

Thinking the Scream

Figures and Forms of Death and the Story of Christianity

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Death is a part of the story of Christianity.¹ By telling a story that weaves in its incoherence, Christianity extends its own coherence. Regardless of claims to coherence or incoherence, these stories are overlaid on the now. Such a now cannot properly be said to be a site of meaning, but to call it meaningless would also be to tell a story and as story it would not refer to its own immanent now but to transcendent narrative structures that place that now in relation to this or that moment. Just as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari think of philosophy, science, and art as all relating to chaos in order to slow down its speed or create relative consistency for thought, the story of Christianity is a way of bringing coherence to the incoherent.² And a story must not only have an origin but an end. It must not only come to life, it must also die. While many secular or non-Christian religious studies scholars know that the structure of their own discipline is enthrall to belief and truth, we still seek to ground everything there. Even in the use of genealogy a privilege is given to the site of origin, to the start of where a story is told. It is a fantasy that scholars engage in when they think they can find the essence of Christianity in its origins. As if Christianity had origins. As if there were anything like origins at all, as if there was coherent meaning

1. Special thanks to Meredith Minister and Amaryah Armstrong for comments on an earlier draft.

2. See Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, New York 1994.

behind this concept. What if, instead of origins, there are only accidents? Instead of a coherence secured by history, by a story, be it chronological or not, instead of all of that there is only now – though this now may even feel like nothing since the now resists meaning-making – that nonetheless is encrusted through stories into cultures we each find ourselves trapped and interpolated within?

This essay is a cataloguing and survey of the figures and forms of death that make up the Christian story. They are parts of the story that may “unsettle” or begin to undo the coherence of those stories, but unsettling is how stories work to captivate. This unsettling is how the narrative tension is achieved and such tension is still in the service of narrative. By cataloguing these figures and forms of death in relation to the Christian story we can begin to see their limits as a radical critique of that Christian story and the stories whose structure is inherited from Christianity. Scholars of Christianity are not only concerned with the birth of Christianity but with its decline and presumably its death. There exists social-scientific research, of course, on the decline of Christianity in the so-called West and it is interesting to note that those who call themselves Christians with a certain fervor often do so in the defense of this same West that is also said to be declining. There is so much violence, so much death being dealt today, in a refusal to accept these dual deaths: the death of Christianity and the death of the West. The second of these was itself created and sustained through a politics of death. Death usually of colonized or enslaved others, but sometimes of the West’s own internal others. And all of that death was justified as it secured the future of that West, though it is hard to see that fantasy as anything but idiotic today and growing ever more so. Death is said in many ways, just as Aristotle said of nature; itself sustained through death.

In the remainder of this essay I will consider three central theorizations of death as a means of thinking through the event of Christ’s death. I will consider Christ’s death at the origin of what has become a culture of death or part of a necropolitical order. I will not be considering the origins of Christianity or even the actuality of Christ’s death as if we could have some experience of it unmediated through the various traditions that form the world today. Rather, I am interested in what we mean by death and if death can even be an event or only ever part of a dialectical process of world-making. This survey of the forms and figures of death serves a larger project, one beyond the remit of this essay, that works towards a theorization of living in the midst of a now that is foreclosed to meaning and meaninglessness, a

living now that is truly without justification, without theodicy, and thus can only be thought while experiencing the vertigo of immanence.³

Biological Death

Deleuze, in the midst of writing about Francis Bacon's radical painting of figures that follows the Christian deformation of the figure, tells us: "The figure is dissipated by realizing the prophecy: you will no longer be anything but sand, grass, dust, or a drop of water."⁴ This dissipation of the figure is another description of biological or natural death. Our deaths or the deaths of our loved ones can be distinguished from the kind of death that takes place biologically and within an ecological framework. When we look upon the face of someone beloved in the moment of their death we are on the edge of an end. Such a death is the end of our life together, the shared experiences, the presence of that person which will now forever be felt as the absence of their presence haunting us. Love that goes out and finds no love returned. Our own experience of the thought of our death runs up against the same limit in consciousness. Death is the end and since we live without ends, except through certain fantasies of reason, it becomes unthinkable except as what is not.

Yet our deaths do not mark an ecological end at all. The ecosystem is not done with us, regardless of how quickly our names may pass from the lips of others or how unnoticed our deaths may be outside of the small group of people who may be, temporarily, marked by it. When we die our bodies dissipate into the ecosystem. One of the perversities of our relationship to death is the way we attempt to extract our death from ecological systems of the exchange of matter and energy. Most of us who die in Sweden or America, for now, do not find our bodies left for carrion-eaters. We find ourselves instead kept cool and pumped with chemical preservatives to slow down natural processes that might find our bodies burst when left in the heat. Yet all of this is cosmetic as some scavengers will eventually find their way to our flesh and clean it from the bone. Human flesh, human bodies, are extracted from the wider ecosystem, but we cannot deny ecological processes the last word. As Mo Costandi writes in one of the monthly Neurophilosophy

3. On the vertigo of immanence see Christian Kerslake, *Immanence and the Vertigo of Philosophy: From Kant to Deleuze*, Edinburgh 2009. Daniel Colluciello Barber has developed an analysis of vertigo that thinks Deleuzian vertigo and the vertigo of Black social death analyzed in Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents", *In Tensions* 5 (2011), <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/frankwildersoniii.php>, accessed 2018-08-16. See Daniel Coluciello Barber, "The Creation of Non-Being", *Rhizomes* 29 (2016), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/barber.html>, accessed 2018-08-25.

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, London 2003, 31.

articles in the Guardian, “Far from being ‘dead,’ however, a rotting corpse is teeming with life. A growing number of scientists view a rotting corpse as the cornerstone of a vast and complex ecosystem.”⁵ Some have attempted to create secular rituals of comfort around this ecological “life after death.” Yet, attending a secular funeral of remembrance for a loved one, where the mourner will never see that person again, would likely be just as alienating an experience as a Christian funeral where they are told their beloved is not dead, but waits on the other side. For the secular remembrance is predicated on the story that this death is not the complete death of the person. Even though death has come for them as it will come for me, the flesh still lives through its dissipation of the figure, such secular narratives preach. Naturalistic explanations of death still must be narrated for there to be meaning, they still require a world for their comfort to dampen the real of death captured when Deleuze continues to write of a kind of cosmic death of the figure, “now the sand no longer retains any Figure; nor does the grass, earth, or water.”⁶ At some point, nothing wins, because nothing was never playing the game to begin with.

As with Christians, I cannot pretend to know why those of us in the West relate to death the way we do. Why we preach one thing, like the interconnectedness of all things, and practice another, desperately attempting to exempt human flesh from that interconnectedness. Why it is, like our stories of Jesus, we want to remove ourselves from death just as his flesh was removed from the cycle of ecological exchange and continued to live through the resurrection. Regardless, we know that we may assume the biological death of Christ because that death is found in the canonical Christian Gospels. What we find when we compare the synoptic Gospels is interesting with regard to this biological vision of death and our attempt to distance our experience from it. We find in Matthew 27:50 and Mark 15:37 relatively the same story. Both have scenes of horror, the profoundly faith-shaking cry of “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” Yet this horror becomes nearly naturalistic, almost like a documentary, when they write of the moment of death. In Luke both the horror and the documentary pass away to create distance from the death. Christ here is more heroic, his death is an example to be emulated. The Real of death is occluded through a story.

The version of Jesus’ death given voice in the Gospel of John presents a less heroic story than Luke, but instead we find horror as genre. Not in the moment of Jesus’ death, which is almost more demure than in Luke. No, it

5. Mo Castandi, “Life After Death: The Science of Human Decomposition”, *The Guardian* 2015-05-05, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/neurophilosophy/2015/may/05/life-after-death>, accessed 2018-08-16.

6. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 31.

is not in the moment of Christ's death that John writes horror, but in what happens to the body of Jesus after. The two thieves crucified with Jesus have their legs broken, their bodies are further mutilated by legitimate agents of the Roman state so that they would die more quickly. The horror of this scene should be obvious, but the author pays no mind and we hear nothing of their screams. Instead we are witness to a sudden presence of blood and water from the side of Christ, the horror of the scene is one of bloodletting of a dead man who no longer feels pain in his flesh, the sick sound of flesh opening and of the particular viscousness of blood hitting the dirt, while the tortured screams of those who still live are not even excised from the text but are just given no attention at all.

For those who experienced the death of Christ in that moment as the death of their friend, their son, their leader, their teacher, or whatever story of relation that fit for them, this would have been the experience many have in the world of those they love coming to a violent end, to a death at the hands of a legitimate violence, a violence of the state or a violence despite the state. Yet, the way that death comes to be narrated matters for the way such death lives in the world. The way such death, like the death of flesh, nourishes the life of the world.

So we may finally ask, even though Jesus' death was a biological death, how was the experience of that death structured? For that we must turn to the forms of death as narratives of life as found in the death drive analyzed by psychoanalysis and the social death of slavery.

Death Drive

Clearly, to the early Christian community, there was a certain declaration of the end within this death. The death of Jesus was narrated in such a way that we might say Jesus was a figure, not of death, but of the death drive akin to the *sinthomosexual* described by Lee Edelman. For Edelman, the *sinthomosexual* is the figure of the death drive in relation to the structure of reproductive futurity that structures all political possibility, right or left, reformist or revolutionary.

In Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, he puts forward the idea that Freud's death drive takes the figure of the queer in the order of the social. Thus the queer as figure represents that "negativity opposed to every form of social viability."⁷ The figure who ruthlessly seeks after their own jouissance or enjoyment without end, who give to those what they desire without concern, and who do so without regard for the future, without regard for the image of the reproduced future in the figure of the

7. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham 2004, 9.

Child. “The death drive as which the queer figures, then, refuses the calcification of *form* that is reproductive futurism.”⁸ This death drive is what pushes beyond the biological cycle in which the death of Jesus would simply be found. As Slavoj Žižek explains the death drive is:

precisely the ultimate Freudian name for the dimension traditional metaphysics designated as that of *immortality* – for a drive, a “thrust,” which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of generation and corruption, beyond the “way of all flesh.” In other words, in the death drive, the concept “dead” functions in exactly the same way as “heimlich” in the Freudian “unheimlich,” as coinciding with its negation: the “death drive” designates the dimension of what horror fiction calls the “undead,” a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death.⁹

Many in the early Christian community understood the death of Jesus to be heralding just such an antisocial form of life. This particular issue is known to Christians today if they read Paul in 1 Corinthians, where he writes that “it is well for a man not to touch a woman. [...] To the unmarried and widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am” (7:1, 8, NRSV). In the 1970s Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau argued that a manifestation of the form of cultural revolution could be found in the early Jesus movement, which they looked to to develop a theory of cultural revolution. This form of revolution was one that they counterposed to ideological revolution. The difference between the two of them can be stated simply as ideological revolution wishes to replace one Master with another and cultural revolutions seek to overthrow the very idea of Master altogether. For Jambet and Lardreau the early Jesus movement was caught between an antagonism between an ideological revolution and a cultural one. Oddly enough, the earliest followers of Jesus, those who looked to him to be the political messiah who would overthrow Rome, would be an example of the early desire for Christianity to be ideological and not cultural. The death of Christ, for those heretics and dualists of the early movement, unleashed a cultural revolution the themes of which Jambet and Lardreau believed could be grouped under two main headings: “the radical rejection of work, the hatred of the body along with the refusal of sexual difference.” They go on to explain:

8. Edelman, *No Future*, 48. My italics.

9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London 2008, 294.

certainly not as production of *one* indifferent sex or of *n* sexes, at work in this revolution was an intelligence too delicate in its desire to allow itself to be taken by these crude decoys, so that it knew, of the sexes, there could only be two.

No, this hatred of the body and refusal of sexual difference was an “abolition of sex itself.”¹⁰ That is, abolition of the social order and the future that secures it. For empirical proof of this form of cultural revolution they direct us to the numerous dualistic sects of early Christianity where the followers lived an antisocial life, where they

refused marriage and refused salvation to married people, gave authority to women to leave their spouses, children their parents, slaves their masters, condemned all ownership, extolled absolute renunciation, these savage hordes of men and women mingled together, living by begging as required or robbery if pushed, women dressed as men, and often at their head, this flood thrown into the streets, an exodus, sleeping here and there in the streets their chaste bodies entangled, these errings that carry males and females without difference, along with shards of broken families.¹¹

If the death of Jesus cast this Christ as a queer figure, as a *sinthomosexual*, it is also clear that Christianity is the name for the affirmation of that same death which determines the negativity of the death drive into a positive form. One where the earthly master comes to be weakened, but where what is Caesar’s is still rendered under Caesar and where we suffer the little children unto him (if the reader will forgive such a biblical cut-up). Edelman tells us that the negative is a *force* that affirmation seeks to determine as some stable or positive *form*.¹² The history of Christianity shows us that the force of death as incarnated in the figure of Jesus gives way to a form of death, a death that redeems death from death. Is there something else within the early Christian experience of the death of Jesus that might undo this, that might undo it in an even more thoroughgoing fashion than Edelman’s *sinthomosexual*? So that, as Deleuze writes, “the form is no longer essence, but becomes accident; humankind is an accident”?¹³

10. Christian Jambet & Guy Lardreau, *L'Ange: Pour une cygétique du semblant, Ontologie de la révolution I*, Paris 1976, 100. All translations from the French are my own.

11. Jambet & Lardreau, *L'Ange*, 101.

12. Edelman, *No Future*, 4

13. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 135.

Social Death

There is another form of death that captures within it an antagonism that grounds and thereby structures our very world. It also points more radically to humankind as accidental rather than essential. This form of death structures our very world even beyond reproductive futurity and arguably structures the very jouissance found in the death drive. In this form of death we find the impossibility of coherence even as the death it brings promises to provide coherence to those who are not subject to it. This is death in the form of social death and the figure of such death is the slave.

This is the haunting thesis of Orlando Patterson in his *Slavery and Social Death*. For Patterson the value of the slave to a master is the slave's strangeness to the community she is enslaved within. Yet, it is this very strangeness that is what makes the slave a threat to the community.¹⁴ The slave only has relation to the community through the master and by necessity has no roots in the community. This is the meaning of the slave's natal alienation. The slave is a non-being, an unborn being, and only exists as the living dead.¹⁵ Slavery comes to be defined by Patterson then as the "permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons."¹⁶

Patterson considers the way in which Christianity developed in relation to the death of Jesus in relation to the figure of slavery. In fact, for the early Christians, slavery "was a major source of metaphors that informed the symbolic structure of Christianity."¹⁷ Paul's theology had these metaphors at its very heart in the themes of redemption, justification, and reconciliation. Patterson notes two contradictory readings of the death of Jesus in relation to the slave. The first says that Jesus' death pays for the sin that led to spiritual enslavement. In this understanding, "the sinner, strictly speaking, was not emancipated, but died anew in Christ, who became his new master. Spiritual freedom was divine enslavement."¹⁸

The other symbolic interpretation is said by Patterson to be more liberating, but for that its reasoning is far more complex. In Patterson's ontological study of the slave, the slave is one who gives up her freedom by choosing physical life. That is, their freedom is given over to social death and they would only be free had they chosen biological death. The slave, Patterson says, "lacked the courage to make such a choice."¹⁹ What is completely new

14. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge 1982, 38.

15. For a full elaboration of the creation of non-being in dialogue with Deleuze's philosophy of immanence, see Barber, "The Creation of Non-Being".

16. Patterson, *Slavery*, 13.

17. Patterson, *Slavery*, 70.

18. Patterson, *Slavery*, 71.

19. Patterson, *Slavery*, 71.

in the death of Jesus is that he annuls the condition of slavery by returning to the origin, “to the original point of enslavement and, on behalf of the sinner about to fall, gave his own life so that the sinner might live and be free.”²⁰ Yet, outside of the symbolic, is this action even imaginable? One cannot die the death of another and this fundamental truth means that the liberating message of Jesus’ death is doomed to only be a story of liberation and not liberation itself. The attempt to make Christianity a slave religion that would liberate those slaves is doomed in its attempt to make coherence out of social death, just in the same way that our attempts to fashion coherence out of biological death simply covers over the scream of flesh.

In the Quranic response to Christian claims regarding the death of Jesus, we find it written that “they did not slay him; nor did they crucify him, but it appeared so unto them” (4:157).²¹ The tradition has come to read this enigmatic ayat in interesting ways, including that one of the followers of Jesus assumed his appearance and died in his stead. Such an idea was horrific to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149–1210), author of *al-Tafsir al-kabir* (*The Great Commentary*), who worried that this suggested we could not rely on our senses to identify individuals.²² But this is perhaps the only way that the second reading Patterson identified could work. If all people take names that are not names, if one could die for another because everyone is dispossessed of their proper identity, then there would be no stories, and so there would be no social death because there would be no social life. The ethical way of conceiving of death requires that we stop making a story for death. Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) writes of the relationship between naming and death, “Behind what is named, there is the unnamable. It is in fact because it is unnameable, with all the resonances you can give to this name, that it is akin to the quintessential unnameable, that is to say to death.”²³ Perhaps we need to find some way to think the unnameable, to think the scream, if we are to have a thought adequate to death.

Writing again about Bacon, Deleuze locates a distinction between pessimism and optimism. Bacon is “cerebrally pessimistic” for he can only see horrors to paint. He is “nervously optimistic,” however, because this figuration of horror is secondary and he moves toward painting “Figure without horror.”²⁴ Choose the scream over the horror and paint the scream, not the horror. Writing about Bacon’s famous painting of Pope Innocent X (1574–

20. Patterson, *Slavery*, 71.

21. This translation comes from *The Study Quran*, New York 2015.

22. See Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir* as cited in *The Study Quran* 4:157.

23. Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, New York 1991, 211.

24. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 61.

1655) screaming, Deleuze writes that we must paint the violence of sensation over the violence of the spectacle. In relation to Edelman's rejection of the future we find Deleuze writing: "The invisible forces, the powers of the future – are they not already upon us, and much more insurmountable than the worse spectacle and even the worst pain? Yes, in a certain sense – every piece of meat testifies to this."²⁵

In this work Deleuze is clearly too enthralled to a kind of overturning of the hierarchy of death over life by reversing that hierarchy. In giving attention to this form of death we give attention to the scream, rather than the horror. To the flesh, rather than the body. The slave is unnameable, quite literally. There are no records of the names of those en fleshed as slaves, there is no memory as there is for the victims of the Holocaust. In the social death of the slave we find the form of death and the figure of death only tangential come to matter, and they matter as a meat-thing, a suffering flesh without stories. The form of death is pitiless or inspires nothing and the figure of death draws out pity or compassion from us through the sensation of it. "Sensation is in the body [...] Sensation is what is painted."²⁶ But if the figure of the slave is a form, it is that form where accidents are essence. Slavery as inextricably linked to flesh, rather than to personhood or humanity.²⁷ Rather than looking to the death of Christ as a story of *sinthomosexual* rebellion or liberation, the true threat to social order is found in the site of the unnameable scream. For the stories of death and life always betray the suffering they claim to speak for, to give meaning to. To provide a grammar for screaming one must give up on coherence, on origins and ends, and instead give attention to the sensations of the flesh, without history, without land, and without kin.²⁸ ▲

SUMMARY

Death is at the heart of the Christian story. The genesis of the Christian story begins, in part, with the death of Christ. This essay examines the death of Christ and its central role in the genesis of Christian culture and its story. The power of death in the story of Christianity is analyzed through a survey of the death of Christ read through three central theorizations of death. Biological death is analyzed as the material cessation of a life. The death drive, as conceptualized in psychoanalysis and

25. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 61–62.

26. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 35.

27. This argument is made by Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics* 17:2 (1987), 64–81.

28. This idea is developed by Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign", *Critical Sociology* 42 (2014), 583–597.

queer theory, is analyzed through the figure of the *sinthomosexual* and the threat this figure of death poses to social order. Social death, a primary concept in the study of racial slavery, is analyzed as a form of death that is itself the foundation or ground of that social order. These disparate forms and figures of death are analyzed through concepts derived from Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, especially his work on figure and form in his study of Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*.