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Introduction

'KITSCH'

The better to earth what follows, let me begin with an image from the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, by Milan Kundera. The character described here, Sabina, is a Czech artist, one of those who emigrated in 1968. The passage from which this is taken is headed 'Parades'. It speaks of her feelings about political demonstrations.

> During her studies, Sabina lived in a dormitory. On May Day all the students had to report early in the morning for the parade. Student officials would comb the building to ensure that no one was missing. Sabina hid in the lavatory. Not until long after the building was empty would she go back to her room. It was quieter than anywhere she could remember. The only sound was the parade music echoing in the distance. It was as though she had found refuge inside a shell and the only sound she could hear was the sea of an inimical world.
>
> A year or two after emigrating, she happened to be in Paris on the anniversary of the Russian invasion of her country. A protest march had been scheduled, and she felt driven to take part. Fists raised high, the young Frenchmen shouted out slogans, but to her surprise she found herself unable to shout along with them. She lasted no more than a few minutes in the parade.
>
> When she told her French friends about it, they were amazed. 'You mean you don't want to fight the occupation of your country?' She would have liked to tell them that behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison. But she knew she would never be able to make them understand. Embarrassed, she changed the subject.[1]

Subsequently, Kundera goes on to associate this 'more basic, pervasive evil' with the phenomenon he terms 'kitsch'.

'Kitsch': for Kundera the term means more than just bad art *per*

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se; it means the whole mentality out of which bad art springs, and to which it appeals.[2]

A largely self-censored perception of reality – governed by indulgence in a communal narcissism, the desire to feel good about what one is part of – kitsch is in the first instance the raw material of any form of *propaganda*. Indeed, Kundera tells us, 'Sabina's initial revolt against Communism was aesthetic rather than ethical in character. What repelled her was not nearly so much the ugliness of the Communist world (ruined castles transformed into cow sheds) as the mask of beauty it tried to wear – in other words, Communist Kitsch'[3]: the ideal expressed in the glowing joyousness of the May Day parade, or 'the incredible innocence and chastity' of Soviet films in the Stalinist era.

Later, in exile, she is the guest of an American senator. His children are running about on the grass, and 'gazing dreamily at them' the senator is moved to exclaim: 'Now that's what I call happiness'. 'Behind his words', Kundera goes on,

> there was more than joy at seeing children run and grass grow; there was a deep understanding of the plight of a refugee from a Communist country where, the senator was convinced, no grass grew or children ran...
>
> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!
>
> The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!
>
> It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.[4]

Kitsch, in short, is about feeling oneself to be, quite simply, on the side of everything natural and decent. It is what springs from, and feeds, that warmth of sentimental feeling. And in this sense it serves to express, as Kundera puts it 'a categorical agreement with being'. So too with the May Day ceremony: 'The unwritten, unsung motto of the parade was not "Long live Communism!" but "Long live life!" The power and cunning of Communist politics lay in the fact that it appropriated this slogan. For it was this idiotic tautology ("Long live life!") which attracted people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade.'[5] In the same way the crowd of protesters feels good: for they too are taking part in the 'Grand March...on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness'.[6]

In a phrase which neatly captures both the regressive nature of kitsch and its intrinsic futility, Kundera defines it as: 'the absolute denial of shit'. In other words, 'kitsch excludes everything from its

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purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence'.[7] Similarly, he speaks of it as: 'a folding screen set up to curtain off death'.[8] In another work, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, he describes a crowd circle dancing in the centre of Prague on the occasion of some festivity. It is in June 1950, the day after Milada Horakova, a Socialist politician, and the artist Zavis Kalandra have been hanged: 'And knowing full well that the day before in their fair city one woman and one surrealist had been hanged by the neck, the young Czechs went on dancing and dancing, and they danced all the more frantically because their dance was the manifestation of their innocence, the purity which shone forth so brilliantly against the black villainy of the two public enemies who had betrayed the people and its hopes.'[9] Eventually (in Kundera's own surrealist vision) led by Paul Eluard intoning his poems, the dancers – still dancing – take off into the sky, like angels soaring above the earth.

In general, kitsch has to do with the affirmation of collective innocence – as, also, in the case of another group of circle dancers which Kundera describes, at a political demonstration in the west, facing the riot police: 'Their hearts are overflowing with an intense feeling of innocence: they are not united by a *march*, like soldiers or fascist commandos; they are united by a *dance*, like children. And they can't wait to spit their innocence in the cops' faces...'[10]

Clearly, the intrinsic dynamic of kitsch is deeply authoritarian – even when pitted against the riot police. Whatever shape its self-expression takes – whether parade, circle dance, religious liturgy, or whatever – the collective harmony kitsch offers is only to be bought at the price of an abandonment of free, critical thought. Kitsch is what inspires the crowd; it is the cliché which bonds the crowd together – over against the autonomous individual. It is the acceptable face of the will to suppress and destroy; the means by which the thought-control of the collective (the hierarchy or the peer group) is dressed up and internalized, rendered seductive.

How, then, is that seduction to be undone?

Sabina's distaste for kitsch is grounded, and finds expression, in her calling as an artist. Not everyone, however, is called to be an artist; nor, obviously, is kitsch a problem only for artists. What other effective basis for a spiritual community, truly free from kitsch, is there available? Where exactly would the lines of division have to be drawn, and how, in order to secure such a community? How far, one might ask, is our culture – as a whole – actually built upon foundations of ideological kitsch? Insofar as it was, emancipation

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would have to mean a sort of despairing abandonment of all tradition. Or, to what extent is the ideological kitsch by which we are governed merely a superficial deformation of traditions which are in themselves quite alien to it; these traditions being therefore genuinely recoverable as potential resources for our moral education?

And how, in particular, does this apply to our Christian religious inheritance?

I have no doubt that – *in terms of its central logic* – there is that in the Christian gospel which is, indeed, eminently recoverable in this sense. But on the other hand, no spiritual tradition is immune from also being corrupted into kitsch; no matter how authentic in itself.

In this book I am basically concerned with the delineation of that whole issue, in theological terms. It is a book about Hegel, because I know of no other thinker who seems to me to come so close to the heart of the matter in this regard; no other who has grappled, as I hope to show, in such a radical way with the problem of Christian religious kitsch; or who has so decisive a grasp on the countervailing inner truth of the gospel, as an affirmation of (to use his own formula) 'the infinite value of the individual as such'.[11]

'INCLUSIVE' VERSUS 'EXCLUSIVE' APPROACHES TO CHRISTOLOGY

What is at stake here is how one understands the manner in which Christ 'represents' humanity. The key question is to what extent that understanding is a strong, or 'inclusive' one, where the main emphasis is on the *universal* truths about humanity and about God towards which the story points; or to what extent it is a weak, or 'exclusive' one, where on the contrary all the emphasis is on the distinctive *particularity* of Jesus, his set-apartness from the rest of us.

Thus, I do not just want to argue that the gospel can be presented in a way that is free of kitsch. I want to suggest that there is a certain sense in which the gospel itself is actually *centred*, precisely, on an image of the destructiveness of kitsch. That is how I would see the cross. Kitsch titillates; kitsch warms the heart; *in extremis* kitsch also crucifies, or justifies crucifixion.

In particular, it seems to me, this is what the Pharisees stand for in the story. It is surely vital that we should get beyond the traditional caricature of them (especially in Protestant polemic).[12] The spirituality the Pharisees propounded was *not* a peculiarly

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legalistic one; that was not what led to Jesus' harsh words against them. Rather, his attack might far better be taken as being directed against the more or less universal phenomenon of the kitsch mentality, which they embody; not at all as an exceptional sort of religious establishment but, on the contrary, as a quite typical one. The destructiveness of the sanhedrin which consented to Christ's passion would, in that case, symbolize the latent destructiveness of all such thinking. And the Roman penal institution of crucifixion would further underline the point, inasmuch as the verdict of crucifixion is a verdict passed not only on the particular individual crucified, but at the same time on the very concept of 'the individual'.

For, after all, crucifixion had a very specific application. Let us recite the basic facts. It was pre-eminently the *servile supplicium*, the slaves' punishment:[13] its use thus both reflected and reinforced the institution of slavery in Roman society, with all that that meant. Whilst there were exceptional cases in which Roman citizens were crucified, this was generally frowned upon.[14] On the other hand, crucifixion was in very widespread use as the standard punishment for rebellious slaves, and for rebellious foreigners – who were reckoned, in this respect, to be on the same level as slaves. It was essentially 'a political and military punishment'.[15] Violent criminals, temple robbers, deserters might be crucified. But mass crucifixions also followed the great slave revolts, especially the last one, that of Spartacus which ended in 71 BC. And the crucifixion of Jesus takes its place historically as merely one in a whole multitude of crucifixions in Judaea, as the Romans battled with the nationalist insurgents there in the period from 4 AD to 70 AD. No elaborate legal process was required. Nor was there the slightest hint of a recognition of any respect due to the condemned man simply as a human individual – such as might have led to a softening of the punishment. On the contrary, crucifixion was supposed to involve a maximum both of obscene horror and of publicity, the better to serve as a deterrent. It was commonly accompanied by torture, a flogging at least, and the cross was erected at a crossroads, in a theatre, or, as in the case of Jesus, on high ground for all to see.

But what is done to one, in a symbolic ritual of this sort, is at a certain level of meaning done to all.

And if the Christian gospel in principle affirms 'the infinite value of the individual as such', then that is surely due, not least, to the way in which the counter-verdict of the resurrection directly reverses

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this gruesome symbolism of the cross. Christ's role as representative of all humanity thus actually has its roots in the totalitarian logic of the Roman penal order. In proclaiming the *absolute* worthlessness of this particular slave or foreigner, reducing his body in this way to a display of the merest trash, crucifixion also constitutes an absolute denial of any value intrinsic to human individuality, which would transcend outward social distinctions or be independent of one's deeds as judged by those in power. And it thereby drastically devalues individual human life. This is what crucifixion says; and insofar as the story is understood representatively, this is what the resurrection of Christ turns right upside down.

Clearly, therefore, with Good Friday at its centre, there is that in the gospel which will always, at any rate, tend to resist the co-opting of Christian religious faith for use as (in Kundera's phrase) 'a folding screen to curtain off death'. Nor is it at all surprising if, from the point of view of a spirituality still stuck at the level of kitsch, the original proclamation of a crucified saviour should have appeared to be nothing but scandalous nonsense: 'Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross... an offence (*skandalon*) to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (1 Corinthians 1:22–3).[16]

This initial scandal is then, moreover, further reinforced by all that is involved in the paradoxical identification of Jesus as the Christ, or Messiah. For what is here superimposed upon the traditional expectation of the Messiah as a triumphant conquering king is, after all, just about the most discordant image conceivable. 'My kingdom does not belong to this world' (John 18: 36): if Jesus is 'lord' and 'king' – mediating to us, as the Christ, the 'lordship' and 'kingship' of God – this is in human, worldly terms precisely *not* as a king, but as a *prophet*.[17] And in the Hebrew tradition king and prophet appear in many respects as, so to speak, anti-types. The king is the symbolic embodiment and guarantor of national unity, while the prophet is the exact opposite: the God-inspired individual, the frequently marginalized, awkward critic. Thus the authority of the king, as commander in chief, rested in large measure on his claim to military glory. It rested also on his sacred, cultic role as the anointed ruler of God's people. True, the great majority of those who bore the title 'prophet' in ancient Judah and Israel no doubt fitted without difficulty into the established order. But in the great written works

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of prophecy which have come down to us both these basic foundations of royal power appear to be swept away. To trust in military might, and to accumulate war horses and chariots, is taken in a number of texts as equivalent to a fundamental lack of trust in God.[18] As the God of Amos famously declares:

> I spurn with loathing your pilgrim-feasts;
> I take no pleasure in your sacred ceremonies.
> When you bring me your whole-offerings and your
> grain-offerings I shall not accept them,
> nor pay heed to your shared offerings of stall-fed beasts.
> Spare me the sound of your songs;
> I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes.
> Instead let justice flow on like a river
> and righteousness like an never-failing torrent.
>
> (Amos 5: 21–4)

The importance of the national unity focussed on the king and on the priestly cult is by no means denied; but it is affirmed by Amos and those who followed him strictly on the basis of a profound reverence for the transcendent – to which the inspired individual prophet, ostensibly at least outside any loyalties of caste, is given direct, authoritative access.

The Hebrew scriptures as a whole reflect a wide range of opposing views about the nature of kingship, with one pole represented by the full-blown, cosmologically conceived imperialism to be found in texts like Psalm 2. The direct linkage of various messianic prophecies to the Davidic line belongs in this category. And there is also a good deal of militaristic nationalism and priestly advocacy of the cult to be found in this literature. But then, considering the norms of the surrounding world, this is nothing more than what one would expect – and what is surely far more remarkable is the simultaneous existence of another, quite contrary kind of tradition.[19] There is in fact a strand in 1 Samuel which presents the people's original choice to abandon their earlier ways and have a king rule over them 'like all the other peoples have' as being tantamount to a direct rejection of the kingship of God;[20] a notion also echoed in the words of Gideon, in Judges 8: 22–3; as well as in Hosea 13: 10–11.[21] And then, too, there is the acutely anti-monarchical satire of Jotham's fable (Judges 9: 7–15).[22]

How was this possible? It is not that any alternative constitutional system is seriously being advocated. It is quite simply that the

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lordship of the God who speaks through the prophets contrasts with the lordship of earthly potentates far more than it reflects it; tends to relativize rather than confirm it. And the power of this tradition within the culture centred on the worship of Yahweh meant that one of the most peculiar features of that society was the space it evidently held open for even the most radical forms of dissent from the prevailing order. The kings could neither prevent subversive ideas from being written down, nor could they suppress what had been written. In such a compact and easily overseeable little society this is certainly remarkable. When one considers the divine status of the pharaohs in Egypt, or the semi-divine status of the monarchs of Babylonia, Assyria and Persia, the contrast is stark: the relationship between the prophet Nathan and King David illustrated by the story in 2 Samuel 11–12 would hardly have been possible under those other regimes, for instance; since the whole point of the story lies in the king's eventual recognition that he is, after all, nothing more than a man ('You are the man'); an individual with moral responsibility for his misdeeds like any other individual. This unique relativizing of worldly authority is indeed one of the most significant practical correlates to the uniqueness expressed, in cultic terms, by the rigorous prohibition of sacred images and of any form of syncretism. The continual 'relapses' of the kings, from Solomon onwards, into 'idolatry' were not perhaps altogether unnatural. And the 'scandalous' Christian appropriation of the tradition of messianic hope, which identifies it with the figure of the crucified rather than with any this-worldly king, might very well be seen as a decisive extension of that whole – from any sort of authoritarian viewpoint perennially scandalous – aspect of the Hebrew tradition.

The problem is, though, that the scandal here must in principle be a scandal to *any* group or institution possessing its own authoritarian orthodoxy – including, not least, *the church itself*, insofar as it has developed in that direction!

The affirmation of a crucified saviour is scandalous in this sense (a) to the extent that Christ is taken to represent the individual dissenter, the questioner, even the heretic, in general; and (b) to the extent that the suffering of Christ is taken as signifying a solidarity with all suffering – the suffering of our enemies as well.

But it is a temptation which any community faces, to take the easier path by both repressing internal divisions and restricting its concern to its own immediate interests And how much the more so

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when, like the early church, it is a small body struggling to survive in an extremely hostile environment. There is, indeed, a profound ambiguity already discernible in Paul's presentation of the scandal of the cross. On the one hand, Paul is insistent that the scandal of the cross also leads further. The passage in 1 Corinthians 1 continues: 'My friends, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are wise, by any human standard, few powerful or of noble birth. Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things without rank or standing in the world, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order.' In a world which divides individual from individual, and which links the self-esteem of certain social groups to their contempt for others, the church in principle stands for the opposite: 'Baptized into union with him, you have all put on Christ like a garment. There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 27–8).[23] And this then further gives rise to what one might perhaps term 'the Pauline theology of liberation':

> This is what I mean: so long as the heir is a minor, he is no better off than a slave, even though the whole estate is his; he is subject to guardians and trustees until the date fixed by his father. So it was with us: during our minority we were slaves, subject to the elemental spirits of the universe, but when the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to buy freedom for those who were under the law, in order that we might attain that status of sons.
>
> To prove that you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying "Abba! Father!" You are therefore no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, an heir by God's own act. (Galatians 4: 1–7; and cf. Romans 8: 14–17)

On the other hand, the context of this experience was the little community's tenuous struggle for survival, faced by the natural hostility of what it perceived as the divisively oppressive surrounding world. For the Roman authorities it was, after all, crime enough that Paul and his followers were engaged in a mission actively to propagate Jewish 'atheism' among Gentiles: Jewish rejection of the imperial cult, along with all other 'idolatrous' worship, being from the official point of view tolerable only insofar as it was confined, in a peaceful way, to the one people among whom it had at least the justification of being traditional[24]. The God of the dissident prophets

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was no more congenial to the upholders of the Roman imperial system than to the upholders of any other authoritarian regime; and the worship of one who had been crucified by the entirely legitimate order of a Roman procurator was scarcely calculated to soften the offence. To be sure, when brought before the justices Christians might make the sort of loyalty oath suggested in Romans 13.[25] But the dictates of their faith equally bound them, from the outset, to fail the more serious test of loyalty which consisted in an 'idolatrous' burning of incense before an image of the emperor. Paul of course had had personal experience of being on the receiving end of persecution; those to whom he wrote had, all of them, made the – no doubt often very painful – decision to reject the traditional faith of their families and their previous social circle.

They had been 'set free', he writes. Set free from what, exactly? Set free from sin; from the Jewish law (and its pagan equivalents); from death: these three basic ideas sit closely together in Paul's mind, recurring in various permutations.[26] The link at one level, no doubt, lies directly in the three-fold response of any authoritarian order to that which challenges it: moral condemnation, an appeal for loyalty to the wider group, threats. Baptism signifies that one has 'died' to sin, made a truly radical break from the surrounding world.[27] The harsh verdict on the world which this implies reciprocates the equally harsh condemnation which the basic project of the Christian community was always liable to evoke from those outside; whilst the Pauline concept of the forgiveness of sins can be seen as underpinning the essential self-confidence required for dissent: 'Who will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen? Not God, who acquits!' (Romans 8: 33). Again, the issue symbolically at stake for Paul in a question such as whether or not pagan converts should be circumcised, is the issue of how far the scandalous novelty of the gospel should be allowed free rein over traditional patterns of loyalty. And the whole apocalyptic element in his thinking, too, has to be seen against the background of a situation in which both he and those to whom he is writing actually faced an ever-present threat of torture and death. At all events, the imaginative leap required – across the dividing centuries – for us to comprehend what Paul is saying must, to a very large extent, be a matter of grasping just how scandalous the gospel he preached really was.

Yet it is not difficult to see how, in this context, the experience of

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