Trump is currently engaged in an orgy of revenge against Democrats who tried to have him thrown out of office. It is impossible to ignore his unfettered glee in pardoning white collar criminals (one of whom is Michael Milken, whose company once threatened to sue me for calling him a junk bond king) and in punishing any and all political opponents even if it means blatant lying, fabricating evidence, and manufacturing conspiracy theories. A dissimulating deification of the military is part of Trump's fascist imaginary—a virtual space created after reality-based television 'it' factors presented in *cinéma verité* mode, emphasizing events in such a way that they have a magnetic pull on viewers, usually through the makeshift milieu of the twitterverse but also in televised mass rallies that appeal to the scurrilous far-right of *das Man*. These are usually mudslinging conservatives, and persons of pedestrian discernment who feel nothing but pride when they are compared to troglodytes or paleo-Nazis. Trump's rallies also include frequent shout-outs to farmers, coal miners, truckers, and police officers where he can brag about rewarding white collar criminals with pardons and ennoble the racist, misogynist, and homophobe, Rush Limbaugh, whom he presented with the nation's highest civilian honor to the disgust of anyone with a thread of decency. Trump does not love America; he is tearing apart its moral fabric; he is forming the American public on the basis of social media's fake news and bringing vile and excremental ideas into the mainstream. Trump is as fake as the dreamy models in a Charlotte Tilbury 'pillow talk' advertisement although he is definitely not as easy to look at.

Trump looks and acts as if he is on drugs, frequently s

Trump has been proclaimed as a messenger of God by his evangelical Christian base that has distinguished itself by its all-embracing and petrifying lunacy. Devega (2020) remarks: 'Trump also manifests a condition where he thinks of himself a type of god. He leads a political cult united by cruelty and collective narcissism'. Even prior to this, it was clear that Trump has a God complex. Consider the comment by Justin Frank: 'Trump does have a god complex. Trump reveals this through his constant use of the phrase "we'll see what happens." The only person who can say something like that is a person who believes they are a god, because only God can be all-knowing and see the future' (in Devega 2020) We can imagine without undue strain that Trump is a charlatan and Master of Chaos. He lives in his own self-contained world with its own laws, logic, and symbolic order, twisted into fanciful distortion when set against a system of intelligibility that requires a logic external to his vainglorious inner world that purports to bear any resemblance to sanity. Here the invariant coordinates of Trump's narcissism lead him directly into the vicinity of demagoguery and the playground of madmen. Frank points out, I believe correctly, that in addition to being an anger and rage addict, '[o]n a basic level Donald Trump is the Jim Jones of American presidents' (in Devega 2020). And his base is drinking the poison carefully calibrated by Mar-a-Lago chefs into a Kool Aid Unsweetened Sharkleberry Fin Powdered Drink Mix.

Social life is heterogeneous and Trump and his critics certainly inhabit separate orders of reality resulting from a lifetime of different preunderstandings of the world.

Both groups have been emplotted in the narrative of citizenship in different, often violently contrasting, ways. For Trump's base, the world is driven by the 'deep state' which is set up to keep elites in power at any cost, while Trump is putatively dedicated to destroying the deep state (notwithstanding the idea that Trump may, in fact, *be* the very apotheosis of the deep state he is attempting to demolish). For Trump's critics, the USA is hewed to democratic principles and organizations after centuries of hard-won struggle, and Trump is quickly unraveling these accomplishments with his temper tantrum presidency. Here opposing ideological predilections from these two distinct political tribes are sedimented over time into our cultural memory, spawning vastly different worldviews. Trump is sometimes described as an abusive father in relation to his Republican administration family, who, after being themselves tormented and publicly harassed by Trump, eventually begin to cross the dividing line to identify with their abusive father and then begin to abuse others in a similar fashion. Likewise, the Democrats began to perceive Adam Schiff as their father figure who was going to save them from Trump through the Mueller Report and then the impeachment process. Predictably, Democrats sat at home nervously waiting for Schiff's heroic endeavors to come to fruition instead of taking to the streets to protest. Was this the plan all along? All this was made possible by the narratives that framed the daily news both in the mainstream press and in a great deal of the social media. So now the two families have ramped up their antagonism toward each other and we are seeing what amounts to a postdigital rendition of the Hatfields versus the McCoys.

The task then faced by the critical cultural worker and educator becomes manifold: How do we prevent the coming-into-being of an American *Volksgemeinschaft*, a racially unified and hierarchically organized nation state in which the interests of the rank-and-file population would be stringently subordinate to the nationalist imperatives of a militarized fatherland swimming in patriotic fervor and on a permanent war footing? Richard Wolf writes:

> The left needs to respond in three key ways. First, it should stress how world war and holocaust resulted the last time post-crash capitalism used nationalism for scapegoating. Second, it should expose scapegoat politics as aimed to deflect working class anger from a crash-prone capitalism. Immigration, trade, tariff policies, or European integration define capitalism's preferred terrain of debate, not a critical left's. The left's core response to capitalist nationalism should be this: capitalism is the problem and transition to a new, different, and fundamentally democratic system is the answer. (Wolff 2020)

I fully agree with Wolff. There will be pitched battles ahead. Battles over ideology, and battles over what is real and what is not. Social justice warriors are feared by those whose intellectual trajectory leads them to feed off the ideological ordure common among paleoconservatives—that belief in egalitarianism and embracing progress under liberal auspices leads straight to work camps or the executioner. Social justice and totalitarianism appear inextricably braided together, eliciting a warning from the right that the left is coming to take away their freedoms and to eat their babies. This makes the right much more forthrightly hostile toward the left and as their souls begin to rot, they become plagued by their own imposing paranoia, turning themselves into vendors of downfall, desolation and degeneration, intellectual charlatans, and deskbound

pedants unable to grasp the nettle of crisis-prone capitalist relations of production in triggering the alienation of the masses and culminating in the political cataclysms of the twentieth century. Their threadbare, aerosol theology has turned Christianity into a pagan ritual, and they would prefer to wear a red MAGA hat to a torrid Trump rally, enraptured by Trump's Adderall-infused embroidering of narcissistic narratives onto the political events of the day, than to read a line or two from Paul's epistles, or letters, to his various congregations (the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians).

Trump is worried that white people in the USA will soon be overrun by people of color carrying clubs made of oak spiked with nails and in this regard he is no different that the pathetic and cowardly members of the Patriot Front who visit my campus under the cover of darkness and distribute their odious white supremacist literature. Trump views today's 'American carnage' as directly related to the 'demographic winter' in which the birthrate of the white race in America is in decline. And as the white folks decline in numbers, so goes the neighborhood.

For Trump and for many of his followers who proclaim the doctrine of American exceptionalism, America is God's instrument for saving the world. Maybe they assume that God keeps a tiny globe on his office desk that brandishes a big pin with 'number one' taped to its head, designating the location of the USA. Now that would not be such a bad idea if the pin could actually perform double duty as an acupuncture needle and bring some political ballast to the country. Trump has reconstituted the notion of American exceptionalism, remaking it into a Trumpist exceptionalism, which is little more than a con game where established institutional policies and practices are all delegitimated and then rejiggered for its main purpose: to keep Trump in power. This requires that institutions be structurally repurposed—a process the Nazis called *gleichschaltung* which can be translated to mean 'reconstructing, reordering, re-gearing' (Lifton in Moyers 2020). The Nazis 'got rid of those who were unreliable, not reliable Nazis, [and] replaced them with reliable Nazis. And the institutions became sources of Nazi concepts and Nazi behavior' (Lifton in Moyers 2020). Trump has reorganized many US government institutional structures by replacing top administrators and directors with his most fanatical supporters who often lack any relevant skills to justify their appointments. It is unequivocally true that American evangelical Christianity (which is notoriously anti-Catholic) is a syncretic religion merging or assimilating American-style free market capitalism into its belief system, and thus asserting wide divergence on interpreting Jesus of the New Testament with regard to differentiating wealth, the idea that some people are poor while others are rich. But this syncresis is, nevertheless, not authorized in relation to other forms of capitalism, such as Keynesianism, since Fox News could never condone such a heresy.

Political rhetoric feverishly delivered from the pulpit about God's master plan for American greatness creates a liminal space in which both the state and church can be brought into a divine harmony. This is especially true during wartime, when the nation itself and the Bible join together to become a collective 'object of worship' revealing the destiny of America as an unerring march toward victory in its undiminished conquest of evil. In contrast, open exceptionalism views America as just one of many nations, none of which can lay claim to being God's sole or privileged instrument of salvation. The founding process of America was, for these early settler colonialists, an event that was caused by God's direct intervention into history, hence, predisposing 'authentic' Christians against liberals and progressives that has continued over the centuries right up to this day.

Christian principles, therefore, had to be integrated into governmental bureaucratic operations in order to keep the nation from falling apart and the struggle is still ongoing, evoking the nation's putative providential past. A recent report by Max Boot, cited by Mathew Chapman (2020), reveals that American jingoists are nothing short of delusory when it comes to boasting about the current world-historical greatness of the United States. Blaming decades of Republican anti-government ideology for its failure to handle the current Covid-19 pandemic, Boot offers a sober assessment of the nation's status as a whole:

> '....we lag in almost every measure of societal well-being among the wealthy nations (now 36) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),' wrote Boot. 'As of 2016, we had the second-highest poverty rate, the highest level of income inequality and the highest level of obesity. We spent the most on education but produced less-than-average results. We were also below average on renewable energy, infrastructure investment and voter turnout. We are the only OECD nation that doesn't mandate paid family leave. One area where we do lead is gun violence. Our homicide rate is nearly 50 percent above the OECD average.' (Boot in Chapman 2020)

Americans by and large do not want to recognize the dark side of their history. Do they remember how Reverend Jerry Falwell in the 1960s opposed sanctioning the apartheid regime of South Africa, calling bishop Desmond Tutu a phony? Are many evangelical Christians who proudly sport their red MAGA hats aware of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's Christmas bombing of Cambodia in 1972 that saw 129 B-52 bombers unloading 40,000 tons of bombs over Hanoi and Haiphong that lasted for 11 days, hitting a hospital and numerous urban centers? Villages and half a million civilians were decimated. The US bombings of Cambodia created the conditions of possibility for the Khmer Rouge to take over the country and begin 4 years of mass killings. Helmed by Henry Kissinger, the US government supported Indonesia's campaign of genocide of roughly 100,000 East Timorese (who were seeking their independence from Portugal at that time). The USA provided weapons and logistical support. In 1973, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon gave the CIA orders to initiate a covert operation to overthrow President-elect Salvador Allende in Chile and he was subsequently killed and replaced by General Augusto Pinochet who initiated a seventeen-year reign of terror.

The Con-sensualisation of Cyberspirituality

I have been reminding American educators about this for 30 years. With my pen as a lance, I can tilt at the evangelical Christian windmill all that I want, but we are also talking about religio-corporate enterprises that have grown exponentially under the Trump administration and have helped to influence government policy, including a restrictive immigration program, appointment of anti-abortion judges, rollback of environmental regulations, and a Middle East peace plan that reveals nothing but contempt and distain for the Palestinians. Technology has certainly played a part in this process that Ravi Kumar refers to as 'con-sensualisation':

The con-sensualisation is achieved through the political formation that dominates it – the ruling class that devises interesting and innovative methods during these times of digital revolution and WhatsApp universities, as well as through the large bureaucracy that is put to task to ensure that the state's ideas reach the people. It is a grand exercise in pedagogy. (Kumar 2020)

These 'con-sensualized' issues are indeed pedagogical, and can spit fire, fueling further evangelical support for Trump. As far as their splendid inattention to any hermeneutics of suspicion goes, or their bad faith theology is concerned, I am not preoccupied with lingering aporias or irresolvable paradoxes braided into various scriptural garments and insistently thrust into our national brainpan. Nor am I occupying a position that pushes paradoxicality to the point that denies all claims to truth. And I'm not working alongside a Skunk Works project with a bunch of technologically determinist nerdballs and end-timers who are desperately trying to create an app that will enable the public to connect directly with God. The closest that this Sky Marshall Commando Cody cyber breed of industry oddballs has come to creating such an app is when they created a Twitter account for Donald Trump's self-worship. As devotees of Donald Trump struggle to survive the Covid-19, from the dirt paths of tumbledown hillside ghettos to the luxury vinyl tiled floors of high-end shopping plazas in major metropolises, the pastor of church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, by the name of Rev. Tony Spell, is defying an order from Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards against large gatherings in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, because the good Reverend Spell believes the handling of the coronavirus pandemic is 'politically motivated' (Palma 2020). In fact, he noted that on Sundays he brings in 27 buses packed with parishioners. He recently boasted: 'I had 1,170 in attendance Sunday' (Palma 2020). He further justified his actions by claiming that his church heals a wide array of ailments: 'Our church is a hospital where the sick can come and get healing… he said. Cancers are healed here, people are healed of HIV in these services. … And tonight, we're also going to pass out anointed handkerchiefs to people who may have fear, who may have a sickness — and we believe that when those anointed handkerchiefs go, a healing virtue is going to go on them as well' (Palma 2020). The self-promoting pastor has since been charged with a misdemeanor violation of the governor's orders. As political power tilts towards the malignant forces of authoritarian capitalism, it is no secret that big-box revivalist preachers want in on the action, even if that puts the lives of their flock and other constituencies at potential risk during a pandemic. As a Catholic who has visited a wide array of religious sites all over the world and occasionally witnessed events that appeared to defy scientific explanation, I am not against the idea of miracles, but I am against pitting triumphalist faith against scientific common sense.

There is some work being done on a responsible use of technology by different religious groups. Drawing on the work of Vincent Miller, Campbell and Garner note that 'across Amish and other Mennonite communities there is a common practice of discernment and understanding around technology and media.' And that this discernment is 'grounded in an ecclesiology structured to produce full accountability between individual members of the church and the will and discernment of the larger group' (Campbell and Garner 2016: 137). Miller's work is instructive on the importance of communitarian decision-making. As indicated by Campbell and Garner, Miller implicates technology here in the perception of time in that,

we tend to focus on a more instrumental view of time (chronos), which allows us to order, manage, and control the world, rather than a more relational view of time (kairos) that comprises moments of meaning within a narrative of life. It is this relational view of time, seen in the New Testament (e.g., Gal. 4;4; Titus 1;1–3) to represent defining moments in history, that is captured in the approach to appropriate technology. Rather than concentrating on managing time and relationships, we should work on using and applying technology to create meaning and true relationships in our individual and communal lives. In this respect, the Amish community's approach to technology is connected to an experience or notion of time that serves the community rather than the other way around. (Campbell and Garner 2016: 137)

Campbell and Garner expand on the values that the Amish community wishes to defend by selectively using only the most appropriate technology: 'Thus the use of technology such as a mobile phone is weighed against how it would impact home life. Would it contribute to authentic and sustainable human relationships? Would it lead to an incessant need to have the next best thing? Would it privilege the individual over against the community?' For the Amish community, therefore, 'the community rather than individuals makes technological decisions; technology is not necessarily evil, so it can be used with caution; and the use of technology can potentially undermine the community and its core values' (Campbell and Garner 2016: 137–138). Further, Campbell and Garner see almost all commodified objects as having some potential for becoming props in a Christian catechism designed to deepen our worship God:

The activity of worshipping God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has been and continues to be intricately linked to technology and media. Examples include the construction of sites of worship such as cathedrals; the development of written texts such as the Bible or prayer books; (…) the technological environment we inhabit shapes the way we worship and the way we behave in the context of worship and the Christian life. (Campbell and Garner 2016: 139)

I admit that there is something meaningful about these statements. I regularly show videos in my doctoral seminars, the most significant being the feature film, *Romero* (Duigan 1989) produced by the Paulist Fathers, whose major narrative culminates in the assassination of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador in 1980. It is indispensable to my portraying the debates over liberation theology since it sets an emotional tone, provides an invocatory power and creates a dramatic resonance among the class that enables them to appreciate the project of liberation theology even, and sometimes especially, among atheists. But I also consider the fact that magicians possess theurgic powers, and create their own props for their stage shows that help the audience willingly suspend disbelief in the existence of magic. But is this the same thing?

The argument that technology is neutral is clearly false. The argument that guns do not kill people, people kill people, that is sometimes hijacked to describe media technology reminds me of the logic embedded in the argument that technology is neutral. But technology cannot be separated from the myriad ways in which it is situated in its deployment. Technology does not stand above history as some insurmountable universal tool, like the lightning bolt of Zeus; it is not forged solely through the inner

determination of capital, nor should it be capable playing the final role of the arbiter of history. Each use we make of technology has to be understood within its contextual specificity. In the case of using the film *Romero* in the classroom, one has to consider the ideological presuppositions of the viewers, the interplay between long-past and present-day structural determinations that make manifest our ability to interrogate the themes, and what aspect of the political informs the pedagogical praxis of the educator—just to name a few considerations. To argue that technology is neutral could easily promote the idea of placing religious symbols in public spaces and to make the argument that religion must have a privileged place in the public sphere if civilization is to be kept in place. And we must continually ask: How can a Christian claim to be against Christian nationalism, while failing to protest and vociferously denounce the banning of immigrants from Muslim countries from entering the USA? Clearly, this is just another step in Trump's strategy of creating a majoritarian society of white ethno-nationalists.

How do we situate Christian nationalism in the sociohistorical and cultural context of today? In what ways is it linked to growing fears of socialism, social justice agendas, and the gender and sexuality movements that took place in the 1960s and 1970s? How have various technologies re-presented socialism, social justice and the civil rights struggles? Have they created a mythical '50s society that makes the protest movements of the '60s and '70s to seem like gross and destructive interlopers into a benign and noble history? Isn't this what Trump's MAGA campaign is all about? Campbell and Garner don't render such questions problematic when they conclude that the 'potential for Christians to become critical and discerning consumers and producers of digital technologies and media opens the door for a variety of religious expressions in online environments' (2016: 143). Here they are not simply referring to Facebook, Twitter, blogging, Google, or Youtube, but to an online site using labyrinths as meditative exercises that contribute to new forms of cyberspirituality.

Speaking of cyberspirituality, I would place the work of Antonio Spanaro in this category. His work, *Cybertheology* (2016), is heavily grounded in the work of Teilhard de Chardin and Marshall McLuhan. Spandaro argues that it is precisely Teilhard de Chardin's theological framework that provides the necessary theological mindset and aggregate of conceptual religious categories to enable us to understand both the history of technology and technological advances up to the present, in particular the Web. For Spanaro, the Internet marks an important connective stage in humanity's journey of spiraling upwards toward God, guided by a cyberspatial eschatology provided by a cyberspatial eschatology provided by avatars of episteme who glide down the corridors of Google fame like the ghosts of Hogwarts, cloaked in robes festooned with algorithms.

Thanks to the Sacred and Sanctifying Web, people now can 'interface' with their religious beliefs while secretly listening to Mutter by Rammstein and attend churches that have been transformed into a virtual or simulated reality. Saving one's soul is favorably compared by Spanaro to saving a personal computer file. The Web, which has become part of a divine milieu, operates out of a particular system of intelligibility (participative logic and user-generated content) that only theological intuition can most fully explain. The virtual world now represents the divine intellect, of a type of self-thinking thought (thought that thinks itself) such that what was once theological has now become technological. Technology has helped to bring civilization closer to the Omega point, an open vision of transcendence, a point of divine convergence with the

noosphere and the cosmic Christ. This journey, strangely enough, began with a microphone placed on a church altar which allowed the congregation to enter into an immediate relation with the speaker. The author frequently turns to McLuhan for an explanation: 'We observe in the liturgy that the acoustic amplification overloads our auditory sensorial channels, lowering the threshold of attention to the visual and individual experience of the liturgy so that it isolates the individual in a sound bubble within the architectural space' (Sparado 2014: 72). Of course, Spadaro also addresses the problems of 'forking' with the use of open source software and discusses issues inherent to what he calls open source theology. While I find some of Spanaro's observations provocative, the entire work, which is admittedly Christocentric, does give off the odor of Christian triumphalism on one too many occasions. I immediately wanted to know whether the theological probes (a term I have borrowed from McLuhan) used by Spanaro can be applied, say, to Buddhism, or to Islam, or possibly to Umbanda (Santería, Candomblé) or Wicca. And I am highly skeptical that the creation of the Internet has, according to Spandaro, proven Marx's critique of political economy to be wrong. Are we truly on an evolutionary path to cosmic intelligence via self-organization, auto-catalytic networks and biotechnological advances? Can we find Christ in technology and evolution, as Teilhard de Chardin proclaims? Do we need to wait for theologians to set the terms for merging with the pleroma or can we robustly engage the transhumanists without the Vatican's approval? Or is there a way for Christian communities and transhumanists to work together cheek by jowl?

The Emperor's Religious Garments

While I have been wildly critical of Trump's evangelical base since Trump ascended the throne in 2016 (McLaren and Jandrić 2020a), I am in agreement with Jon Meacham (2020) that the sphere of religion offers the most effective portal through which the naked emperor can be exposed for all of his perverse and self-indulgent inhumanity. While clearly Trump should be adjudicated into a penal colony, that is very unlikely to happen while Trump is still president and considered by inveterate end-timers to be chosen by God to rule the American Throne with an iron fist. A critique of Trump from a Christian perspective, using Christ's teachings as a measure would, for instance, be the most effective way to reveal the danger he poses to democracy and civilization itself. For example, the crumbs that Trump threw to his base with his tax cuts can be revealed to be a charade when one considers the emphasis that the Bible places on economic conditions and poverty. Meacham writes:

> [Martin Luther] King had been deeply influenced by the theologian Walter Rauschenbusch and his 1907 book 'Christianity and the Social Crisis,' which argued that Jesus called the world not simply to contemplate but to act. 'The Gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being, but his material well-being,' King wrote in a Rauschenbusch-inspired passage. 'Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial' (Meacham 2020)

Meacham further emphasizes the importance of seeing the New Testament as a Social Gospel in action. He writes:

> Representative John Lewis, Democrat of Georgia, was perhaps King's most devoted disciple. Growing up in Pike County, Ala., he overcame a childhood stutter by preaching to the chickens on his parents' tenant farm. Hearing King on the radio, Mr. Lewis was moved to action, and came to share the older minister's philosophy of Christian nonviolence. Their inspiration came from the New Testament: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'; 'Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' As Mr. Lewis recalled, the struggle within time and space was about 'Heaven *and* earth. This was the Social Gospel in action. This is was love in action, what we came to call in our workshops soul force.' The goal? 'The Beloved Community,' which was, he said, 'nothing less than the Christian concept of the kingdom of God on earth.' (Meacham 2020)

While it is true that technology may have initially been created by Millenarianist over-achievers to 'recover Eden', whose Adamic myths compelled them to reverse the fall of Adam and Eve from God's most sacred real estate property (Noble 1999), today technology can be used both to transgress the moral maxims of the day, or impel us as good technoscientists to transcend our hatred and embrace a loving faith that includes technological innovations braided to the teachings of Christ and Marx. Nevertheless the same questions remain: Who owns the media conglomerates that control the technologies? And who benefits from such arrangements? What is the relationship between the owners of the means of technological production and those struggling for a socialist alternative to capitalism (McLaren and Jandrić 2020b)? I have no problem with technology being invented or used to pursue worldly dreams that might help ease the needless suffering of humanity, or to participate in finding hope in a hopeless world, but it is clear to me that more needs to be done to liberate technology from the white-knuckled vice-grip of corporate Christian fundamentalists and to liberate Christianity from the perils and pitfalls of technological 'progress' and to encourage a more nuanced and granular understanding of how technology might enable a project of faith and hope—including how the Gospel messages themselves might be better embodied (enfleshed) through technological advances, without having to retrofit humanity on a massive scale with biomechatronic body parts.

It is incorrect to say that the collectivization or nationalization of individually owned property will usher in a socialist revolution because when this occurs the basic nature of capitalist society is still present—value augmentation, when labor assumes a value form. Marx of course supports collective ownership of the means of production. But by this he does not mean simply transferring ownership deeds from private to collective entities, but rather ensuring that the working class owns and controls the means of production. We need to transform the very nature of human relations. We need to push past distributive economics in our fight for a socialist society. The struggle is such a daunting task that many of us are left to live our lives fluctuating between hope and despair.

Justin Frank makes some very insightful remarks about hope that we would do well to take to heart:

There are several levels of hope. On one level, hope is the denial of anxiety and fear and the denial of helplessness. The irony about hope is that it combines the denial of helplessness with an expression of hopelessness. That's what's paradoxical. There are people who hope for things but do not do anything to achieve that outcome. When a person is denying helplessness by hoping that things will work out, they are also acting helpless by hoping that somebody else is going to save them and somehow everything will work out. Hope can be an abdication of responsibility as a way of protecting oneself against anxiety. The hope-peddlers are behaving as though they are addicted on an unconscious level to death, because they are denying the work that is necessary to stay alive by protecting the USA. (Frank in Devega 2020)

Many of the experiments to build a socialist society have throughout history ended in failure. Whether or not advances in technology will help in this endeavor—or whether they will overall tighten the death grip of capitalist social relations—is a debate that is far from being resolved. This has driven many politically progressive Christians to embrace a fatalistic despair and to cling to an abstract hope divorced from the arena of concrete struggle. For Americans facing an epic choice during the presidential election in November 2020, the stakes are brutally high. Hope is not something that can be invoked as a magical talisman that calls upon supernatural forces to intervene on our behalf. To activate revolutionary change, hope must always be bonded with struggle. And if this includes communing with God in cyberspace, then I can only wish that the ultrahumanist vision of our dear Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, will lead to the eventual enhancement and deepening of biological life rather than its transcendence. It is time for a de-transcendence, a time for us to meet the poor on their own terms, a time for us to repristinate the commons and expand its democratic sphere, a time to deepen its connection to the people rather than be blown through the history of pain and suffering like Benjamin's Angel of History, with a storm caught in its wings, its neck wrenched backwards, forced to look upon the dung heap of humanity's glorious achievements.

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