

# **Opium or Liberation? (Notes towards an Investigation)**

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SOSC 489 Thesis

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10 November 2011

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*“Is faith a narcotic dream in a world of heavily armed robbers, or is it an awakening?”*

– Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Introduction**

If Merton were alive today, he could be forgiven for concluding that the heavily armed robbers have won. The Cold War is over, and with it, apparently, any serious hope of an alternative to capitalism. Welfare state capitalism cowers in Europe, ‘populist capitalism’ is being established with the ‘help’ of the West in the Third World, a ‘neo-liberal’ capitalism of unprecedented intensity dominates the English-speaking countries, and the next world power seems to be arising in the former Communist world, pioneering a new form of authoritarian capitalism (Žižek 2008a: 362, Jameson 2009: 358, Wallerstein 2006).

Not only geographic regions, but entire areas of life are being brought under the irresistible banner of global capital. Hitherto independent areas of life that could conceivably have posed a challenge to – or at least a retreat from – capitalism are being commodified; aesthetics, worldviews, science, culture in general (Jameson 2009: 266,333, Žižek 2009c: 25, Jameson 1984). We are in an era of universal commodification, a “historical stage of capitalism which includes everything from the labor on the ground to the form of the thoughts and fantasies in people’s heads”, in which it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson 2009: 362, Žižek 1994: 1).

It is in this context that I wish to discuss a religion that emerged in another time where another multicultural global Empire seemed undefeatable and inescapable. This religion arose among a Middle Eastern people who had been failing to liberate themselves from domination and occupation for hundreds of years; and it was centred on a founder who was summarily executed by that Empire in the manner reserved for slaves and rebels. This religion even celebrated as its founding event the very moment of its founder’s defeat (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:10)<sup>2</sup>. Yet that religion survives today while that Empire does not.

Of course, the most obvious difference between religion today and religion in the time of Christ is that today’s societies are secular. Yet perhaps that is the key to Christianity’s ability to challenge the global dominance of capitalism. Modernity<sup>3</sup> is characterised by religion’s autonomy from particular cultural forms, it can no longer be an “organic binding force of social substance” (Žižek 2003: 3-5). According to Žižek, this leaves just two possible roles religion can take; *therapeutic*; helping individuals “function better in the existing order” or *critical*; helping the discontented “articulate[] what is wrong with this order” (Žižek 2003: 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Merton 1968: x.

<sup>2</sup> This traumatic founding event was even seen as the Christians’ *victory* over the powers of the world (Colossians 2:9-15). All biblical references are taken or paraphrased from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>3</sup> And this is far from fully undone by ‘post-modernity’ and ‘post-secularism’.

Now that Christianity has been shunted from its official position near the top of that order, it could be the perfect time to try and force open cracks within it, from which Christianity can articulate discontent, and show that an alternative is possible (Hauerwas 1988: 443). Yet, equally, Christianity could be surviving primarily as a crutch for those who need it to get through each day and continue working, buying and obeying. It is this ambiguity that I wish to explore.

*Research questions*

1. Which expressions of Christianity operating in New Zealand today function ideologically to support status quo power distributions, and which expressions offer an effective utopian challenge to that status quo?
2. How can we understand the ways in which this ideology and utopia operate?
3. What determines the ideological or radical-utopian nature of particular expressions of Christianity?

My original intention was to focus on contemporary expressions of Christianity operating in New Zealand. However, it soon became apparent that to do this effectively would require substantial theoretical and historical groundwork. I wish to study today's Christianity in the context of its origin as a radical utopian movement, its lapse into ideology, and its periodic glimmerings of radical-utopian potential in the centuries since. I also wish to draw on theoretical and practical perspectives on Christianity's socio-political functioning, and try to incorporate them into an overall frame.

The constraints of this short thesis have not granted me enough room to give my primary area of interest – contemporary New Zealand Christianity – the in-depth attention it deserves. In a nod to Althusser, I have subtitled this report 'Notes towards an Investigation', to indicate that it is a discussion of issues that ought to be considered if an investigation were to be undertaken to answer the above research questions, and a map of possible directions empirical research could take. This approach has meant that this particular discussion focuses as much on historical Christianity as contemporary expressions, and much more on theoretical perspectives than on empirical research. This essay can be considered a historical and speculative methodological prelude to designing potential research into contemporary, empirical expressions of Christianity in New Zealand.

The thesis is divided into three main sections. In the first, I explore the two main sociological concepts through which I will view Christianity; ideology and utopia. In the second, I map a historical and theoretical account of Christianity beginning as a counter-ideological utopian movement, becoming ideological for much of its history in various ways described by various theorists; and coming full circle to various theoretical articulations of Christianity's radical-utopian potential today. Lastly, I suggest potential research that could be undertaken into Christianity operating in contemporary New Zealand. I provide a few select examples of

Christian expressions, primarily as described on public internet websites, and offer a very provisional analysis of the ideological and/or utopian content that research could perhaps uncover more decisively.

**Exploring and defining concepts:**

**II. Ideology**

‘Ideology’ and ‘utopia’ are both problematic concepts which have carried diverse meanings in academic and popular use, so it pays to spend some time clarifying what I mean when I use the terms<sup>4</sup>.

The word ‘ideology’ was coined in 1796 by French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, who proposed a new science involving the critical analysis of ideas (Thompson 1990: 29-30). This meaning was essentially spoiled four years later by Napoleon, who used it polemically against de Tracy and other republican ‘*idéologues*’, whom he accused of abstract idealism (Thompson 1990: 34-37). Through this polemical use, the word ‘ideology’ gradually began to refer to (erroneous) idea-systems themselves (1990: 31-32). This critical usage of the term has been one of two main ways in which it has been used, and is particularly associated with the Marxist tradition.

Karl Marx himself first used the term in direct analogy to Napoleon, comparing the German ‘Young Hegelians’ to the French ‘*idéologues*’ in *The German Ideology*, and advocating for materialism against idealist “false consciousness” (Jameson 2009: 323-324). The concept has since been developed as a way for Marxist theory to “complete itself” by explaining why so many people have not intuited or accepted a Marxist analysis of society; the concept of ideology is essentially Marxism’s explanation for its own rejection “within the terms of its own system” (Jameson 2009: 318-319). Beyond this first “polemical conception” of ideology, Marx developed an “epiphenomenal conception” of ideology as a superstructural reflection of material reality, covertly expressing the interests of the dominant class (Thompson 1990: 37-40). Later Marxists such as Vladimir Lenin extended this to any idea system expressing a class interest; in both cases, what is important is not the falsity of an ideology, but the class interests it veils (Jameson 2009: 325-328).

Subsequent Marxists have widened the concept of ideology to include what Marx analysed as “illusions”, “fixed ideas”, “spirits” and “ghosts” (Thompson 1990: 41). This “latent conception” of ideology extends ideology beyond overt ideas to “the lived experience of daily life – irrespective of people’s official opinions and intellectual values” (Thompson, 1990: 40-44, Jameson 2009: 328-332). In this conception, what is important is that an idea or experience functions to sustain a relation of domination.

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<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson is optimistic about the ambiguity of the term ‘ideology’, noting that it forces us to confront the complexity of the concept itself (Jameson 2009: 317).

<sup>5</sup> Hence literally ‘idea-ology’, “science of ideas” (Thompson 1990: 30).

The second main way of defining ideology emerged among early 20<sup>th</sup>-century theorists, including Lenin Georg Lukács and Karl Mannheim (Thompson 1990: 44-47). These conceptions, which have also made their way into the vernacular, essentially define an ideology as any set or system of ideas. The main criticism that can be made of these neutral conceptions is that they deprive the concept of its critical edge which, although not original to the word, can be a useful tool of analysis (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1983: 158).

Of course, this is not to say that neutral conceptions look at ideologies uncritically. Marxist Göran Therborn, for example, defines ideology neutrally (Therborn 1980: 18), but looks critically and systematically at idea-systems, ironically similarly to de Tracy's original aim<sup>6</sup> (Thompson 1990: 48). Indeed, the entire development of the concept of ideology – from de Tracy's original proposal of a science of ideas, through polemical and critical conceptions and back to a scientific examination of idea-systems (ideology-ology?) – can be understood as part of what Freud called “the Copernican revolution in thought” over the last two centuries; an increasing “mistrust of reason” and consciousness (Jameson 2009: 317-318,323).

I aim to analyse religious ideas and experiences which support relations of domination, an accusation often made of Christianity. As there are other phrases for ideology as ‘idea-system’ (worldview, beliefs, discourse, culture etc.), I have opted for a critical definition. I am attracted to the broad focus of Thompson's definition of ideology as any “symbolic form” that functions to “establish and sustain relations of domination”<sup>7</sup> (1990: 54-58). However, he restricts his definition to “symbolic forms”, excluding other ways in which domination is supported, such as “apathy and indifference ... habit and routine” (1990: 56).

Ultimately, I find Slavoj Žižek's definition more useful; it is broader still, encompassing rituals, habits, apathy, cynicism, and common senses. For him, ideology is *any* content (true or false<sup>8</sup>; discursive, active, or emotive) that is “*functional with regard to some relation of social domination ... in an inherently non-transparent way*”<sup>10</sup> (Žižek 1994: 8). Žižek divides his definition into three ‘moments’, based on Hegel's moments of religion: doctrine, ritual and belief. He terms these ideology ‘In-itself’ (“ideology as a complex of ideas”, ideology ‘For-itself’, (“ideology in its externality”, and ideology ‘In-and-For-itself’ (the “‘spontaneous’ ideology at the heart of social ‘reality’ itself”) (Žižek 1994: 9-10)<sup>11</sup>.

The first moment is the most straightforward; concepts and beliefs “destined to convince us of [their] ‘truth’, yet actually serving some unavowed particular power interest” (Žižek 1994: 10-12). For the second moment, Žižek draws on Louis Althusser's concept of “Ideological

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<sup>6</sup> I will later draw on Therborn for critical analysis in my provisional research section.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis removed. All emphasis is unchanged unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> In a way Žižek's definition is like what Thompson would have produced if he had accepted Gramsci's notion that ideology is “largely unconscious and always institutional” (Eagleton 1991: 197).

<sup>9</sup> “if true, so much the better for the ideological effect” (Žižek 1994: 8).

<sup>10</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> This roughly corresponds to Jameson's passing comment about ideology's “constitutive features of belief, socially symbolic praxis and group mediation” (Jameson 2009: 316).

State Apparatuses” (Althusser 1970), describing the “material existence of ideology in ... practices, rituals and institutions”, which are not merely the external expression of internal ideas, but actually play a role in generating internal ideas (Žižek 1994: 12-14). The third moment refers to the “elusive network of implicit, quasi-’spontaneous’ presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of ‘non-ideological’ ... practices” (Žižek 1994: 14-15)<sup>12</sup>.

Žižek’s primary example of this mode of ideology today is what Marx called ‘commodity fetishism’; a religious term for “the troubling surplus of meaning an object is made to carry” as it is ‘commodified’, transubstantiated into a tradable commodity (Jameson 2009: 257,262, Ward 2003: 336). Marx did not use the term ‘ideology’ for commodity fetishism, and some have described ideology as losing importance amid the rising importance of consumption<sup>13</sup> (Jameson 2009: 266). However, insofar as reference to a “process without a subject” (Jameson 2009: 331-332) disguises the real power interests implicated in commodity fetishism, a reference to supposed “extra-ideological coercion” is “an ideological gesture *par excellence*” (Žižek 1994: 15).

Žižek’s conception of ideology is broad enough to include many of the diverse ways in which ideology can operate, and his account of the three moments of ideology provides a useful schema to explore three areas in which Christianity can operate ideologically<sup>14</sup>. Thus, when I use the term ‘ideology’ in this study I will be assuming Žižek’s definition<sup>15</sup>. However, Žižek does not delineate specific techniques or operations of ideology within each moment; systematic analysis would require going beyond Žižek. Here, Thompson again becomes useful with his “modes of operation of ideology” (1990: 60-66)<sup>16</sup>. Göran Therborn’s “mechanisms of subjection” are also helpful (Therborn 1980: 93-98)<sup>17</sup>. For the provisional research I undertake below, I will use the moments for an overall frame, and the modes and mechanisms for analysis within each moment<sup>18</sup>.

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12 Jameson’s equivalent to this third ‘moment’ of ideology is summed up as ‘reification’, which for Lukács was a combination of Marx’s concept of commodification and Max Weber’s ideas of rationalisation (Jameson 2009: 329).

13 Eg. Adorno (Jameson 2009: 266), Abercrombie, Hill & Turner (Therborn 1984: 168).

14 The correspondence is all the more appropriate considering I am simply transferring the three moments *back* into religion; Žižek picked them up from Hegel’s discussion of religion, “which, for Marx, was ideology *par excellence*” (Žižek 1994: 9).

15 I have found Thompson useful for a systematic history of the different definitions of ideology, as well as a systematic account of the specific methods by which ideology operates, but ultimately I find Žižek’s *definition* more helpful for this investigation, for the reasons mentioned. To reiterate, Žižek’s definition of ideology is any content that is “functional with regard to some relation of social domination ... in an inherently non-transparent way” (Žižek 1994: 8).

16 Thompson’s ‘modes’ are a non-exhaustive, yet comprehensive, list of “typical strategies of symbolic construction” sorted into “five general modes through which ideology can operate”; legitimization, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification (Thompson 1990: 60).

17 These ‘mechanisms’ do not cover the full gamut of Thompson’s broad (and neutral) definition of ideology, but are his way of explaining the ways that obedience to a ruling class is ideologically maintained, read through the prism of Therborn’s notion that ideology tells us what exists, what is good, and what is possible (Therborn 1980: 18). Therborn gives two examples for each category; ‘accommodation’ and ‘sense of inevitability’ for what is, ‘sense of representation’ and ‘deference’ for what is good, and ‘fear’ and ‘resignation’ for what is possible (Therborn 95-98).

18 As Thompson and Therborn use different definitions of ideology to Žižek, their modes and mechanisms do

### III. Utopia

Utopia is arguably even more conceptually diverse than ideology; as well as being a negative or neutral term, it can be positive too. The word derives from Thomas More's genre-forging 1516 book of the same name, intended as a pun meaning a 'good place' that is 'no place'<sup>19</sup> (Kumar 2003: 64). Subsequent definitions have tended to focus on one or the other of these two aspects. Marx used the term derogatively for unrealistic socialist dreaming that will amount to nothing and become a "subset of ideology", while Mannheim considered it the functional opposite of ideology; for Mannheim, 'utopian' dreaming that does not serve to transform the status quo does not deserve the title (Levitas 2007: 289).

Utopia is typically traced to dual ancient sources: Greek conceptions of the 'ideal city' and Judaeo-Christian prophecies of the coming kingdom of God. The former used perfection as a noun, placing it in a (separate, timeless) *place*, while the latter used it as a verb, to be attained within (future) *time*<sup>20</sup> (Kumar 2003: 66-67). Krishan Kumar denotes these the 'pre-history' of utopia, and declares that 'utopia proper' did not begin until More (Kumar 2003: 68). For Kumar, utopia is a rational and utilitarian description (unlike Judaeo-Christian prophecy) of an egalitarian society (unlike Greek ideal cities). This seems arbitrary, effectively defining utopia as 'modern, secular utopia'. As Kumar excludes both the period and the mood in which Christian utopian visions were formulated, his definition is unhelpful for this investigation<sup>21</sup>.

Ruth Levitas opts for a broader definition inspired by Ernst Bloch, whereby utopia is "the expression of the desire for a better way of being" (Levitas 2007: 290). This is a wide, perhaps universal, phenomenon. Paralleling the (ideological) suggestion that we are living in a 'post-ideological' age, late modernity is characterised by a (utopian) anti-utopianism, where pragmatic, piecemeal changes are preferred to grand utopian visions (Levitas 2007: 297-300). This fits into the phenomenon Žižek describes as 'post-politics', which shuns all transcendent

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not always cover the entire field I would wish to analyse (though using two theorists has meant that they sometimes make up for each other's gaps). This is something I would need to address if I was to undertake research in this area; particularly, I would need to find more detailed analysis for the second moment, the ways ritual and institution function ideologically, which Thompson omits. Žižek's main source for this moment, Althusser's own "notes towards an investigation" whose subtitle I have co-opted, is similar to Žižek in providing overall theory, backed up by illustrative examples from his own experience, rather than in-depth analysis. However, as my 'research' is ultimately just an suggestion of how I might proceed with empirical research and some examples of the kind of religious activity I may wish to study, Thompson and Therborn's modes and mechanisms will suffice.

<sup>19</sup> *Eutopia* = good place, *outopia* = no place (Kumar 2003: 64).

<sup>20</sup> Zygmunt Bauman notes that utopia as a place is rendered problematic now that there are no undiscovered places left on the globe (Bauman 2003: 22). This would seem to indicate that the Judaeo-Christian sense of utopia within time is more appropriate today than the hope of finding a utopia in another place, particularly if we are to reject notions of a sequestered spiritual realm, as we will discuss later. However, Bauman also says that the concept of a future is increasingly irrelevant to today's imagination (2003: 22-23).

<sup>21</sup> Even modern Christian utopia is not a modern utopia in Kumar's terms, as it sees itself enacting ancient utopian visions, rather than formulating a new vision that is (perhaps) inspired by the ancients. Kumar does not class as (modern) utopia any modern movements which seek to directly enact these ancient visions (Kumar 2003).

causes as ‘totalitarian’, instead advocating personal enjoyment and self-expression<sup>22</sup> (Žižek 2008b: 40-42).

However, if utopia is defined in a broader sense, we can identify the currently hegemonic version of utopia; searching for ‘a different today’ rather than a transformed tomorrow. This can be glossed as more responsible searches for “civil repairs” (Alexander 2001), but is more likely to become a search for individual satisfaction within current social and economic systems (Bauman 2003, Levinas 2007: 300). Moreover, such ‘pragmatism’ fails to criticise the largely unquestioned underlying utopia of maximised economic growth (Levitas 2007: 298-301). This ‘anti-utopian utopianism’ can be just as utopian as any explicit utopian vision<sup>23,24</sup>.

Given the social and ecological havoc the unconscious, unrelenting utopia of growth is wreaking, Levitas believes that an “explicit adoption of utopian thinking” is required to provide the necessary radical, holistic break from current assumptions and systems (2007: 301-302). Both Levitas and Kumar agree that artistic and literary utopias are more effective at “compelling [a] change of attitude” than utopian social theory (Kumar 2003: 70-71). Christian utopian visions, which have more in common with these more emotive utopias, could potentially provide more powerful narratives to compete with capitalism than the academic objections of social theorists.

However, in Levitas’s account, utopia can have either transformative or ideological effects (Levitas 2007: 290-91). Levitas’ broad conception of utopia seems appropriate for studying the Christian tradition, which almost always has some conception of a ‘golden age’ or ‘paradise’, whether modelled on the Jewish earthly future redemption or the Greek ideal spiritual realm (Kumar 2003: 64). Designating all of these as ‘utopia’ allows us to focus on the more important question of which utopian expressions enact a radical alternative to the status quo, and which function ideologically to maintain it<sup>25</sup>.

### **Historical and theoretical considerations:**

#### **IV. Original Christianity as counter-ideological utopia**

The Christian utopia developed within the Jewish utopian tradition. A counter-ideological streak<sup>26</sup>, and a desire for worldly emancipation<sup>27</sup>, which can be summed up as ‘apocalyptic’<sup>28</sup>,

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<sup>22</sup> It is tempting to remark that in this environment, political commitment is reduced, like consumption and personal taste, to a shallow, spontaneous gesture of support symbolised by clicking the ‘like’ button on the website Facebook.

<sup>23</sup> “It is more accurate to say that pragmatism is the dominant form of legitimation in contemporary political culture, rather than that contemporary politics is driven by pragmatism” (Levinas 2007: 298).

<sup>24</sup> The capitalist utopia of “perverse desires that you are ... solicited to realise” is one of two false (ideological) utopias Žižek identifies; the other is the never-to-be-realised ideal society of the standard Marxist critique of utopian socialism (McMillan 2011: 14).

<sup>25</sup> When I wish to refer to the kind of utopia that is, like Mannheim’s, the ‘functional opposite’ of ideology, I will use phrases such as ‘radical-utopian’ or ‘counter-ideological utopia’.

<sup>26</sup> In Jacques Ellul’s words, “counterpower” and “an anti-ideology” (1986: 113-116).

was an integral feature of the Jewish nation from its birth through to the time of Jesus<sup>29</sup> (Ellul 1980, Horsley 2003: 74-92, Wright 2005: 59-79). It would be no exaggeration to say that “Judaism and Christianity originated as indigenous peoples’ reactions to imperial rule” (Horsley 2003: 45).

Part of this was the Jewish propensity to iconoclasm, whereby a “radically transcendent divinity implied a relativism ... of all political and social arrangements” (Horkheimer, quoted in McLellan 1987:124-125). In pre-modern times when religion and politics were virtually inseparable (Horsley 1997: 1-2), rejection of idols and ideology critique were more closely tied together. Another aspect was the eschatological mindset, a rejection of “the notion that the world we experience will exist indefinitely” and the hope of an eventual messianic redemption (Hauerwas 1983b: 128). A relatively late development in Jewish eschatology was the belief in bodily resurrection, which originally entailed the defeat of all political power based on violence and the threat of death; resurrection represented “the creator’s overthrow of the kingdoms of the world and his establishing of a new world altogether” (Wright 2003: 548-549,725-731, Wright 2005: 69-70).

Jesus was a committed representative of this apocalyptic tradition, which is apparent in the fact that he got himself crucified. Crucifixion was “a form of execution used primarily to intimidate provincial rebels and discourage resistance to imperial rule” (Marshall 2006: 28); *pace* Douglas Adams, Jesus was not killed for “saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change” (Adams 1979: 15)<sup>30</sup>. Any interpretation of Jesus must meet this “criterion of crucifiability” (Marshall 2006: 35), which rules out an ideological Jesus who would have instead been “cultivated by the authorities ... perhaps sent on speaking tours of trouble spots throughout the country” (Kee 1982: 144).

Jesus’ innovation on Jewish apocalyptic was to bring the utopia from the *future* into the *present*; this is summed up in his central proclamation “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). This stance of fulfilling and radicalising previous Jewish thought (Matthew 5:17-48) is demonstrated by Jesus’ reference to a Jewish prophecy usually

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27 Phillip Blond traces the origin of not just utopia, but politics itself, to Jewish slaves imagining an alternative order (Blond 2005: 440).

28 Contra popular accounts of ‘the apocalypse’ as world destruction by natural or ecological disaster, Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic involves prophecies of “future deliverance from imperial domination” (Elliott 2004: 118). Noting Jameson’s observation that it is easier nowadays to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Žižek 1994: 1), we could remark that amongst all these visions of global catastrophe, what the world needs now is healthy dose of old-fashioned apocalypics.

29 This can be seen from the birth of the Jewish nation in liberation from the Egyptian empire, to its early experiments as a decentralised egalitarian community, to the law and the prophets’ harsh critiques of the kings and economic inequality for replicating imperial structures of Egypt, to the sages’ articulation of their creation myth in direct polemic against the cosmogony of the Babylonian empire during their exile there (Ellul 1986: 16); through to the various protest movements against the occupying Roman empire up to and beyond the time of Jesus (Ellul 1980, Horsley 2003: 74-92, Wright 2005:59-79).

30 In the words of Stanley Hauerwas, “If you ask one of the crucial theological questions – Why was Jesus killed? – the answer isn’t “Because God wants us to love one another.” Why in the hell would anyone kill Jesus for that? That’s stupid. It’s not even interesting. Why did Jesus get killed? Because he challenged the powers that be” (Hauerwas 1991: 533).

interpreted as a sign of “the terrors of the end-time”, where sons and daughters rise up against traditional familial authority (Micah 7:6, Matthew 10:34-39). For Jesus, this eschatological anarchy where “traditional morality, law and order are dissolved and no longer apply” is precisely the situation he wishes to enact (Wengst 1987: 61-63). Although he was the archetypal ancient pacifist, in this sense Jesus came to bring “not peace, but a sword”; he resolutely opposed the “pseudo-peace” of the status quo (Matthew 10:34, Wengst 1987: 62). Jesus’ utopian vision and practice challenged “conventional understandings of power”, both ancient and modern, on personal, social, religious, economic and political levels (Myers et al 1996: 133).

This stance also characterised the apostle Paul, who was effectively Lenin to Jesus’ Marx (Žižek 2003: 9). Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the ‘counter-imperial Paul’, and the (often covert) ways in which Paul challenged the ideology of the Roman Empire in all three of Žižek’s moments<sup>31</sup>. Paul’s theory and praxis were diametrically opposed to the “abstraction, idealism and elitism” that characterised the classical world (Strom 2000: 13,121-125). Paul’s major project was the establishment and maintenance of *ekklēsiai*<sup>32</sup>, the utopian communities from which the Christian ideology critique was launched<sup>33</sup>.

These communities were more along the lines of a “revolutionary party” than the churches we are familiar with today<sup>34</sup>. This ‘party’ took the form of eschatological communities in which the “the future” of the Jewish utopia “is becoming a present reality” (Koester 1997: 163). In early Christianity, a ‘church’ was “a political institution” which did not merely *advocate* an alternative to the hegemonic order, it directly *was* the alternative (Hauerwas 1991: 553, Hauerwas 1986a: 150). They therefore tended to attract those denied a position of privilege in the hegemonic order; the poor, women, slaves, and all those typically considered “the shit of the earth”<sup>35</sup> (1 Corinthians 4:13). The Christian expression of utopia thus prefigures the Marxist notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”<sup>36</sup>, by which the oppressed are the vehicle of revolutionary change.

Christianity at its roots was therefore a *this-worldly, imminent, radical, participatory* utopia. All four of these elements are necessary for Christian utopia to produce the apocalyptic

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<sup>31</sup> See especially Horsley (ed.) (1997), or my Anderson 2011a.

<sup>32</sup> This term was drawn from the politics of the day, denoting Greek citizens’ assemblies (Horsley 1997: 8).

<sup>33</sup> “How could the world ever recognize the arbitrariness of the divisions between people if it did not have a contrasting model in the unity of the church? Only against the church’s universality can the world have the means to recognize the arbitrariness of the national and racial divisions resulting in violence and war” (Hauerwas 1983a: 375).

<sup>34</sup> N.T. Wright, quoted in Marshall 2006: 35. This also calls to mind Friedrich Engels’ quote of Ernest Renan; “If I wanted to give you an idea of the early Christian communities I would tell you to look at a local section of the International Working Men’s Association” (Engels 1895: 318).

<sup>35</sup> Terry Eagleton’s translation (Eagleton 2005: 16).

<sup>36</sup> For Marx the hope of emancipation lies with “the formation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society ... a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it” (Marx 1844: 56). This theory was arguably first articulated in Jesus’ “blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

revolution of its early days<sup>37</sup>; the displacement of any of them is enough to neuter its emancipatory effect. Ideological Christianity is not non-utopian, but presents a *displaced* utopia; *other-worldly* rather than this-worldly, *future* rather than imminent, *mild* rather than radical or *passive* rather than participatory. I will later describe various forms of ideological Christianity as various displacements of its original utopian vision; but first, it will be useful to look at the historical background of how Christianity first became an ideology.

## **V. Constantine and ‘the triumph of ideology’**

Utopian stances are difficult to protect against the encroachment of ideology; as C. Wright Mills put it, “if you do not *embody* controversy, what you say will inevitably be an acceptance of the drift to the coming hell” (Mills 1958: 416). The decisive step from genuine utopia into ideology, observable in all three of Žižek’s moments, took place in the fourth century<sup>38</sup> with what can be called the “Constantinian turn” (Hauerwas 1986b: 476). The Roman Empire had fluctuated between persecuting Christians and simply hoping they would go away, neither strategy proving very successful at checking the growth of the church. Amid one of these periods of harsh repression, however, aspiring Roman politician Constantine came up with the ingenious strategy of containing the Christian movement by joining it himself (Kee 1982, Bulloch 1981).

Whatever Constantine’s personal religious convictions, this was predominantly a Machiavellian political move for Constantine who was in the middle of a civil war aimed at realising his childhood ambition of world domination (Kee 1982: 144-146). As legend has it, on the eve of an important battle in 312 C.E., Constantine saw a vision of the cross and the words ‘in this sign, conquer’. The next morning, he painted the cross on his men’s shields, marched out and won the battle. This was emblematic of Constantine’s career from this point onwards, as he went on to gain sole control of the empire, and declare Christianity its official religion; converting it from a threat to the empire’s unity to the very basis of that unity (Kee 1982: 158).

For Christianity to be used for this purpose, it had to be drastically transformed from its utopian roots. Some of the changes symbolically linked to Constantine (Hauerwas 1986b: 474) had already begun, and indeed some prior shift was required for the church to be willing to accept Constantine’s outstretched hand, but it would take a staunch non-cooperationist to refuse an offer of ceased repression *and* apparent state power, and the church gratefully accepted (Yoder 2009: 174). This opened the door to dramatic changes in the theology, structure and practice of the church. Indeed, the wide-ranging changes of the Constantinian turn can be shown to demonstrate ideological change in all three of Žižek’s ‘moments’ of ideology.

### *Ideological effects of the Constantinian turn*

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<sup>37</sup> We could even dub these four aspects ‘the four elements of the Apocalypse’.

<sup>38</sup> Compared to other utopian movements, the church arguably did quite well in maintaining its original radicality for almost three hundred years.

The change in the first ‘moment’ can be summed up by the increasing influence of Greco-Roman thought on Christian theology, particularly the philosophy of Plato; theology throughout the Middle Ages can be described as ‘Platonised Christianity’ or perhaps even ‘Christianised Platonism’ (Wright 2003: 49-50). While Semitic worldviews tend towards an integrated ontology where spirit and matter are the inner and outer perspectives of “one indivisible reality” (Wink 1984: 107), ancient Greek philosophy, in all its diversity, was characterised by dichotomies of “primary reality” and “everyday reality” (Strom 2000: 36,68). Plato’s articulation of this involved an ontology whereby “the world of space, time and matter is of secondary ontological importance, and the unseen world of Forms, or Ideas, is primary” (Wright 2003: 49). The two most important elements of Platonist influence were both factors of this idealism; a generally anti-materialist ontology, and the idea that so long as we are stuck with the material world, it ought to emulate eternal Ideas.

The Platonist disdain for the physical body and material-temporal reality, which had previously been adopted by the Gnostic sects but vigorously rejected by orthodox Christianity (Wright 2003: 500-527), finally captured the popular Christian imagination in the wake of Constantine, with drastic effects for the Christian utopian hope. What had been a Semitic hope of transformation of this world became an Indo-European “flight from political or concrete reality”<sup>39</sup> (Ellul 1986: 29,133-134). No longer concerned about the vicissitudes of this world, the church began to accept slavery, criminal justice, war and the state; all previously considered antithetical to the kingdom of God (Bulloch 1981: 318-334).

Inextricably linked to idealism in Plato’s philosophy were abstraction and elitism (Strom 2000: 13,58-69). If the common people were encouraged to place their hopes outside the material world, elites<sup>40</sup> still had to concern themselves with how to manage the material order. The Platonist answer to this was that the fleeting, corrupt material world ought to model itself on the eternal, perfect Ideal world. The problem is that we cannot observe the Ideal world except by observing the material world. The adoption of this circular Platonist reasoning by the church led to the notion of ‘orders of creation’, whereby human reason is capable of discerning the will of God by observing how things are ordered in the world (Yoder 2009: 136-137).

Thus did the kingdom of heaven begin to be conceived in the image of the earthly empire (Kee 1982: 130-144). In imitation of Roman society, the pagan notion of a ‘cosmic order’ was imported, a “hierarchical proportional order in which each member is in its own place”

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<sup>39</sup> The ‘new heavens and new earth’ prophesied in Revelation 21:1-5 became a longing for escape to a sequestered spiritual realm known as ‘Heaven’. ‘Heaven’ in the original Jewish and Christian understandings denoted something quite different; firstly “the realm of “withinness”, the metaphorical “place” in which the spirituality of everything is “located”“ and secondly the realm of possibilities, the depository for “the transcendent possibilities of human life *on earth*” (Wink 1984: 119-125).

<sup>40</sup> Eg. Plato himself in ancient Greece, and Constantine’s chief apologist Eusebius in the post-Constantinian church. With regard to Plato’s elite status and elitist philosophy, Mark Strom poses the classic ‘Weber vs. Marx’ question of “which came first – Plato’s philosophical hierarchy of reality or his everyday experience as a privileged man in a society structured by rank and status?” (Strom 2000: 37).

(Žižek 2009b: 250). In this “soft-Fascist vision”<sup>41</sup>, people play their parts in the eternal order by being loyal subjects of the sovereign (Kee 1982: 138). Thus, “under guise of pointing a reverent finger upwards”, this ‘revelation’ of Eusebius functioned “to advocate unquestioned acceptance of whatever the Emperor is and does” (Kee 1982: 135).

The name this mode of theological reflection is ‘natural theology’, which betrays the fact that it is “not theology, but ideology”; “to anyone under the sway of an ideology, everything seems quite ‘natural’ and straight-forward” (Kee 1982: 134,144,166)<sup>42</sup>. This naturalisation, even divinisation, of the status quo of Roman society led to the church’s increasing approval of all forms of inequality; hierarchy entered the church, women and femininity were increasingly marginalised (Ellul 1986: 33-34) and the view appeared that worldly financial success was a divine blessing<sup>43</sup> (Bulloch 1981: 318-334).

This theological justification of hierarchy was closely connected to the change in Žižek’s second ‘moment’ of ideology, ideology as materialised in institutions and practices. Due to the sudden influx of numbers to manage, and the connection to imperial power, the church became an institution (Ellul 1986: 32), and this institution began to replicate the “hierarchical structures and coercive instincts of the wider imperial order” (Marshall 2006: 29). A legal apparatus developed in imitation of Roman law, and clericalism and hierarchy appeared alongside impressive church buildings. This was a particularly dramatic change for bishops such as Eusebius, who went from persecuted ‘community organisers’ to public figures of high social standing and power (Bulloch 1981: 318-344, Ellul 1986: 131-133).

The change in the third ‘moment’ of ideology is best characterised as an unconscious absorption into the underlying spirituality of the day. While critics of religion often make much of Christianity’s adoption of pagan festivals and rites<sup>44</sup>, from an ideological analysis point of view the most significant aspect of this was the way in which Constantinian Christianity functionally resurrected the earlier ‘emperor cult’.

This cult of veneration of the divine or quasi-divine Roman emperors was the primary way in which Rome maintained hegemony without an extensive bureaucracy, and with military force mainly concentrated around the frontiers (Horsley 2003: 95-105). The emperor cult is the source of such phrases as ‘Lord’, ‘Son of God’, ‘gospel’ and ‘salvation’, and the target of the ideology-critical parody of early Christian writers who used such language to describe Jesus (Horsley 1997). The cult was not so much a planned ideological proceeding emanating from

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek identifies this notion of a ‘cosmic order’ in the Hindu caste system, contemporary ecological worldviews, and the post-modern socialist conservatism of theologian John Milbank (Žižek 2009b: 250).

<sup>42</sup> Thompson identifies ‘naturalisation’, where a contingent social or historical creation is portrayed as permanent and natural, as a common ‘mode’ of ideology (Thompson 1990: 65). Cf also Žižek (1994: 11) – “Let the facts speak for themselves’ is perhaps the arch-statement of ideology”.

<sup>43</sup> In addition, the radical wealth distribution advocated in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) began to be seen as an ideal to be practised by monks and elite Christians, rather than a concrete way of life for the entire Christian community as in the early church (Acts 4:32-35, Bulloch 1981: 318-334).

<sup>44</sup> This is indeed important, especially to the extent that it syncretised Christianity with the aforementioned pagan Cosmic Order, in festivals and honouring the cyclical movement of the seasons, the notion of patron saints mirroring pagan polytheism, rites honouring the naturalised notion of ‘sacred femininity’ in Mary, etc.

Rome<sup>45</sup> as the spontaneous outpouring of awe and gratitude for the sheer power of Caesar and the salvation of the *Pax Romana*. Thus the cult fits better into the third moment of ‘spontaneous’ expression than the first moment<sup>46</sup>. As difficult as it is for us to picture today, the unconscious gushings of the political-religious imperial cult is the ancient equivalent of today’s “theological mad dance of commodities” (Žižek 2008b: 12).

Christian adoption of this spontaneous veneration “transformed Christianity into [Constantine’s] own imperial cult” (Kee 1982: 153), one that did not worship him, but a God increasingly modelled on him. The observation of Byzantine art is exemplary here, as depictions of God and the ‘heavenly court’ began to resemble Constantine and the Roman imperial court<sup>47</sup> (Kee 1982: 173-174). If Christians who absorbed these images perceived themselves as worshipping the God behind Constantine’s throne rather than the person sitting on it, it was no less effective in uniting the empire beneath Constantine.

On all three of Žižek’s levels of ideology, therefore, the Constantinian turn can be accurately described by the subtitle of Alistair Kee’s book: *Constantine versus Christ : the triumph of ideology* (Kee 1982).

## **VI. Ideological Christianity as displaced utopia**

A millennium and a half after Constantine, Stanley Hauerwas remarked that many of the effects of the Constantinian shift upon Christian activity still remain (Hauerwas 1986b: 476). Modern social theorists have conceived of religion and Christianity<sup>48</sup> in a variety of ways, but thinkers as diverse as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and Antonio Gramsci have all seen it as integral to “the reproduction of social order” (Torres 1992: 44). When not considered a “dependent variable” and/or “a respectable distraction from the sources of life” (Mills 1958: 414), Christianity has been seen as an active, potentially dangerous force producing obedience to the established order, as in the invectives of Mikhail Bakunin and the anarchist tradition (McLellan 1993: 9). All of these perspectives describe a Christianity in which one or more of our four elements of the Christian utopia have been displaced.

These theories can be roughly divided<sup>49</sup> into those which describe ‘religion-in-general’ as an essential characteristic of ‘society-in-general’, and those who seek to articulate a specific

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<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the emperor cult initially sprung up in the eastern regions of the empire where divinisation of rulers had some precedent (Horsley 2003: 95-105).

<sup>46</sup> The way that it operated, “mainly through image, ritual, and urban architecture” (Horsley 2003: 98) indicates some crossover with the second moment, but this is to be expected; commodity fetishism as today’s underlying spirituality also must be institutionalised in concrete rituals of advertising, shopping and consumption (Jameson 2009: 258).

<sup>47</sup> These images probably had more effect on the illiterate majority’s perceptions of God than written theology (Kee 1982: 173-174).

<sup>48</sup> In Western social theoretical traditions such as Marxism, study of ‘religion’ has often been conflated with study of Christianity (McLellan 1987: ix).

<sup>49</sup> There would of course be other ways of dividing these up; critical (Marx, Bakunin, etc.), positive (Durkheim) or ambiguous (Weber); Religion as an autonomous agent in its own right (Weber, Bakunin), a ‘dependent variable’ of some other factor (Marx’s historical materialism and Durkheim’s functionalism), or somewhere

relationship between certain theological beliefs and certain socio-economic activity. Sociologist-theologian Jacques Ellul observes that over its history, Christianity has functioned ideologically in both ways; as a “civic religion” aimed at “gathering and unifying” the society, and as a “religion of escape” with ideological properties of specific theological beliefs for specific believers (Ellul 1986: 28-29,39-40).

The most prominent articulator of the ‘gathering and unifying’ mode of religion is Durkheim, who described religion providing a ‘*conscience collective*’ that facilitated the smooth functioning of societies (Durkheim 1912). From a more critical perspective, Gramsci affirmed that the role of religion is cementing and unifying collectives (Therborn 1984: 172). In developing into an effective imperial cult, Christianity began to perform this role as the “structural ideology” of the empire (Ellul 1986: 39-40). However, this Constantinian residue has lost much of its power in the relatively secular modern era<sup>50</sup>. Ironically, it is only secular practices which can perform this religious role today (Horsley 2003: 111-113). Durkheim himself observed this; in his account the replacement for the religious *conscience collective* would be the ‘cult of the individual’ (Durkheim 1912). Žižek identifies the true successor as commodity fetishism (Žižek 1994: 18).

For Žižek, the two possible roles religion can take in modernity are *critical* – which corresponds to our description of Christianity as radically utopian, and *therapeutic*, which corresponds to the second way Christianity can act ideologically; with specific theological beliefs facilitating individuals’ smooth participation in the socio-economic system (Žižek 2003: 3). The ‘elective affinity’ between theology and socio-political activity can be framed, in Weberian fashion, as the material outworkings of religious belief, or in Marxist style as the mode of production producing suitable ideological accompaniments for its material functioning; in any case, both Marx and Weber connected Protestant belief to the emergence of bourgeois capitalism.

Marx’s position<sup>51</sup> is best summed up in his famous comment that religion is the “sigh of the oppressed creature ... the *opium* of the people” (Marx 1844: 42). The idea is that religion, specifically Christianity, expresses a genuine protest at material oppression, but instead of proposing revolutionary action in this world as the solution, it promises consolation in a sequestered spiritual afterlife (“going to heaven when you die” – Wright 2008: 18). As the material world does not really matter in the cosmic scheme of things, resistance to the advances of capitalism and other socio-economic forces is unimportant. As we have seen, this tendency is not original to Christianity, but represents the intrusion of Platonist idealist

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in between (Gramsci’s [and Althusser’s] ‘relative autonomy’).

<sup>50</sup> Recall Žižek’s statement, mentioned in the introduction, that religion can no longer “fulfil this function of the organic binding force of social substance” (Žižek 2003: 3-5). The United States of America is a possible exception here, as the “most religious (developed) nation in the world” (Žižek 2008b: 127); however, this designation of the loss of moral consensus around being a ‘Christian nation’ certainly seems to apply to the relatively secularised New Zealand.

<sup>51</sup> This criticism is in fact not new to Marx and Bakunin; it is part of the classic materialist critique of religion as found in French materialism and the pre-Hegel German enlightenment. Marx’s innovation was to reinforce the criticism with the strong affirmation that the ‘opium’ effects are not merely the ‘unintended consequences’ of the theology, but result from the active use of religion as an ideology (Torres 1992: 3).

ontology. Bakunin, who mounts a similar critique to Marx, is well aware of the Platonist roots of this anti-materialism, but is no less critical of Christianity for having accepted and cultivated it since Constantine (Bakunin 1882: 70-77)<sup>52</sup>.

Weber's account of the role of Protestant belief in the rise of the 'Spirit of Capitalism' is more nuanced than Marx's passing comment. He agrees that a relationship can be drawn between Protestant anti-materialistic ontology and participation in capitalism, rejecting "the supposed conflict between other-worldliness ... and ... capitalistic acquisition" (Weber 1905: 42). However, for Weber this does not indicate conscious and mechanistic ideological manipulation by bourgeois elites, as for Marx (Turner 1991: 77), but "unforeseen and even unwished-for results of the labours of the reformers" (Weber 1905: 90). Moreover, Weber's account of the relationship goes further than Marx or Bakunin; for him the Protestant religion does not just discourage material resistance, but aggressively encourages material action.

Weber's explanation prefigures the third moment of Žižek's schema more than the first. He is not concerned with official ethical theory so much as the "psychological sanctions" engendered particularly by the Calvinist concept of predestination (1905: 97,98-128). The main psychological consequence of embracing this doctrine was an "unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual" who could no longer rely on his own efforts, the church and its sacraments, nor even God to save him; he could only hope he had been pre-enrolled in the inscrutable ranks of the elect<sup>53</sup> (1905: 104-105). The Calvinist had no way of ascertaining his eternal fate, save the semi-conscious search for 'good works' as the 'fruit' of God's work in his life (Matthew 7:15-20). When this was added to Luther's notion of the calling, which conflated good works with "the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs", it produced frenzied, rationalist (and rationed) economic activity which became the work ethic necessary for the development of capitalism (1905: 79-87).

It is important to note the distinction between the logical theological consequences of doctrine – Žižek's first moment – and the largely unconscious socio-psychological

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<sup>52</sup> A similar Platonist intrusion is the modern ideal of separation of religion and politics. This can be traced to Luther's Platonist reading of Christ's statement "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), from which he devised a dualist 'two kingdoms' theology (Luther 1522: 163-168). This understanding of Christianity as inherently apolitical was absorbed into Enlightenment thought; as expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau; "Christianity ... is entirely spiritual ... the country of the Christian is not of the world ... he does his duty; but he does so with profound indifference to the good or ill success of his efforts" (McLellan 1993: 6). More integrated ontologies read Jesus' remark as indicating that "his style of exercising kingly rule is unlike that of other kings" (Marshall 2006: 33-34). Indeed, Austromarxist Max Adler called this statement "the basic sentiment of all revolutions" (McLellan 1987: 87). Within Christian theology, internal criticism of 'two kingdoms' theology can be as vicious as the Marxist-Bakunian critique; John Howard Yoder says that "[Jesus] refused to concede that those in power represent an ideal, a logically proper, or even an empirically acceptable definition of what it means to be political. He did not say ... 'you can have your politics and I shall do something else more important'; he said, 'your definition of polis, of the social, of the wholeness of being human socially is perverted'" (Yoder 1994: 107). New Zealand theologian Chris Marshall even goes so far as to say that "without this reading ... the Nazi holocaust might never have happened" (Marshall 2006: 33-34).

<sup>53</sup> This anxious yearning for salvation was not only motivated by desire to reach heaven, but desire to avoid 'hell'; the parallel other-worldly (under-worldly) *dystopia* which is an even more direct import from Greek thought ('Hades') than the other-worldly 'heaven' (Wright 2003: 32-84).

ramifications – Žižek’s third moment (1905: 232n.). Jean Calvin himself “most emphatically denied that works were indications of favour before God”, and the ‘logical’ effect of predestination would seem to be fatalism (1905: 228n.). However, this was overpowered by the profound need for reassurance of salvation which produced perhaps the most “intense form of the religious valuation of moral action” in history (1905: 115-116)<sup>54</sup>.

These descriptions of ideological Christianity are very different from early Christian utopianism. However, it is important to note that some form of utopian hope is still a vital element of Christian belief. If Christianity originally articulated a *this-worldly, imminent, radical, participatory* utopia, these ideological expressions can be understood as Christianity which has displaced one or more of these vital utopian elements. The Marxist criticism identifies the displacement of the *this-worldly* element. Weber builds on his, giving a fascinating description of how desire for other-worldly utopia can encourage intense this-worldly action. Durkheim’s explanation of Christianity inspiring integration into society describes the displacement of the *radical* political, ethical, and economic ramifications of the kingdom of God; or indeed the abandonment of the Christian utopia altogether in favour of the modern utopia of secular liberal democracy.

## **VII. Modern discussions of Christianity as radical utopia**

Social theory and radical politics have not always seen Christianity as necessarily ideological. Many early socialists saw their work as the continuation of Christianity, and while Marx vehemently opposed any attempts to conflate his project with Christianity, various flirtations appeared throughout the twentieth century (McLellan 1987: 1-5,21). Given the ideological

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<sup>54</sup> Another interesting aspect of Weber’s study, though one which perhaps renders him less helpful for studying contemporary Christianity, is that once this religious process had given birth to the spirit (and the materiality) of capitalism, it took on a life of its own; attracting adherents through mere adaptation to circumstances. Capitalism could thereafter cut its Protestant umbilical cord, which had become, if anything, a hindrance to the pure operations of its spirit (1905: 72).

<sup>55</sup> In designating the modern democratic ‘utopia’ as a ‘secular’ vision, I am not intending to imply that one must be non-religious to subscribe to it. Instead, this vision involves the idea of a *secular public sphere*. Within this vision, if there is a place for religion, it is in an apolitical private sphere; the question of whether one is religious or not is politically irrelevant and should be kept to oneself; it is considered rude amongst intellectuals to probe into what one does in the privacy of one’s own Sunday mornings (Žižek 2003: 5-6). This stance is not restricted to the non-religious; it is a particularly common position among American Christians, for whom “once the separation of church and state is seen as theologically desirable, a society where this separation is achieved is not a pagan society but a nation structured according to the will of God” (Yoder, quoted in Hauerwas 1986b: 476).

Richard Horsley’s exploration of various interactions between religion and empire yields a consistent lesson; the modern idea that politics can be separated from religion is misleading and inaccurate for most of human history, and even for today (Horsley 2003). Although, as observed, it stems from Luther’s theology, the idea of a ‘secular public sphere’ necessarily involves the reduction of religion to private experience and the neutering of any real material significance it might have.

In this, the religion desired by Durkheim lines up with that analysed by Weber and criticised by Marx; all assume that Christianity only has something unique to say about private, spiritual matters, but that this anti-materialism itself has real (usually conservative) material effects (for Christian criticisms of this stance, see Yoder 1994 and Marshall 2006). Indeed, Ellul says that Christianity’s ability to become a Durkheimian religion of “integration into the social body” is inextricably linked to its becoming a “flight from political or concrete reality”; complementary “perversions” which should be criticised both theologically and sociologically (Ellul 1986: 133-134).

nature of institutional Christianity, it is tempting to suspect that only Marxism continues “that critical distance from the modern capitalist state which characterized the attitude of the early church towards Caesar” (Kee 1982: 169). Nonetheless, a number of thinkers have described ways that, even today, Christianity can operate as a genuinely revolutionary utopia. I will canvas modern thinkers from the Marxist and Christian traditions who have offered explanations of post-Constantinian Christianity’s radical-utopian potential.

### *Marxist social theorists*

The first Marxist to consider this theme at length was Friedrich Engels, who found room within his dialectical materialist schema of history for the politico-religious struggles of the Reformation in his native Germany<sup>56</sup>. In Engels’ account, this supposed “violent theological bickering” was in fact motivated primarily by material class interests, “attempts of the burghers and plebeians ... and the peasants ... to adapt the old theological world outlook to the changed economic conditions” (Engels 1850: 97-98, 1887: 270).

These material struggles were expressed “under religious shibboleths” (1850: 98) because the church held hegemony over all intellectual production throughout the Middle Ages (1850: 98). In these conditions, the discourse of theological heresies and religious prophecy was “the only language [the people] could then understand” (1850: 117). The inevitable rise of the bourgeoisie produced the victory of the Lutheran church, whose theology best represented bourgeois interests. Theological hegemony was in its death throes, however, and eventually the bourgeoisie of France were able to “entirely cast off the religious cloak” and revolt to victory on “undisguised political lines” in the French Revolution (Engels 1887: 270, 1892: 305).

Engels was more interested in the attempted rebellions of the peasants and plebeians; particularly Thomas Münzer, who, unlike the bourgeois reactionary Luther, was genuinely revolutionary (1850: 108-111). The theology that best expressed the interests of the landless plebeians and peasants was Anabaptism, a radical wing of the Reformation who resurrected

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<sup>56</sup> Most of the time, Engels appears to consider this the first and only era when Christianity had a genuinely revolutionary effect; although his writings on early Christianity display an interesting schizophrenia. At times he compares the early church to the modern socialist movement, calling it a “great revolutionary movement” and saying that early Christian communities were much like outposts of the International Working Men’s Association (1883b: 205-208); at times he suggests that genuinely revolutionary politics did not enter Christianity until around the thirteenth century (1878: 145, 149-150, 1886: 240); and at times he even repeats the Marx/Bakunin accusation of the early Christians seeking a “spiritual salvation” in place of material alleviation (1882: 202).

In 1895 he seems to synthesise all these views by saying that Christianity did indeed have much in common with the modern socialist movement; both preach salvation to oppressed people, but “Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society” (1895: 316). The reason the early church was unable to have a material revolutionary effect is attributed to “the historic conditions”; early Christianity was socialism “as far as it was possible at the time” (1895: 317). This vague reference to ‘historic conditions’ is a clue to why Engels cannot admit that early Christianity was genuinely revolutionary; it does not fit the official, predetermined Marxist schema of history, in which socialism does not arrive until much later, and certainly does not falter and fade away once it has arrived.

the utopian visions of the kingdom of God (1850: 102). Rallying behind Münzer, they launched the rebellion known as the Peasant War, calling for the abolition of class difference, private property, usury, and state authority, and the establishment of total equality (1850: 111). Unfortunately, they were doomed to failure, given the “limits set by the contemporary situation” (1850: 102-103); history was decreeing the rise of the bourgeoisie at that time, not the peasantry. The war was a colossal failure with both aristocratic Catholics and bourgeois Lutherans uniting to slaughter the Anabaptists.

Engels’ account is a situationally dependent description of the particular period in history where the dying discursive hegemony of the Christian aristocracy overlapped with the rising consciousness of the classes it was oppressing. As such, it is not helpful in describing any genuinely revolutionary Christianity either before or after this period. Engels also downplays the genuinely spiritual motivations of Münzer and the other Anabaptist revolutionaries<sup>57</sup> (1850: 98,102, 1895: 317-318). Karl Mannheim also described the early Anabaptists, but in his account, the movement was “at the same time robustly material and highly spiritual” (Mannheim 1936: 192).

Slavoj Žižek represents a very different account of the radical-utopian potential of Christianity. Like Engels, it is largely specific to a particular time; unlike Engels, he takes theological beliefs seriously as a force for change in a manner more akin to Weber than Marx. In Žižek’s account, genuine Christianity is materialist (and atheist), and genuine materialism must go through a “Christian experience” in order to be truly effective today (Žižek 2003: 6). Žižek’s version of this experience is based on a Hegelian and Lacanian reading of the Trinity (Žižek 2009a, 1999: 127-170).

If it seems unusual for an atheist to be advocating a ‘Christian experience’, it will perhaps make more sense in the context of the current historical situation. Two features of post-modernity are important for Žižek here; the apparent defeat of any alternative to capitalism (Žižek 2008a), and the “onslaught of new spiritualisms”<sup>58</sup> (Žižek 2000: 1). With regard to the latter, Žižek’s appropriation of Christianity is his attempt to turn theology against itself; to fight New Age obscurantism, today’s ‘opium of the people’ (Žižek 2001: 12-15), not through the desperate anti-spiritualist scramblings of a Richard Dawkins, but through advocating a materialist theological alternative.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Engels holds a dualist ontology which is essentially the reverse of Plato’s; for him, the ‘spiritual’ is merely the shadowy reflection of the material world. This means that he cannot acknowledge a movement as ‘genuinely religious’ when material interests and activity are involved.

<sup>58</sup> “One of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so-called ‘thought’” (Žižek 2000: 1).

<sup>59</sup> In promoting a use of Christian theology and practice while denying the ‘literal’ truth of God and the resurrection, Žižek overlaps to some degree with liberal theology such as that promoted by German Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann, American Anglican John Shelby Spong or New Zealand Presbyterian Lloyd Geering. However, he would probably be uneasy with this comparison, loathing most forms of liberalism and shunning the disavowing stance of “I don’t really believe in it, it’s just part of my culture”, as if one believes in God like one believes in Santa Claus (Žižek 2003: 6-7). Žižek makes specific reference to American philosopher John Caputo and his “aseptic, lifeless, bloodless” post-modern theology (Žižek 2009b: 260). Instead, Žižek endorses the ‘death of God’ theology of American Christian atheist Thomas J. J. Altizer, which fully embraces the traumatic core of Christianity that post-modern theology covers up (Žižek 2009b:

In the former situation, Žižek sees Christianity as capable of overcoming some fatal limitations of the Marxist tradition. For Žižek, the failure of certain ostensibly atheist traditions such as Stalinism is the inability to get rid of the “religious hard core” (Žižek 2003: 170) of reliance on the ‘big Other’. This Lacanian concept of the “symbolic Order” which “guarantees the meaningfulness of our acts” (Žižek 2001: 109-110, Žižek 2009b: 296), which often stubbornly survives in the guise of “the people” or “Historical Necessity” (Žižek 2008a: 227, Žižek 2008b: 135), is the true target of atheism. The atheism the world needs is to “accept that the big Other doesn’t exist, and act upon it” (Žižek 2009b: 299), and insofar as Christianity is the only religion in which God dies, “it is only Christianity that opens up the space for thinking this nonexistence” (Žižek 2009b: 287). This also opens up the ability for ideology critique, as we follow the Old Testament figure of Job<sup>60</sup>, and the dying Christ on the cross, in confronting the big Others of the market, the state, with the utter meaninglessness of the suffering they inflict<sup>61</sup> (Žižek 2008b: 179-180).

This ‘death’ comprises the first gesture of Žižek’s ‘Christian experience’, the second is the resurrection, the birth of the Holy Spirit, the “community deprived of its support in the big Other” (Žižek 2003: 170), left with nothing but themselves to consider “the change [we] want to see in the world” (Žižek 2009c: 154, referring to Gandhi). This is Žižek’s version of the alternative utopian Christian community, which he sees primarily manifested in radical political and psychoanalytical collectives<sup>62</sup> (Žižek 2000: 160). Žižek is more attracted to the Judaeo-Christian open, ‘messianic’ utopia than the Marxist determinate, concrete-political utopia (Sinnerbrink 2010: 16-20, 21n., Mannheim 1936: 218-219). This is another area where (Žižek’s version of) Christianity improves upon a failure of Marxism; Žižek diagnoses the traditional Communist utopia of “pure unleashed productivity *outside* the frame of Capital” as a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself (Žižek 2000: 17-21).

### *Christian theologians*

Žižek’s theoretical version of Christianity can be criticised for being completely divorced from ‘Really Existing Christianity’; this criticism can certainly not be made of the late-twentieth-century Liberation Theology movement. Located primarily in Latin America<sup>63</sup>, the movement comprises theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo, armed

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254-260). Indeed, as we will see, an experience of the ‘death of God’ is essentially what Žižek means by ‘the Christian experience’, although for Altizer and Žižek, “the entire history of Christianity, inclusive of (and especially) its Orthodox versions, is structured as a series of defenses against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation / death / resurrection” (Žižek 2009b: 260).

<sup>60</sup> For Žižek, Job provides “the first exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history” (Žižek 2003: 125)

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, in discussing Christianity’s potential for ideology critique, Žižek does not draw on his three moments of ideology. In fact, his ‘theological turn’ since 1999 has hardly overlapped at all with his in-depth analysis of ideology, which was a dominant theme of his work last century (Cf. Žižek 1994 with my discussion of Žižek’s Christianity; Anderson 2011b).

<sup>62</sup> On a recent visit to the Occupy Wall Street protest, Žižek told those gathered that the Holy Spirit was amongst them, while the bankers were worshipping “blasphemous idols” (Žižek 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Liberation theology has also been active in other places such as South Africa, the Philippines, and the West, where it has certain commonalities with black and feminist theologies (McLellan 1993: 54).

revolutionaries such as Camilo Torres, and even bishops such as Hélder Câmara; most of whom are “part of the pastoral bureaucracy” of the Catholic church (McLellan 1993: 55). Drawing on the story of the Jewish liberation in Exodus, the prophets’ critiques of ideology and injustice, and the Gospel narratives of Jesus, the liberation theologians seek to enact the kingdom of God in the context of liberation from Third World oppression (1993: 53-54).

Liberation theologians have also drawn on Marxist social analysis, particularly in its critical insights about capitalism (1993: 58). In many ways, liberation theology can be considered “a rapprochement between ... the “theory of revolution” and the praxis of the Christian faith” (Torres 1992: 74). This combination has given rise to potent ideology critique and political-spiritual utopian action, leading the continent’s economic, political and military elites to distrust the Catholic church, their former “invaluable ally” (1992: 74).

French Protestant sociologist-theologian and Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul was at the vanguard of a twentieth-century, Marxist-inspired rediscovery of the ‘revolutionary Jesus’ (Ellul 1969: 43-44). However, he ultimately considered “Marxist reinterpretation[s] of the Bible ... futile and dishonest” (Ellul 1986: 203n.). Ellul is indicative of many orthodox Christian theologians who maintain that it is not necessary to combine Christianity with Marxist theory to make it revolutionary. For Ellul, Christianity represents a radical counter-ideological utopian tradition older and grander than Marxism.

Ellul describes Christianity’s inherent ideology critique; the Bible “always contests political power”, and encourages to “counterpower”, “anti-statism” and “an anti-ideology” (1986: 113-116)<sup>64</sup>. However, he feels strongly the corruption of ‘Really Existing Christianity’, which has become both the opium of the people and “a religion of conformity, of integration into the social body” (1986: 29, 133-134). Ellul’s utopian hope for Christianity is in what he calls “X”, the term he uses for the genuine movement of Christ, although this is “not the current that society as a whole, and especially the political authorities, recognize as the church” (1986: 6,11-13,132). Ellul demonstrates that that it is not necessary to embrace ‘death of God’ theology to take responsibility for changing the world; he claims that Christians must fulfil Christ’s radical teaching or “recognise the falsity of what we believe” (1986: 7).

In a similar vein is American Methodist Stanley Hauerwas’ portrayal of the Christian community as an alternative to the dominant political-economic order of the world; a theme picked up Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder (Yoder 1994). Much of what Hauerwas says in theological language can be considered equivalent to our notions of ideology (“reinforcing the powers that Christ defeated” – 1991: 527) and utopia (“salvation is a political alternative to the way the world is constituted” – 1991: 533). For Hauerwas, Yoder and other ‘post-liberal’ theologians, simply obeying the radical revelation of Christ will enact the kingdom of God, without recourse to other intellectual traditions or ‘natural’ theologies.

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<sup>64</sup> Ellul uses the word ‘ideology’ in a negative sense that works roughly equivalently to Žižek’s definition in this situation; as a pseudoscientific belief that covertly justifies a prior commitment (Ellul 1969: 77-79).

This school carries a strong instinctual sense that commonsense ‘natural’ reasoning is in constant danger of being swept along in the tide of ideology, as with the liberal rivals of their German mentor Karl Barth, who ended up supporting Hitler (Hauerwas 2004).

Another account of Christian revelation opposing ideology is provided by French Catholic anthropological philosopher René Girard, who describes Christianity’s challenge to the founding lies of civilisations. Following Freud’s observation of “some kind of collective murder” as the dominant theme of primitive religion (Girard 1987: 121), Girard theorises that a ‘scapegoat mechanism’ is the root of all societies’ foundational myths. He attributes original conflict to ‘mimetic desire’, desire produced through imitation, which leads to escalating tension as multiple imitators desire the same object. Punishing a scapegoat provides a release for this tension, by focusing mimetic desire upon the scapegoat and subsequently restoring peace (1987: 121-129).

This echoes Durkheim’s theory of how societies maintain solidarity through punishing threats (1987: 127), but Girard’s account is considerably more critical. The mechanism is hypocritical; though portrayed as “the just punishment of a guilty criminal”, its target is “chosen more or less at random” (1987: 79). Moreover, the cycle is doomed to repetition as it does not eliminate the real issue behind the conflict, but merely temporarily neutralises it.

For Girard, a path out of this deadlock is carved by the narratives of the Bible, which consistently take the side of the innocent victim. This culminates in the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which Girard sees as the ultimate anti-myth, exposing the truth of scapegoating and placing God on the side of its innocent victims (Kirwan 2004). If this exposure forms the ideology-critique element of the Judaeo-Christian revelation, the utopian hope of escape from the scapegoat mechanism is through *imitatio Christi*; through imitating not the mimetic desires of society, but the alternate paradigm pioneered by Jesus’ sacrifice (Girard 2000: 310-311, Yoder 1987: 90).

These various Catholics, Calvinists, Marxists and Methodists from North and South America and Western and Eastern Europe thus provide a variety of ways of understanding Christianity as a potential counter-ideological utopia in the modern era. However, all these theorists are aware of the competing ideological expressions of Christianity; whether through Constantinian distortion, primal instincts, or the dictates of history. The fundamental ambiguity of Christianity renders it all the more important to put aside generalist assumptions and critically analyse particular expressions of ‘Really Existing Christianity’ for their ideological/utopian effects.

### **Potential research:**

## **VIII. Finding contemporary examples of ideological and radical-utopian Christianity operating in New Zealand**

In the following sections I will sketch suggested contours of empirical research that could be undertaken with the above analysis in mind. First, I will suggest an example worth exploring for each of Žižek's three moments of ideology, discuss how they displace the Christian utopia, and how they may class as ideological according to John Thompson's 'modes of ideology' (Thompson 1990: 60-66) and Göran Therborn's 'mechanisms of subjection' (Therborn 1980: 93-98). I will also give one example which may embody the original, radical (undisplaced) Christian utopia.

*First moment: Popular evangelism and Platonist ontology*

Platonist ontology and the carrot and stick of 'heaven' and 'hell' still survive in Christianity are perhaps most obvious today in popular evangelism. One example worth pursuing could be evangelistic tool 'The Wordless Book', which uses colours to explain (a version of) the Christian gospel in simple terms; particularly effective with children. The book comprises five coloured pages, each symbolising an aspect of the evangelistic message. The Wordless Book is sold at low cost on several New Zealand websites, represented in its classic tract form<sup>65</sup> and in "salvation bracelets"<sup>66</sup> and lanyards<sup>67</sup>, and is even available as a free iPhone application<sup>68</sup>.

The most apparent ideological feature of this evangelism is its individualism; in Althusser's language it 'interpellates' the addressee as an individual subject (Althusser 1970: 128-136). Individual salvation appeals fall into the 'pietist' tradition, where salvation is "an immaterial issue of individual morality". Theologians outside of this tradition have pointed out that Biblical salvation is far more collective and political (Davis & Riches 2005: 28, Hauerwas 1991: 533). Marx considered the Protestant notion of the human as an abstracted individual the perfect anthropological accompaniment to capitalism (Marx 1867: 135).

Looking more closely at the theological content articulated alongside the Wordless Book would allow more specific analysis of 'elective affinities' between theological doctrine and socio-political stance. More in-depth research into the theological content of pietistic evangelism would be vital, but brief allusion to an online articulation of the Wordless Book will suffice here (Berean Bible Ministries). Ideological content could likely be found on each of the five pages<sup>69</sup>, but the gold page is the most relevant to utopia. This describes 'Heaven', the home of a God who "wants you to be in Heaven with Him some day" (Berean Bible Ministries). This suggests a Platonist displacement of the 'this-worldly' element of utopia, and potentially a thoroughgoing anti-materialist ontology.

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<sup>65</sup> \$0.26 per copy (Child Evangelism Fellowship of New Zealand) or \$2.00 for a glossy version (CLC International, New Zealand).

<sup>66</sup> \$13.50 plus postage for a pack of ten (Kidsreach).

<sup>67</sup> \$5.00, but with dual functionality; "Need something to hold a name tag or a set of keys? These lanyards are an awesome witness as well!" (Children's Bible Ministries).

<sup>68</sup> "the first" iPhone version of the "classic salvation tool" utilising "the universal language of color to tell the good news of the gospel" (New Zealand iPhone/iPad/iPod touch Application List).

<sup>69</sup> For example, the "penal substitution" atonement theology presented on the red page has been criticised for evoking "divine child abuse" as a mechanism of salvation, which justifies punitive criminal justice, and advocates passive acquiescence to oppression (Marshall 2002).

Comparing this Platonised evangelism with Thompson's 'modes of ideology', *legitimation* and *unification* do not appear particularly relevant, as they are positive representations of relations of domination (1990: 61-62; 64-65); *dissimulation*, deflecting attention away from relations of domination, seems more appropriate; indeed, it deflects attention from material reality altogether (1990: 62-64). Where the material world is referenced, it seems to be portrayed negatively; this could aid *fragmentation* in the scapegoating of criminals or enemies (1990: 65); and *reification* through representing injustice as an inevitable, natural effect of the fallen world (1990: 65-66).

However, since Thompson excludes "apathy and indifference" from ideology (1990: 68-69), perhaps Therborn's 'mechanisms of subjection' provide a more appropriate schema. Therborn divides these mechanisms into those involving what *is*, what is *good* and what is *possible* (fear, resignation) (Therborn 1980: 94). Platonised ontology (theory of being) fits best with the 'what is' mechanisms. *Accommodation* is where people have higher priorities than resisting domination; Platonised evangelism prioritises the 'spiritual' realm over the material. *Inevitability* is the sense that there is no alternative to the current domination; Platonised evangelism sees the material world as unavoidably corrupt (Therborn 1980: 95-98).

### *Second moment: Church ritual and obedience*

It would take far more in-depth research to measure this moment of ideology, particularly if studying a church situation where rituals are relatively unconscious and spontaneous. However, it would be worthwhile to study the role ritual and institution play in turning *obedience* into "the supreme value of Christianity" (Ellul 1986: 17). Most Catholics since the fourth century have denied any moral permission to disobey the orders of rulers<sup>70</sup> (Yoder 2009: 88). Thus I will draw briefly on the liturgy and ritual of the Catholic mass<sup>71</sup>, with the proviso that inferences drawn in this section are even more provisional than the others<sup>72</sup>.

The mass is officiated by a priest, who facilitates proceedings, elicits responses from the congregation, delivers the homily and administers the sacraments. The liturgy follows the same rough format each Sunday; after introductory rites comes a 'penitential act', a reading from the gospel, a homily whereby the priest elaborates on the gospel, a collective recitation of the Nicene or Apostles' Creed, the 'prayers of the faithful' where topical issues are prayed for. The mass culminates in the sacrament of the Eucharist or communion, which is preceded by the most interactive element of the mass, the sharing of a 'sign of peace'; other active participation is provided by songs and responses dispersed throughout (National Liturgy Office 2011).

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<sup>70</sup> Moreover,

<sup>71</sup> My source is the current official New Zealand liturgy for the mass (National Liturgy Office 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the examples of liberation theology, and of the Catholic Worker network we will later discuss, ought to guard us against any hasty generalisations about the ideological nature of the Catholic institution.

However, it seems clear that these dissident movements have been a minority within the church as a whole.

Three areas that seem to warrant investigation are the role of the priest in proceedings, the effect of the physical ritual, and the ‘prayers of the faithful’. The ceremony is clearly centred around the priest, who alone is permitted to administer the Eucharist under church law; this centralisation mirrors the worldwide church structure of laity under a priest, priests under a bishop, bishops under an archbishop and archbishops under the Pope. It would be useful to compare this centred ceremony with Louis Althusser’s discussions of how ideology interpellates people as subjects by subjecting them to an Absolute Subject; i.e. in the case of Christianity; God (Althusser 1970: 132-136)<sup>73</sup>.

The specific functioning of the material rituals would also be worth studying from an Althusserian perspective. Althusser takes influence from Blaise Pascal’s instruction to “kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”; demonstrating that actions do not merely follow beliefs, but can play a role in generating them (1970: 127). Althusser refers to the specific rituals of a Catholic mass; kneeling, making the sign of the cross, the sign of peace, acts of contrition, etc. These actions are inscribed into the liturgy at certain consistent points (National Liturgy Office 2011), making them the natural, almost Pavlovian, response of regular mass attendees. It may be worth studying whether the repetitious performance of rituals, centred on the priest, serves to inscribe into parishioners the sense of a ‘natural’ hierarchical Cosmic Order.

The ‘prayers of the faithful’ is another ritual perhaps worth examination. This section consists of prayers for “the needs of the Church” (typically including reference to ‘our bishop *x*, our archbishop *x*, and our pope Benedict’), “the needs of the public authorities”, “the salvation of the world and those burdened by any kind of difficulty” and “the needs of the local community” (National Liturgy Office 2011). The latter two display a reassuring this-worldly concern, but the former two are perhaps indicative of ideology.

Thompson excludes “habit and routine” from ideology (Thompson 1990: 68-69). However, church ritual can still fulfil his modes of ideology, particularly the discursive content of the ‘prayers of the faithful’. *Legitimation* may be achieved through universalisation and narrativisation, as arrangements which serve some are represented as serving all (‘our’ bishop, ‘our’ government) (1990: 61-62); *dissimulation* through euphemisms such as ‘leadership’ rather than ‘power’, ‘public authorities’ rather than ‘politicians’ (1990: 62-64); *unification* and *fragmentation* through symbolising unity with those included in the rituals, and differentiation from those excluded (1990: 64-65); and *reification* through naturalising hierarchies as natural and eternal reflections of ‘cosmic Order’, outside of social-historical contingency and conflict (1990: 65-66).

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<sup>73</sup> It is tempting to suggest that Althusser places altogether too much emphasis on the fact that the world ‘subject’, apparently in French as well as English, carries dual meanings. However, the connection does seem plausible in the Catholic church situation which Althusser was commenting on.

In Therborn's schema, church ritual would seem to fit best with the 'what is good' mechanisms. *Representation* is when ruling classes are perceived as ruling on behalf of ruled; Catholic ritual involves weekly prayers for 'our' religious and secular authorities. *Deference* is the impression that the present rulers alone have the necessary qualities to rule; according to Therborn this is mostly a pre-capitalist notion, but this may be encouraged by church ritual as Catholics grow used to deferring to church hierarchy and its (male, celibate, highly trained) representatives (Therborn 1980: 95-98)<sup>74</sup>.

*Third moment: Megachurches and commodity fetishism*

If religion exhibiting the third moment of ideology often takes the form of absorption into the dominant 'spontaneous' spirituality, as with Christianity's assimilation into the imperial cult after Constantine, today's equivalent would be Christianity being absorbed into today's dominant underlying spirituality; commodity fetishism. Study of the 'consumer Christianity' of megachurches such as the Australian-centred Hillsong network seems highly pertinent.

The first Hillsong church was started by New Zealand-born couple Brian and Bobbie Houston in Sydney in 1983 (Koutsoukis 2005). Today, the church has satellite congregations in cities as diverse as London, Paris, Moscow, Cape Town and New York (Hillsong Church), with weekly attendance numbering in the tens of thousands. Hillsong also holds several annual conferences, operates an 'International Leadership College', and broadcasts a television show (Hillsong Church). The most prominent aspect of Hillsong's activity is its music; Hillsong's 'worship' songs are sung in many evangelical churches around the world, including New Zealand.

This is a lucrative venture for Hillsong, as churches who use Hillsong's songs pay copyright fees through Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI). Hillsong's songwriters, including New Zealand's Brooke Fraser, comprise a significant proportion of CCLI's worldwide top 100 chart (PraiseCharts 2011). Hillsong also sells a number of 'resources' on its website; musical recordings, live performances and theological teaching from Hillsong's pastors, on CDs, DVDs, 'Special Edition MP3 players' and e-books. The website's 'resources' section advises that all purchases will "directly support the furthering of the ministry of Hillsong Church globally" (Hillsong Church). It is not known how profitable the Hillsong enterprise is, as their accounts are not publicly available, but as a church they are not obliged to pay taxes (The Sun-Herald 2004).

Theologically, the church have been accused of promoting a 'prosperity gospel' suggesting that God wants his followers to be wealthy; in 1999 pastor Brian Houston released a book entitled *You Need More Money*. However, responding to criticism from Reverend Tim Costello of World Vision, among others, Houston has toned down this teaching and ceased

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<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, Therborn refers specifically to ritual, stating that it provides discursive and material affirmations while excommunication, expulsion, confinement and death provide discursive and material sanctions. While the sanctions may not be so commonly used by the church nowadays, perhaps the surviving rituals maintain the affirmative function (Therborn 1980: 82-83).

publishing the book (McDonell, 2004). Rather than analysing specific theological connections, it would be worthwhile to examine the extent to which Hillsong has become assimilated into the spirituality of commodity fetishism, and therefore performs an ideological function for capitalism in Žižek's third moment.

There is an increasing scholarship on commodity fetishism, or capitalism itself, as the dominant religion of our time. Jameson identifies commodity fetishism (also known as 'consumerism') as the principle factor in the unprecedented global spread of capitalism in post-modernity (Jameson 2009: 265-266). Richard Horsley analyses Christmas the major religious festival of consumer capitalism, performing many of the same functions as the imperial cult; establishing group identity, providing a meaning of life, and offering moral redemption (Horsley 2003: 106-126). He observes that we are seeing commodity fetishism develop far beyond what Marx foresaw (2003: 118), and that the religious nature of this goes unnoticed precisely because it is perceived as secular (Horsley 2003: 111-113). Graham Ward discusses the commodification of religion itself as "a late stage in the process of commodification" (Ward 2003: 330).

If commodity fetishism is today's dominant utopia<sup>75</sup>, 'consumer Christianity' may prove to be guilty of the same utopian displacement as Durkheimian 'unifying' religion; displacing the radical aspect of the Christian utopian vision and allowing the Christian utopia to increasingly resemble the dominant 'utopia' of the day.

Thompson's modes of ideology provide fertile grounds for comparison here. *Legitimation* may be found in exhortations to buy church products and/or contribute to various 'love offerings' to God and 'his people' rather than to specific stakeholders (Thompson 1990: 61-62). *Dissimulation* may be observed where loaded religious terms such as 'blessing' are imported to euphemistically describe financial success (1990: 62-64). *Unification* is likely provided through the focus on fashion and accessorisation, as well as specific commodities which function as belonging markers, with *fragmentation* the corresponding differentiation from those outside of group status (1990: 64-65). *Reification*<sup>76</sup> could be observed in naturalising and eternalising commodification and capitalism as the permanent and inevitable vehicles of God's work (1990:65-66)

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<sup>75</sup> Given our broad definition of utopia as "desire for a better way of being" (Levitas 2007: 290), the notion that commodity fetishism is today's dominant utopia would seem to be a logical corollary to the idea that it is today's dominant spirituality, though this should perhaps not be taken for granted. Bauman's description of the kind of utopia available to the 'liquid modern' imagination is consistent with the suggestion that our dominant utopia is provided by commodity fetishism. For Bauman, "happiness has become a private affair; and a matter for here and now ... The paradigm of the search for happiness is mining, rather than agri- or horti-culture. The mines are emptied of their useful contents and then promptly abandoned – when the deposits have been exhausted or when their further exploitation becomes too cumbersome or costly." (Bauman 2003: 23).

<sup>76</sup> Commodification itself can also be described as 'commodity reification'. Jameson's version of Thompson's 'latent' Marxist conception of ideology, which is also his equivalent to Žižek's third 'moment', sums it up as reification (Jameson 2009: 329).

Consumer Christianity does not seem to fit so easily with Therborn's 'mechanisms of subjection', which are mainly explicit arguments in favour of submission. Implicitly and unconsciously, consumer Christianity could foster feelings of *inevitability*; that there is no alternative to commodification and capitalism, and *representation*; that they operate on behalf of their participants; but these rationalisations are probably most effective if they are kept as unquestioned background assumptions (Therborn 1980: 95-98)<sup>77</sup>.

### *Other displacements*

I have framed this provisional section using Žižek's three moments of ideology. An alternative way of framing research would be to follow my own notion that ideological Christianity is Christianity whose utopia has been displaced in some way. I could therefore frame my research by the four possible displacements of the four important elements I have identified in the Christian utopia; *this-worldly*, *imminent*, *radical*, and *participatory*. The above examples have involved displacing the this-worldly and radical elements; I could also explore ideological Christianity which displaces the participatory element, and sees the kingdom of God as something *God*, not us, will enact; or displaces the imminent element, expecting it in the distant future, not now<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> This brief discussion has focussed on 'consumer Christianity' as Christianity which overtly engages in the production and marketing of commodities; a more subtle, and arguably more interesting area to explore would be the ways in which the church's promotion of its messages resembles the marketing of commodities; there could be an absorption into commodity fetishist ways of thinking even where money does not change hands.

<sup>78</sup> A displacement of the *participatory* element could perhaps be observed in the Jehovah's Witnesses sect. Their articulation of eschatology is in many ways more orthodox than popular Christian hopes of 'going to heaven'. The Watch Tower website describes a this-worldly utopia of eternal peace on a "paradise earth", a highly imminent expectation given that we have been living in the 'end times' since 1914, and even endorses radical political change to "this entire wicked system". The only element lacking is the sense of human participation in the enacting of the kingdom of God. Humans will be mere spectators in the coming battle where "heavenly armies" fight to establish the divine utopia (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 2005). Perhaps the subtlest of the four displacements is the neglect of the *imminent* emergence of utopia. The New Testament describes the kingdom of God variously as in the future, as coming, or as already here; this has usually been interpreted as an "overlap of the ages", a 'now but not yet' which posits that Kingdom is here and how, even while the world as a whole falls so far short of utopian hopes (Hauerwas 1983b: 128, Strom 2000: 87-91). A truly imminent understanding of the Christian utopia interprets this to mean that "the church is called to be *now* what the world is called to be ultimately" (Yoder, quoted in Stassen 2009: 13, emphasis added), and this imminent interpretation of 'inaugurated eschatology' has always been a threat to the status quo (Mannheim 1936: 190,195). However, some theological articulations of the doctrine have reinterpreted it so that the 'not yet' serves as a bulwark against enacting the 'now' (Hauerwas 1984: 417-420), a subtle shift of focus that could serve to displace the utopian hope to a distant future. Anglican theologian (and then-Bishop of Durham) N.T. Wright strongly denounces dislodging the Christian hope to another place (Wright 2007), but he nonetheless shows a tendency to shunt it to another time in his Augustinian appraisal of the state as the enemy of Christ, a product of the fallen world that is doomed to destruction, yet nonetheless a necessary remedy against that fallenness in the meantime (Wright 2005: 68-69). Church hierarchs, whether Anglican, Orthodox (Augustine – Hauerwas 1984: 410-411), Catholic (Hauerwas 1984: 417-420) or Methodist (Hauerwas 1988: 436-439) bishops, seem particularly drawn to this downplaying of the 'now' of eschatology; perhaps they are aware that the very existence of their position is dependent on a compromise with the 'not yet redeemed' order of the world. If the ideology critique, as well as the utopian society, does not take effect until the distant future – as seems to be the case in Wright's appraisal of the state – Christianity could potentially have the same legitimising effect in the 'now' as the Durkheimian 'gathering and unifying' religion.

*The Catholic Worker movement and the utopia of 'The Common Good'*

The Catholic Worker is a loose network of communities and publications founded in New York in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, now operating primarily in the United States, but also throughout North America, Europe, Africa and Australasia, including several manifestations in New Zealand. Inspired by Catholic social teaching and “the justice and charity of Jesus Christ”, Catholic Workers operate houses of hospitality in poor urban areas and farms in rural areas, and engage with political issues from pacifist, anarchist and/or socialist points of view (The Catholic Worker Movement 2008, Forest 1995). The main forms this engagement takes is newspapers, including the original *The Catholic Worker* and Christchurch-based publication *The Common Good*; and political activism, notably the ‘Ploughshares’ protests; non-violent ‘disarming’ of military equipment<sup>79</sup> (Ploughshares Aotearoa).

With regard to the examples of ideological Christianity articulated above, the Catholic Workers avoid the Platonised ‘other-worldly’ utopia, talking of a “needed personal and social transformation” in this world (2008). Comparison to Catholic ritual and institution is interesting, because many Catholic Workers are also committed participants in said ritual and institution; but this is supplemented by the ‘rituals’ of “non-violent action”, “the works of mercy”, “manual labour” and “voluntary poverty” (2008), and the global church structure is often criticised by Catholic Workers, who maintain an informal, decentralised configuration<sup>80</sup> (Quigley 2011). The Catholic Workers’ approach to financing their operations and broadcasting their messages is almost opposite to that of Hillsong; the *Catholic Worker* newspaper still carries its original price tag of 1 cent<sup>81</sup>, and there is nothing for sale on its website; nor any requests for donations; although there are dozens of ‘volunteer opportunities’ listed (The Catholic Worker Movement 2008).

Catholic Workers seek to enact Thomas Aquinas’ utopian concept of “the Common Good, “a vision of a society where the good of each member is bound to the good of the whole in the service of God” (The Catholic Worker Movement 2008). For the Catholic Workers, this entails “personalism”, a “decentralized society” and self-sufficient “distributist communitarianism” (2008). Although further research would be necessary, this certainly seems a fitting successor to the this-worldly, imminent, radical, participatory utopianism of the early church<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> The name comes from the biblical prophecy of ‘beating swords into ploughshares, and studying war no more’ (Isaiah 2:1-4, Micah 4:1-4).

<sup>80</sup> “It is unlikely that any religious community was ever less structured than the Catholic Worker. Each community is autonomous. There is no board of directors, no sponsor, no system of governance, no endowment, no pay checks, no pension plans. Since Dorothy Day’s death, there has been no central leader” (Forest 1995).

<sup>81</sup> This still makes the original *Catholic Worker* the most expensive of all Catholic Worker newspapers.

<sup>82</sup> It may seem unexpected that a group founded and primarily located at the heart of today’s global-capitalist ‘empire’, and within the Roman Catholic church no less, should provide our contemporary example of radical-utopian Christianity. However, as a decentralised network working to undermine the dominant world empire through forming alternative communities in its cities, seeing themselves as being genuinely loyal to a much older religious tradition that has been oppressed, contorted and co-opted by this empire and others

## **IX. Attempting to identify determining factors**

If the previous section would comprise the *descriptive* element of potential research, the properly sociological *explanatory* element would require us to ask ‘why’ questions (McLennan 2007). Why does a radical, emancipatory utopia sometimes accompany Christianity, and why is this utopia sometimes displaced and replaced by an ideological utopia? What makes the Christian utopia express itself in radical or ideological ways in particular situations? And how can we ensure that our religion (or other people’s religion, for that matter) is expressing the kind of utopia that we (or God, for that matter) want?

A possible way of beginning to the answer these questions would be to look at what changed with Constantine, and compare those factors to recent examples of ideological and radical-utopian Christianity. This could allow us to formulate questions aimed at identifying possible *determining factors* deciding whether a particular community, activity, or individual will function ideologically or as a counter-ideological utopia.

Five changes are immediately apparent when examining the Constantinian turn (Bulloch 1981: 318-334, Kee 1982). Firstly, *legal-political position*; Christianity went from a marginalised, often persecuted sect to the established religion<sup>84</sup>. Secondly, *theology*; from

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before it, the Catholic Workers are perhaps the closest example in today’s world of the early church in the time of Paul.

This calls to mind Žižek’s desire to return to the “unique moment when a thought already transposes itself into a collective organization, but does not yet fix itself into an Institution ... a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capitalist world order, and, furthermore, a project that would unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, as intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of its repressed truth. What Christianity did with the Roman Empire, this global “multiculturalist” polity, we should do with regard to today’s Empire” (Žižek 2001: 4-5).

<sup>83</sup> Another example of radical-utopian Christianity operating in New Zealand today could be provided by the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), the local, contemporary successor to the revolting peasants studied by Engels. The AAANZ is a loose network of interested parties, including members of various Christian anarchist, ‘new monastic’ and missional communities around Australasia, and Victoria University of Wellington theologian Chris Marshall (Marshall 1999).

The AAANZ’s articulation of the kingdom of God is a utopia aimed primarily at ‘Reconciliation’, which is “the heart of the gospel” and “the centre of our work” (Anabaptist Association of Australia & New Zealand). This involves peacemaking on individual, societal, global and ecological levels (contra the violent early rebellions of Münzer and others, since the 1560s the movement has been predominantly pacifist (1999: 19). To this end, the genuine church is conceived as a “counter-cultural community” enacting “radical discipleship” (Marshall 1999: 21).

With respect to the ideological forms of Christianity discussed, the AAANZ avoids the Platonist ontology, advocating a this-worldly utopia driven by a “wholistic, integrative theology” attempting to “address[] with equal concern the spiritual, physical and social dimensions of life” (1999: 16). They criticise the institutionalisation of the church, advocating “multi-voiced worshipping communities, places of friendship and accountability” where “young and old are valued, consultative leadership is exercised, and roles are related to gifts rather than gender” (Anabaptist Association of Australia & New Zealand). Their ‘rituals’ are to “seek[] ways of living simply, sharing generously and working for justice”. Acknowledging that “spirituality and economics are inter-connected”, they seek to live an alternative from the “consumerist culture” and “economic injustice” of today’s world. Similar to the Catholic Workers, they do not offer anything for sale on their website (Anabaptist Association of Australia & New Zealand).

<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the church was increasingly associated with the Roman empire, and Christianity was increasingly

Semitic, material and counter-ideological to Greco-Roman, idealist and elitist. Thirdly, *socio-economic status*; the church was longer merely a movement of the poor. Wealth, rather than poverty<sup>85</sup>, was considered blessed, and rather than voluntary income redistribution to the needy, imperial funds allowed the construction of opulent church buildings. Fourthly, *institutional structure*; from decentralised to hierarchical, and from informal to clerical (Strom 2000: 180-181). Finally, *socio-economic/political stance*; from radical-utopian to ideological.

If we are to take this last factor as a ‘dependent variable’, determined or at least influenced by something<sup>86</sup>, research could attempt to ascertain where the other four factors sit in the causal chain today. Briefly, here are some questions that may be worth considering:

1. *Legal-political position.* For Gramsci, the separation of church and state made religion’s role in the “reproduction of hegemonic relations ... much more subtle and possibly provisional” (Torres 1992: 44). As today’s world contains various churches with various relationships to states, I could investigate what difference these relationships make to ideological/radical-utopian stances of adherents. I could compare New Zealand’s Anglican quasi-state church with officially independent denominations. Alternatively, I could compare the Catholic church in New Zealand to its more established equivalent in Peru or Poland, or consider countries where certain churches are illegal.

However, it could be argued that the same Enlightenment secularisation is observable in all Western societies, whether retaining an established church or not; the notion of a state church appears to have lost significance. I suspect that despite legal-political position’s importance in the time of Constantine, it would not be a significant determining factor for Christian socio-political stances today. Hauerwas states that the shift from Christendom to nation-states, and the secularisation of said nation-states, has not significantly changed “the moral identification of Christians with the state”, particularly in his native United States (Hauerwas 1986b: 476)<sup>87</sup>.

2. *Theology.* When Weber and Bakunin discuss the relationship between religious ideas and socio-political activity, they tend to give the impression that ideas come first, and material activity is merely the practical outworking of ideas. This is in stark contrast to Marxist historical materialism, whereby the “religious world is but the reflex of the real world” of class struggle and modes of production (Marx 1867: 135). Göran Therborn ridicules “historical idealism” for its sense that ideas can shape history from outside it (Therborn 1980: 44).

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distrusted outside the empire as a result (Bulloch 1981: 318-334).

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Luke 6:20: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”.

<sup>86</sup> It would also be important to consider what roles *agency* and *chance* play in this process; if they are significant roles, perhaps we should be talking of ‘influencing’ factors rather than ‘determining’ factors.

<sup>87</sup> An illustrative example would be to compare patriotic Christians in the United States, with its proud tradition of separation of church and state, and their revolutionary southern neighbours in Catholic Latin America.

Research could attempt to measure whether theological views can really have an independent impact on the material world, perhaps by measuring the effect of exposure to certain ideas, books etc. This is, of course, unlikely to be able to prove conclusively whether Weber or Marx is correct, and perhaps even stating the question in this way is a concession to the Platonist dualism of ideas and matter, contrary to the Christian ontology where the ideal/spiritual and the material are the inner and outer aspect of the same reality; “neither is the cause of the other”<sup>88</sup> (Wink 1984: 124). Perhaps the inner and outer world are mutually determining; Althusser considered that even the Marxist tradition has granted superstructural features a “relative autonomy” from the base, and even a “reciprocal action” upon it (Althusser 1970: 105).

3. *Socio-economic status.* Some connection between socio-economic position and socio-political views should be expected, but how much difference does Christianity make to this situation? Do the variations in theological and political stances among Christians simply mirror class allegiances, with Christianity merely functioning as a language to express class consciousness, as for Engels? Or is Christianity able to disrupt the usual relation and cause people to have different views than their class position would predict?<sup>89</sup>

Here, too, causal relations would be difficult to measure, not least because class positions are not static, and theological beliefs about class and wealth could lead to lifestyle change, as in the income redistribution of the early church. This could be measured by the type of research mentioned above, exposing people in different class positions to theological ideas; ideally, however, research would assess concrete changes in class position following theological change or vice versa; perhaps qualitative research such as interviews would be appropriate here.

4. *Institutional structure.* Jameson suggests that “history and social development impose objective structural limits on the capacity of even the finest minds to penetrate reality” (Jameson 2009: 320). The shape of Christian institutions may affect the theological views and political activity of their adherents. This would partly involve Žižek’s second moment, the unconscious workings of ritual in the Ideological State Apparatuses, but even in the conscious first moment, a hierarchical church seems unlikely to preach anarchism, and a church seeking to expand its income seems unlikely to preach against commodity fetishism<sup>90</sup>.

This would represent a theory of material determination which is nonetheless wider than the classic Marxist focus on class and modes of production as the ultimate reality. It may turn out that churches are in reality more concerned to sustain their own positions and privileges than to genuinely respond to social reality (Gramsci, quoted in Pozzolini 1970: 129-130). If

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<sup>88</sup> For other attempts to delineate a ‘theological materialism’ which also incorporates the ideal and spiritual, see Davis & Riches 2005, Milbank 2005, Blond 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Recent American research found that the more frequently people read the Bible, the more likely they are to support abolishing the death penalty increases, oppose for the USA PATRIOT Act drops and support socio-economic justice (Franzen 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Marx remarked that “the established Church will more readily pardon an attack on thirty-eight of its thirty-nine articles than on one thirty-ninth of its income” (McLellan 1987: 27).

their structure mirrors the structure of the wider society, they will share ideological goals with that wider society; perhaps it is inevitable that in promoting obedience to priests, churches will also promote obedience to governments; in promoting their own CDs and DVDs, churches will also promote the overall practice of consumption<sup>91</sup>.

Research could involve comparing ideological/utopian stance to institutional shape of various structures. If a connection were able to be observed, it would further reiterate the importance of identifying where Christianity has imitated the dominant ideology of the wider society in its own operations.

## **X. Conclusion**

In the above chapters, I have compared historical, theological and social-theoretical perspectives on Christianity to the sociological concepts of ideology and utopia, and begun to dip my toes into empirical examples of ideological and radical-utopian Christianity. I have attempted to incorporate various theoretical accounts into the framing perspective that emancipatory Christianity presents a this-worldly, imminent, radical, participatory utopia, and ideological Christianity can be perceived as Christianity whose utopia has had at least one of these four elements displaced.

As this thesis constitutes ‘notes towards an investigation’, I have not managed conclusively to answer any of my research questions. Nevertheless, I hope that I have mapped out a theoretical and methodological framework through which research could identify ideological and radical-utopian expressions of Christianity in contemporary New Zealand, analyse the ways in which this ideology and utopia operates, and attempt to explore the intriguing question of what determines Christian socio-political stances.

I hope that this discussion can serve not only as a suggested prelude to in-depth research, but also as helpful guidelines for how ‘really existing Christianity’ can be approached by lovers of truth, justice and freedom who are concerned with opposing ideology – and by Christians who are convinced that true Christianity is not a dream but an awakening.

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<sup>91</sup> This does not necessarily entail the conscious manipulations of power elites, but could be the “unforeseen and even unwished-for results” of church structures operating (Weber 1905: 90).

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