

# Barth, Žižek & the Cold War:

## *Defending Radical Politics against the Totalitarian Concept*

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*This essay explores the challenge to the totalitarianism thesis as seen in the work of the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth and the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. At the heart of their critique is the self-righteous historical narrative of the democratic West toward forms of radical thought. The criticism of both Barth and Žižek is not a recommendation of historical communism but an attempt to think otherwise by utilizing elements of the Christian tradition. Both thinkers provide a model of consistently theorizing against the stream of popular social-political ideologies.*

### INTRODUCTION: COLD WAR RHETORIC STILL HAUNTS US

Politicians often reference religious scriptures to make a connection with their audience. For some there is an open acknowledgment of how Christianity formed our political documents, yet, at the same time, there is often an open confession that no particular religious faith shapes any particular political policy in the world in general. There is a certain pride that one can balance spirituality and the secular; this is why admirers of liberal democracy speak about how their position yields tolerance. However, there seems to be another type of theological language that has crept in political rhetoric, one that has incorporated the binary logic of good versus evil or friend versus enemy as when Reagan labeled the Soviet Union the Evil Empire or when Bush declared Iraq, Iran and North Korea as the Axis of Evil.<sup>1</sup> This type of rhetoric sparked a turn to religious texts by contemporary political writers like Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek to deal with the abuse of political power and to challenge this religious-political language that favors the liberal-democratic paradigm with instead one with an emphasis on liberation. I will argue that the twentieth century theologian Karl Barth is a forerunner to these thinkers in his important critique of the totalitarian paradigm, which came by his life-long commitment to radical politics. By examining Barth's work in dialogue with Žižek specifically, this paper will illustrate for us a careful suspicion of the binary religious-political language behind some of the critiques of leftist thought and point us to instead ask about the problems of the actual historical socialist states than to simply declare the goodness of liberal-democracy.

The most glaring examples of theological-political language are in the twentieth century with the rise of totalitarian governments during Barth's lifetime.<sup>2</sup> For example, was not Hitler and the Nazis the embodiment of evil and the Soviet Union the Beast in the East? Moreover, today certain Islamic regimes are declared evil and oppressive; the oppressed people living in these countries are in need of liberation, and the terrorists that are caught are animals that may need to be tortured for the

<sup>1</sup> See Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan's Speech before the National Association of Evangelicals," <http://www.presidentreagan.info/speeches/empire.cfm> (accessed 28 October 2011) and George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002)," <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540> (accessed 28 October 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Book, 1994) as the best and classic example of political theory on totalitarianism that avoids some of the excesses of totalitarian themed works that build off this book.

greater good and safety of the world.<sup>3</sup> In short, if one can fashion one's political enemy as evil or crazy and convince one's constituents about the veracity of this claim, then that automatically makes one's position the good. Paul Berman's book *Terror and Liberalism* gives intellectual credibility to this view because he claims that European totalitarianism shares with modern Islamism hatred toward liberalism. So for him the Cold War continues.<sup>4</sup> Berman's thought is somewhat at odds with others who claimed that with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the West (and thus liberal democracy) was the victor of the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> Berman is building upon the work of the French historian, Francois Furet, who lumps the fascist and communist totalitarian regimes together because of their mutual distrust of modern liberal democracy that had its genesis after World War I among other things; Berman simply continues Furet's thought to include modern Islamic governments.<sup>6</sup>

Edward Said notes that the political group that has gained the most power from the results of the totalitarian rhetoric has been the neo-conservative movement: "The neo-conservative movement began in the 70s as an anti-communist formation whose ideology was undying enmity to communism and American supremacy."<sup>7</sup> Because of the victory of the United States over the Soviet Union that ended the Cold War, the neo-conservative movement has now turned toward the enigmatic ideal of promoting liberal democracy across the globe.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, what often happens in political discourse is to label those that are against the neo-conservatives policies as those that are against freedom and democracy. At the present time, a common theme for some neo-conservatives like Robert Kagan is to bewail the postmodern mood in the US and Europe (the West) because they forget their place in the world while at the same time warning democratic nations of the new post-Cold War danger of Russian and Chinese autocracy or Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>9</sup> In short, according to Kagan, the Cold War never really finishes; the struggle for democracies continues. Conversely, Said describes what the framework looks like that forms the discussion in politics in the United States between both Republicans and Democrats:

The ideological position common to nearly everyone in the system is that America is best, its ideals perfect, its history spotless, its actions and society at the highest levels of human achievement and greatness. To argue with that – if that is possible – is to be "un-American" and guilty of the cardinal sin of anti-Americanism, which derives not from honest criticism but for hatred of the good and the pure. No wonder then that America has never had an organized Left or real opposition party as has been the case in every European country.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See one example not from the Right Wing from Thomas L. Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 180, where he writes: "There is a lot about the Bush team's foreign policy I don't like, but their willingness to restore our deterrence, and to be as crazy as some of our enemies, is one thing they have right."

<sup>4</sup> Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W H Norton, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> The most famous example of this is Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992). Also see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), for his controversial description of how the West must deal with a clash of civilizations with the East now that the Soviet Union (the former East) collapsed. See Žižek's critique of both in *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 140-1, where he says that Huntington's clash of cultures is the political setting of Fukuyama's liberal-democratic picture.

<sup>6</sup> Francois Furet and Ernst Nolte, *Fascism and Communism*, trans. Katherine Golsan (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, "Europe vs. America," <http://www.left.ru/inter/november/said.html> (accessed 05 June 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Mandelbaum, "David's Friend Goliath," *Foreign Policy* 152 (2006), 55, where he defends American foreign policy on the basis of American exceptionalism: "The alternative to the role the United States plays in the world is not better global governance, but less of it—and that would make the world a far more dangerous and less prosperous place. Never in human history has one country done so much for so many others, and received so little appreciation for its efforts."

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Return of History: And the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 4 and 105.

<sup>10</sup> Said, "Europe vs. America."

One can perhaps take issue with some of Said's conclusions about a viable opposition party without ignoring his point dealing with the sort of religious expression given toward America that both political parties are guilty of. This religious expression was formed by rhetoric that reacted to historical events of the twentieth century, which boiled down the conflict to an "us versus them" mentality. Ideas that waver from the historiography of neo-conservatives or liberal-democratic thinkers are thus labeled prone to totalitarianism.

Not all contemporary political thinkers are convinced of the totalitarian paradigm. One of the areas of defense against it is the idea that the communist project was radically different from fascism. For example, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt declare: "The notions of 'totalitarianism' that were constructed during the period of the cold war proved to be useful instruments for propaganda but completely inadequate analytical tools, leading most often to pernicious inquisitional methods and damaging moral arguments. The numerous shelves of our libraries that are filled with analyses of totalitarianism should today be regarded only with shame and could be thrown away with no hesitation."<sup>11</sup> They instead see the maintenance of biopower by mostly capitalist nations rather than from so-called totalitarian as the real problem.<sup>12</sup>

Negri challenges liberal historiography by stating that "we should have thanked the Soviet multitude" because it was from their forces that Nazism was ultimately defeated.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Soviet Russia modernized so quickly but was at the same time "the most atrocious act of political masochism," leads Negri to affirm that "we should reread the period after 1917 as a long civil war between classes."<sup>14</sup> In short, instead of arguing about clashes between ideologies, he contends that it was issues over management of development that led to the fall of Real Socialism; the liberal governments from the beginning were in a silent war with the Soviets to prevent a socialist style of government from succeeding. This is why they could never openly congratulate the Soviets for their help against the Axis Powers. Therefore, Negri concludes that the term "totalitarianism is absolutely ideological" because it does not pay attention to the historical dissident movements within the totalitarian state.<sup>15</sup> He writes: "In short, it seems to me that categories like socialism, Stalinism, fascism, and totalitarianism are too generic in order to be able to add something to the knowledge that we have of historical reality."<sup>16</sup>

French philosopher Alain Badiou also challenges the totalitarian reading because it claims the politics of emancipation has its roots in the Jacobins of the French Revolution that is eventually repeated in Stalinism.<sup>17</sup> The twentieth century is the so-called totalitarian century which Badiou notes includes the Soviets, the Nazis and the Chinese, based upon the counting of the dead innocents (he adds that one could also bring along the Cubans and Islamic nations).<sup>18</sup> The basis of this reading is to ascribe the idea of Evil behind these regimes but Badiou claims that this reading does not get to the heart of the problem; instead one should study the Nazis and any of these particular forms with caution. He writes that "the moral equation that identifies the Nazi (or

<sup>11</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 421.

<sup>12</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 24-5.

<sup>13</sup> Antonio Negri and Raf Valvola Scelsi, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, trans. Peter Thomas (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 11-12. Also see Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008) for an account of how battle ready Stalin's forces were in World War II.

<sup>14</sup> Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, 17 and 24.

<sup>15</sup> Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, 28-29. Here Negri takes Arendt to task for her interpretation of the American Revolution over the French and Russian Revolutions. He notes that Arendt's other works are of supreme value but that the works on totalitarianism is set up in the mood of the Cold War.

<sup>16</sup> Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2007), 203.

<sup>18</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 1-3. Badiou contrasts the totalitarian century with the Soviet century and the liberal century.

Stalinist) ‘unthinkable’ with Evil amounts to nothing more than a feeble theology.”<sup>19</sup> In short, by giving metaphysical labels to social-political systems ignores the real historical happenings of these events. This differentiation is what leads him to reject the “crass equation” of Nazism with Stalinism under the banner of totalitarianism because, according to Badiou, while the fascism of the Nazis promoted submission to the nation and its racial identity, the real proletarian movement was an obstacle to this submission.<sup>20</sup> So like Negri, Badiou believes the totalitarian label ignores the dissident voices framed in communism. To some extent the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has built upon Badiou’s argument in spades to claim that the idea of totalitarianism serves as an ideological tool to prevent radical thought.<sup>21</sup>

Because of the recent attention to religious texts in attempting to understand social-political phenomena, outside of the narrative of democracy versus totalitarianism, by atheists like Badiou, Negri and Žižek especially in their readings of biblical books like Job and the letters of Paul, I contend that it is a worthwhile project to view Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s opinions on the theory of totalitarianism as a form of ideology during the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> I believe that Barth is a belated voice in this conversation, kept out of it because he is first and foremost a theologian. However, Barth was a principal player in the events of history that matter so much to thinkers like Badiou, Negri and Žižek, and I contend a resource that these thinkers are missing from their own theoretical work.<sup>23</sup> Building upon Rudy Koshar’s thesis, Barth was one of the most important intellectual voices of his day and should be treated as such; theology was at the heart of his work but he was also politically active as a voice advocating socialism.<sup>24</sup> George Hunsinger suggests that when looking at Barth’s whole life one sees “a public intellectual embroiled in ceaseless controversy.”<sup>25</sup> The fact that the most important events of his life span between 1917 to 1968, what Negri calls the real twentieth century, makes him an interesting conversation partner with those thinkers trying to understand what went wrong with Real socialism especially because Barth himself was quick to criticize the knee-jerk reaction of anti-communists.<sup>26</sup>

There is some resistance to the work of these new thinkers much like there is against Barth’s thought. For example, Mark Lilla recently laid at least partial blame for Barth’s eschatological thought during the Weimar years for the eventual rise of the Nazis while also warning of the danger of the inherent violence behind Badiou’s work, and what he calls the neo-Paul, especially. He is committed to the Great Separation between the religious and the secular but in such a way that he sees Barth, Badiou, Žižek and others continuing a type of negative, secular-apocalyptic type of religion that will eventually foster a violent outcome.<sup>27</sup> In short, Lilla is a good example of presupposing the liberal-democratic framework as the means to of criteria for any type of religious based criticism as potentially dangerous, yet in doing so ignores the actual tensions of the different

<sup>19</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 102-3.

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2001), 130-1.

<sup>22</sup> Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, 204-8. Here Negri openly admits that “religion isn’t simply the opium of the people but relief that touches profound zones of human spirituality.” He compares the Constantinian forms of religion of the priests and bosses or the neo-cons theocratic leanings with those of liberation theologians in Latin America.

<sup>23</sup> See Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 48, where he references Barth’s view of atonement via a secondary source and Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (North Carolina: Duke Press, 2009), 130, where he lists the *Church Dogmatics* in his bibliography.

<sup>24</sup> Rudy Koshar, “Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History?” *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (2008): 333-62.

<sup>25</sup> George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, 24-5.

<sup>27</sup> See Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) and “A New, Political Saint Paul?,” *The New York Review of Books* 55 (2008).

social classes within society. One of the reasons for this recent religious turn is because these thinkers believe a secularization of forms of political theology needs to be practiced because national-religious forms will overtake the democratic ones.

Lilla correctly sees that behind Barth's eschatological language lies an endorsement of upsetting the status quo. Žižek, more than Badiou and the others, continues to find inspiration from Christian thought to emphasize his position of openness to a political act that will challenge the liberal-democratic paradigm. I will illustrate that Barth's position during the Cold War was a continual commitment to his understanding of socialism and much like Žižek and company, his anti anti-communism was his way of being open to a politics of emancipation. This is why he did not criticize in a similar manner the type of political/theological rhetoric used by some in the Western tradition with regards to totalitarianism and democracy especially in the way communism is oftentimes equated with Nazism. Therefore, what is sometimes perceived as Barth's and Žižek's equivocal attitude toward Leftist violence is actually their critical commitment to reframe the way we question political regimes and the prevailing ideologies that hold them together.

## BARTH'S REJECTION OF COLD WAR POLITICS

Karl Barth is famous for his open rejection of Nazism and for being the principle author of the Barmen Declaration. Before writing his Romans commentary, Barth was known as a socialist pastor in the village of Safenwil in Switzerland; he even had the nickname the Red Pastor because of his socialist beliefs.<sup>28</sup> During his pastorate he preached that for Jesus "there was only a social religion, a religion of solidarity" and that "Real socialism is real Christianity in our time."<sup>29</sup> Later, in his *Church Dogmatics*, he proclaims: "The Christian community both can and should espouse the cause of this or that branch of social progress or even socialism in the form most helpful at a specific time and place and in a specific situation."<sup>30</sup> In short, he was a man of the Left and remained one the rest of his life even though there has been some argument how important Leftist thought remained for his theological thought.<sup>31</sup> Hunsinger, building on the work of Ulrich Dannemann, points out that "Barth was especially interested in the socialist goal of production for humane use rather than profit, and in extending democratic practices and control to the economic order so as to eliminate class privileges of wealth and income in favor of economic and therefore political equality."<sup>32</sup> In addition, in 1939 on the eve of World War II, Barth himself said: "Wherever there is theological talk, it is always implicitly

<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth, *Final Testimonies*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 38. There has been much made of the impact socialism has had on Barth's theology. The principal author that sees a connection between socialism even in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is William Marquardt. See George Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) for a number of essays discussing Barth's relationship to socialism and Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 2004), 26-8. Also see Larry Abbott Goleman, "Dialectical Theology and Critical Theory: Revelation, Self, and Society Under Commodification," Ph.D. Diss., Emory University, 1998 for a comparative study of Barth and Bonhoeffer with the Frankfurt School and other Marxist thinkers.

<sup>29</sup> Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 34 and 36.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-75) III/4, 545 (hereafter cited as CD).

<sup>31</sup> See Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 114-120; also see James Bentley's chapter on Barth's socialism in *Between Marx and Christ: The Dialogue in German-Speaking Europe 1870-1970* (New York: Verso, 1982) and Robin Petersen, "Theology and Socialism," in *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988). For a somewhat recent, Left-Barthian view see Dick Boer, *Een Heel Andere God: Het Levenswerk van Karl Barth (1886-1968)* (Gorinchem: Narratio, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> See Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 118. Also see Ulrich Dannemann, *Theologie und Politik im Denken Karl Barths* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1977).

or explicitly political talk also.”<sup>33</sup> So where did the idea that Barth’s social-political view was totally secondary and separate from his theological work come from?

One of Barth’s contemporaries that fostered the idea of Barth’s political detachment is Paul Tillich. Tillich writes: “Whether it be nationalism, or socialism, or democracy, or ‘the American way of life,’ which happens to be identified with the Christian message, Karl Barth would see these things as idolatrous.”<sup>34</sup> Tillich began his career as a religious socialist but then abandoned that format during his time teaching in the United States whereas he notes that Barth also started out in religious socialism but “detached himself” until the Nazis became a problem for the church. Tillich claims that after WWII “Barth is more or less neutral” and because of his strict view of the purity of the Word of God does not “identify the cause of Christ with the cause of the West” and therefore “is seriously attacked by Western churches.”<sup>35</sup> This type of view led some commentators to highlight what they perceived as Barth’s “disinterest in engaging the real world.”<sup>36</sup>

Tillich’s view is shaped by a number of misconceptions. First, Tillich follows the conservative historiography that sees Barth’s *Romans II* as a break with socialism. This is followed by the silent years of the 1920s.<sup>37</sup> However, Barth, in his second edition of *Romans* of 1922, writes that “Christianity displays a certain inclination to side with those who are immature, sullen, and depressed, with those who ‘come off badly’ and are, in consequence, ready for revolution. There is, for that reason, much in the cause of socialism which evokes Christian approval.”<sup>38</sup> Barth does not abandon his socialism between the times of the *Romans* commentaries but after the Russian Revolution he seems to be at least a little more critical of revolutionary movements as he was of nationalism during World War I.<sup>39</sup>

Second, the idea that Barth became neutral after World War II betrays his actual political stance. He makes a case against the West by saying: “Anyone who does not want communism – and none of us do – should take socialism seriously.”<sup>40</sup> At the end of World War II, he was involved in the Swiss-Soviet Union Society, Aid for Russian Internees and the Soviet Union Society on the principle that Switzerland and the West had an unhealthy “fear of Bolsheviks and communists.”<sup>41</sup> This hardly sounds like an apolitical, neutral stance. This open attitude towards the Soviets made him the target in 1950s of “many small McCarthys.”<sup>42</sup>

The impact socialism had on Barth’s thought was only one of many influences on Barth’s theology although he himself claimed that he had never been a “doctrinaire socialist.”<sup>43</sup> Still, after WWII, his thought was radical enough to come “under scrutiny from the American Secret Service” because he was on friendly terms with “too many Eastern friends.”<sup>44</sup> He may not have considered himself a doctrinaire socialist but he was a member of the Social Democratic Party in Switzerland in 1915 (the same party Lenin belonged to in exile) and the Social Democratic Party in Germany in 1931 because

<sup>33</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 292.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), 536. Also see McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic*, 25-6 and Bentley, *Between Marx and Christ*, 63-4 and 70-1 for Tillich’s neo-orthodox reading of Barth.

<sup>35</sup> Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 539.

<sup>36</sup> C.C. West, *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 313.

<sup>37</sup> Koshar, “Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History,” 358.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford Press, 1968), 463.

<sup>39</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic*, 282.

<sup>40</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 382.

<sup>41</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 322.

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), 66.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *Final Testimonies*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 382.

he wanted to be a part of an actual political group to mount some type of critical voice.<sup>45</sup> Bentley points out that as a member of the SDP Barth often “preferred to give public support to socialists and to make his criticisms in private.”<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, the idea that Barth became detached from politics is without warrant. Timothy Gorringer notes that it is clear from Barth’s writings that “theology would always be on the left, on the side of the weak and the oppressed.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, Hunsinger declares that “it is fundamentally false to portray Barth as a theologian who did his thinking in monkish isolation from the world. . . . Karl Barth was a socialist. He took the world as seriously as he took the Bible.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Barth understood the socio-political world and tended to see this world from a position on the political Left. From the very beginning of his theological thought, Barth became aware of the way the church had often sided with the prevailing ideologies. In his essay on Ludwig Feuerbach, Barth noted the missed opportunity for the church to illustrate that the work of God also means human liberation:

If only the Church had been compelled before Marx to show in word and action, and had been able to show, that it is just the knowledge of God which automatically and inevitably includes within itself liberation from all hypostases and idols, which of itself can achieve liberation!<sup>49</sup>

The way Barth handled the matter of the Cold War was to be neither communist nor anti-communist because he saw this framework built upon ideology for both regimes. He thought both sides of the conflict spewed an unhealthy rhetoric that would lead the world into another violent conflict, but he ultimately laid more blame on Western nations for their reactive stance toward the East.<sup>50</sup> This position was not popular on either side of the ideological spectrum, yet his greatest critics came from the West because of his “practical co-operation” with communists.<sup>51</sup> For example, he was even openly criticized for his position at his retirement from Basle University in 1962.<sup>52</sup> In addition, he was publicly questioned about his political stance by two leading theologians: Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>53</sup>

What exactly was Barth’s position? Barth points out that he was not a communist and was not naive of the real problems in the Soviet Union. He writes: “I decidedly prefer not to live within its sphere and do not wish anyone else to be forced to do so.”<sup>54</sup> Barth remarks that there were certainly problems in the Soviet Union under communist leadership; nonetheless, there were also problems in the West under liberal-democratic governments: “In the East there is arbitrary rule of the almighty party, propaganda, and police, but in the West we are surrounded by an equally tyrannous press, systems of private enterprise, snobbish presumption, and public opinion.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, he saw both political options as hostile toward the Christian church in their own way which is why he positions

<sup>45</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 82-3 and 216-7, 255. Barth joins around the time Tillich quits.

<sup>46</sup> Bentley, *Between Marx and Christ*, 73.

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 275. Also see pages 213-4.

<sup>48</sup> Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 224.

<sup>49</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 234. Also see Paul Chung, *Karl Barth: God’s Word in Action* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008), 419-448, for a more detailed analysis especially in relation to Marx and other radical thought.

<sup>50</sup> Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 63-6.

<sup>51</sup> Bentley, *Between Marx and Christ*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, 220.

<sup>53</sup> Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 181-3. Also see Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-52* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 106-113 to read the correspondence between Brunner and Barth.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Barth, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land* (New York: Association Press, 1959), 52. Also see Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 226-7.

himself in the middle of each system.<sup>56</sup> Both the East and the West were only concerned with preaching their own doctrine and completely ignored Christ and the gospel.

For Barth, the gospel of Christ trumps all but must be careful not to be captured by ideology: “The Church must not concern itself eternally with various ‘isms’ and systems, but with historical realities as seen in the light of the Word of God and of the Faith.”<sup>57</sup> Consequently, he notes: “Wherever we find ‘ism’ there lurks an ideology, and it is as well to be on guard if it is not already too late.”<sup>58</sup> He tries to avoid making the Christian gospel into some sort of principle, law or system. The gospel as a statement of truth does not need to rely on ideological propaganda like the kind one finds from either anticommunists or communists.<sup>59</sup> The Word serves as a negative means for Barth to chasten human attempts at a pure, doctrinaire message or system. Barth, late in his life, writes: “Those who know the reality of the kingdom, Christians, can never have anything to do with the arrogant and foolhardy enterprise of trying to bring in and build up by human hands a religious, cultic, moral, or political kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>60</sup> Why? Because, according to Barth, God’s dealings toward humanity has been revealed to be centered in the election of Christ by God’s grace.<sup>61</sup> This is why Barth states that Christians can have nothing to do with ideologies that go against the work of Christ. In fact, Barth, in 1942, makes the case that the leader figure of modern governments and the social mass of communism or the nation of fascist governments are perversions of Christ’s election and the election of his people in him.<sup>62</sup>

Barth’s care for the purity of the gospel, in fact, did not prevent him from making clear political statements. He was against lumping Nazism and communism into the same totalitarian package. He believed that Nazism and communism were two different political entities. Therefore, it was wrong to try to equate the two. Nazism tried to play itself off as a form of Christianity, which “had stupid supporters and advocates even in the very Church itself.”<sup>63</sup> Communism, for Barth, was a godless system; it had never tried to replace the “real Christ” with a nationalistic Christ and is not anti-Semitic like the Nazis.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Frank Jehle writes that Barth “was of the opinion that with its myth of an Aryan master race and its destructive anti-Semitism, National Socialism did not even have, unlike Marxism, a single good *intention*.”<sup>65</sup>

Barth appeared to have found the linking of Nazism with communism so absurd that he made this provocative statement:

It would be quite absurd to mention in the same breath the philosophy of Marxism and the ‘ideology’ of the Third Reich, to mention a man of stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler, Göring, Hess, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, etc. What has been tackled in Soviet Russia—albeit with very dirty and bloody hands and in way that rightly shocks us—is, after all, a constructive idea, the solution of a problem which is a serious and burning problem for us as well, and which we

<sup>56</sup> Barth, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, 51-2. Also see Koshar, “Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History,” 359-60.

<sup>57</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 114.

<sup>58</sup> Barth, *Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV,4 Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 226.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, *Christian Life*, 227.

<sup>60</sup> Barth, *Christian Life*, 264.

<sup>61</sup> Barth, CD II/2, 94.

<sup>62</sup> Barth, CD II/2, 311-3. Barth uses the term “the totalitarian state” to explain the nature of both communism and fascism. The fact that he contrasts the Nazis and Communists later illustrates some development in his thought.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 137.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 140.

<sup>65</sup> Frank Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968*, trans. by Richard and Martha Burnett (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 89. Also see Barth, *Against the Stream*, 139.

with our clean hands have not yet tackled anything like energetically enough: the social problem.<sup>66</sup>

There are two things to examine from this extraordinary passage. First, what does he mean that Stalin was a man of stature as compared with the Nazis? Second, what is the idea behind that bloody hands are the result of trying to deal with the social problem? Jehle contends that Barth was “rhetorically speaking,” even though he also believes this was a poor statement to make.<sup>67</sup> However, Barth is being somewhat consistent in his thought; it seems that, for Barth, Stalin does indeed look better than the Nazi leaders because at least with communism there was a conscious attempt to fix the social problem. Stalin’s programs made the Soviet Union an advanced industrial nation in short time. Of course, Stalin did it in such a way to be guilty of having bloody hands.

In connection with his thoughts on the good intentions of communism, Barth became very critical of Western democracies. Barth tried to be crystal clear that just because there was a long Christian tradition from the West, it still did not make it “God’s cause.”<sup>68</sup> He declared that “as long as there is still a ‘freedom’ in the West to organize economic crises, a ‘freedom’ to dump our corn into the sea here whilst people are starving there” then he refused to go completely over to the side of the West and absolutely criticize the East.<sup>69</sup> This was Barth’s main contention with the West in that it saw itself as representing the Christian side and that, unlike the East, it granted freedom to all its citizens without having to resort to totalitarian violence like in Stalinism. However, Barth saw a double danger. First, any system calling itself Christian especially in light of the Nazis abuse of this tradition concerned him. Second, Barth’s Leftist commitments were strong enough to lead him to criticize what he saw as the manipulation that capitalist countries used to insure the profit for the few over the many. In other words, Barth asked was this really democratic freedom?

For Barth, the rabid anti-communism coming from the West went overboard with its condemnations. He declares: “I regard anticommunism as a matter of principle an evil even greater than communism itself. . . . Have we forgotten that what is at stake in this ‘absolute enemy’ relationship . . . is a typical invention (and a heritage from) our defunct dictators—and that only the ‘Hitler in us’ can be an anticommunist on principle?”<sup>70</sup> To some extent, he looked at the situation incredulously because everyone with some basic, common sense and awareness of the empirical evidence knew that the abuses of Stalin’s government were well known. It almost seemed to confuse Barth why figures in the West needed to continue with tirade after tirade against the Soviet bloc; he did not think it took any courage to renounce the Soviets from the safety of the US. Barth, always the provocateur, acted as if he was almost insulted that thinkers in the West would uncritically expect him to speak out against communism in the same way he did against the Nazis. He declares: “Must the Church then move with the stream and thus side with America and the Vatican, merely because somewhere in the text-books of its professors—ever since 1934—it has rightly been said that ‘totalitarianism’ is a dreadful thing?”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Barth clearly notes that most battle cries from the West against totalitarianism are not honest and thus in his mind not Christian; in fact, he responds by saying if they were they would be against all forms of totalitarianism like the fascist one in Spain led by Franco.<sup>72</sup> He contends that “communism can be warded off only by a ‘better justice’ on the part of the Western world, not by the all too cheap denials.”<sup>73</sup> Barth was also against the type of speech that saw an anti-Christ figure in modern totalitarian movements. For

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 139. Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream*, 88-9. Jehle also points out that in a correspondence earlier between himself and Josef Hromadka that Barth refers to Stalin as Beelzebub.

<sup>67</sup> Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream*, 88

<sup>68</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 136.

<sup>69</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 140.

<sup>70</sup> Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 63.

<sup>71</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 117.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 138.

<sup>73</sup> Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 57.

example, Barth referenced the devil as the adversary that prowls like a roaring lion in 1 Peter 5 and claims that it is a mistake to link this lion up with communism; he writes that “to identify that ‘lion’ with communism as such is to fall into the trap of a dangerous optical illusion.”<sup>74</sup>

Even at a later stage of his career, Barth found certain commonality between Christianity and communism. The main connection was that both traditions gave preferential treatment to the poor.<sup>75</sup> Another idea is the strict call they place upon its followers. Upon reflecting on a post-war conference on Humanism, which included a number of communists, Barth noticed the connection that communism has with Christianity:

For that which is called the “exclusiveness” of the Christian proclamation and Christian theology, when looked at in its own terms, consists in this—and this is what it may have in common with Communism, in a formal sense—that it summons men to decision and responsibility, to faith and obedience. From case to case, but also fundamentally and permanently, it calls men to a binding decision and responsibility, to a freedom which is the highest and truest freedom, since it is that of the free men who knows himself in all serenity to be a man who is called, ordered, and obligated.<sup>76</sup>

Here Barth’s thought is a helpful response to the non-political movements that emphasize freedom and choice first for the so-called autonomous or private individual. Unlike the liberal democratic ideal that is based on capitalism and the desire for profit, Barth insists that Christianity links up with a movement that teaches discipline and responsibility (a discipline that Žižek would learn to appreciate in Paul’s letters). Barth’s unflinching commitment to Christ over all leads his thought to form “a basis of nonconformism in the Christian faith.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, this compels Hunsinger to make the claim that Barth’s affinity to socialism might be a useful model for Christians in the future: “Yet at the present time, when many people believe that although the bolshevist ‘socialism’ means the loss of human freedom, the advance of ‘democratic’ capitalism is bringing an increase of world poverty, perhaps Barth’s socialist views are not as outmoded as his critics would suggest.”<sup>78</sup> Now we will turn toward the thought of Slavoj Žižek and see how he critiques the liberal democratic tradition especially in his defense of communism against equating it with Nazism.

## ŽIŽEK’S DEFENSE OF COMMUNISM OVER NAZISM

Barth wrote his works before and at the beginning of the Cold War, while Žižek writes at the tail end of the Cold War and in the present. Thus, while Barth gives us a theologian’s perspective during the Cold War, Žižek’s voice arrives in the here and now. It is amazing considering the gap of time and their respective differences just how similar Žižek and Barth sound on their views about liberal-democracy and communism. Žižek has written the most about this relationship and he probably takes Christianity more seriously than many of the neo-Paul writers, even though both Agamben and Badiou have inspired his reading of Paul. Tyler Roberts suggests that Žižek’s focus on Paul’s idea of love becomes a central theme to his politics.<sup>79</sup> Scott Stephens claims that Žižek follows Barth’s monkish idea of writing theology (or theory) as if nothing is happening; he points out that “just as Barth’s defiant restatement of the dogmatic tradition constituted one of the most effective protests against the idolatry of National Socialism, so too it is at the very point of Žižek’s theoretical withdrawal from, and even indifference toward, the demand to *respond* to certain exigencies that

<sup>74</sup> Barth, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, 49.

<sup>75</sup> Barth, CD III/4, 543-5.

<sup>76</sup> Barth, *God Here and Now*, trans. by Paul M. van Buren (New York: Routledge, 2004), 131.

<sup>77</sup> Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream*, 99.

<sup>78</sup> Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 227.

<sup>79</sup> Tyler Roberts, “Militant Love: Žižek and the Christian Legacy,” in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love’s Wisdom*, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008).

we discover his importance for politics – and indeed, for political theology – today.”<sup>80</sup> In short, both Barth and Žižek each respond in their own way and during their own time, via a careful theoretical output that oftentimes baffles both friends and enemies. Like Barth, Žižek always responds to events in ways that go against the flow; his commitment to writing theology as a tool for radical theory should be taken with much seriousness in the same manner that I have just argued for the reading of Barth’s social-political writings.

Žižek lived under Tito’s Communist government in postwar Yugoslavia and was one of the democratic voices that led to independence for Slovenia; he even ran for president in 1990.<sup>81</sup> Since that time, he became a critical voice towards the West’s condescending attitude aimed at internal struggles of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>82</sup> Žižek does not shy away from describing himself as a committed Leftist even though he came to identify himself as a Marxist later in his work.<sup>83</sup> One of the reasons he is passionate when he writes and speaks about his position is that he thinks that the movement has been severely compromised in the immediate past. He is described by Michael Hardt as “one of the very few contemporary thinkers whose theoretical arsenal is rich enough to be able to confront the question of revolution and articulate how it can be conceived today.”<sup>84</sup> His thought is radical because he is dissatisfied with appeals by other thinkers on the political Left to “weather the storm” while waiting for a real democratic movement to arise.<sup>85</sup> However, he does not espouse a naive return to the Leftist politics of the past as found in the Soviet Union. Adam Kotsko poignantly describes Žižek’s mood when he writes:

Žižek makes no effort to whitewash either the terrors of Stalinism or the very real oppression of the post-Stalinist era, and in fact he has very little patience for nostalgic Western Marxists who are scornful of the Eastern European countries’ embrace of liberal democracy and capitalism. He frankly admits that things went horribly wrong and that any thought of a return to Real Socialism is obviously out of the question – but he nevertheless insists on the absolute necessity of moving beyond a simple rejection of Communism and undertaking a detailed analysis of precisely how it went wrong.<sup>86</sup>

Žižek aims then to explain Leftist political failings in the past century in order to discover a clear and concise Leftist voice in the present against the liberal-democratic hegemony and also totalitarian movements. He is well aware that defending this tradition is controversial, yet believes that he has no other option because “in spite of its horrors and failures, Really Existing Socialism was the only political force that – for some decades, at least – seemed to pose a serious threat to the global rule of capitalism, genuinely scaring its representatives, driving them into paranoid reaction.”<sup>87</sup> The fact

<sup>80</sup> Scott Stephens, “Žižek, My Neighbor – Regarding Jodi Dean’s *Žižek’s Politics*,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1 (2007): 2.

<sup>81</sup> Glyn Daly and Žižek, *Conversations with Žižek* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2004), 49-50 and Henrik Jøker Bjerre and Carsten Bagge Lausten, *The Subject of Politics: Slavoj Žižek’s Political Philosophy* (Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2010), 10.

<sup>82</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 229-36.

<sup>83</sup> Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 16, 42 and 145 and Daly and Žižek, *Conversations with Žižek*, 31. There was a transition in Žižek’s thought from radical, liberal democracy that one can see featured in *Sublime Object of Ideology* as he opposed Tito’s communist regime to an openly communist commitment; he came to believe that liberal reform most often opens the door to nationalism. To some extent this transition of his philosophy occurred around the same time that Žižek’s interest in theology blossomed.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Hardt, “Thomas Jefferson, or, the Transition of Democracy,” in Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence* (New York: Verso books, 2007), xvi.

<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 280.

<sup>86</sup> Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 145. Also see Žižek, *Violence*, 48-9. He also notes how tragic those Western leftists were who defended the Soviet Union even with the prospect of persecution and prison. See 51-2.

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 46. Žižek finds much of his inspiration of Leftist thought from the French Marxist philosophers Louis Althusser and Alain Badiou. In addition, Žižek often uses the terms Communist,

that Žižek has a penchant for controversy is probably why Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Bloucher declare that “the vast majority of writing on Žižek has become increasingly critical” and that “Žižek has now been accused of nearly every theoretical and political sin readers can imagine.”<sup>88</sup> Some of this is probably due to his somewhat playful attitude toward Stalinism.<sup>89</sup>

Oddly enough a main source of inspiration that Žižek has found for his political thought comes from the Christian tradition. He claims that Christian scriptures contain a revolutionary appeal because it speaks about a “rupture” that creates a “New Beginning” that upsets the idea that history contains only elements of the same.<sup>90</sup> Bjerre and Lausten declare that “Žižek’s Christianity is an activist, political doctrine.”<sup>91</sup> Unlike other Marxist thinkers who dismiss Christianity as a backwards religion or an ideology of the bourgeoisie, Žižek declares that “there is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism *should* fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms – the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, because Christian and Marxist traditions both value truth that liberates, they would be valuable allies against all forms of obscurantism and New Age spiritualities; they could also assist in a critique of the excesses of liberal democracy and capitalism.

Žižek even makes a connection between St. Paul and Lenin: “Paul goes on to his true Leninist business, that of organizing the new party called the Christian community. Paul as a Leninist: was not Paul, like Lenin, the great ‘insitutionalizer,’ and, as such, reviled by the partisans of ‘original’ Marxism-Christianity?”<sup>93</sup> This connection is to illustrate two ideas. One, how militant both movements are when put into practice, and two, how the move by some for the pure origin of a tradition is fake; both Paul and Lenin as the actors who put the doctrine into practice, for Žižek, were necessary to carry the tradition from fragmented groups to a fighting collective.

Žižek has written much on figures like Lenin and Stalin. In one sense, he attempts to analyze them as real flesh and blood political figures instead of simply dismissing them as creatures of a metaphysical evil. Something went terribly wrong in the movements that these leaders spawned, and it is important to take a sober look at exactly what could have prevented such an outbreak of violence upon humanity. One of the problems with these movements is the way these leaders used ideology to create an almost god-like status of their power, especially in the figure of the Stalinist Leader who’s image was found everywhere within the country he ruled.<sup>94</sup> However, Žižek seems to have a growing fascination with the passage from the revolutionary moment in Lenin to the objective organization of the State under Stalin.<sup>95</sup> In addition, his growing affinity toward communist theory allows him to write more favorably toward thinkers from this tradition to the extent that he perhaps is guilty of sugarcoating the violence committed in its name. One of the temptations he tries to avoid is going easy on the movement because of its excesses while at the same time simply

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Marxist, Leftist and Socialist interchangeably. One his aims are to reconcile the Communist tradition, founded by Marx, with its theory and its history.

<sup>88</sup> Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 16. The authors own critical look at Žižek will lead them to posit the idea of two Žižek’s: first, a radical democratic and then a revolutionary vanguardist. The transition occurred during 1996-1997 when Žižek turned to the work of Schelling.

<sup>89</sup> Daly and Žižek, *Conversations with Žižek*, 35 and Bjerre and Lausten, *The Subject of Politics*, 117-8.

<sup>90</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 53-4.

<sup>91</sup> Bjerre and Lausten, *The Subject of Politics*, 101.

<sup>92</sup> Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (New York: Verso, 2001), 2. Also see Žižek, “Interview with Slavoj Žižek,” [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200407/?read=interview\\_zizek](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200407/?read=interview_zizek) (accessed on 08 June 2009).

<sup>93</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 9. Also see Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 140.

<sup>95</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 99 and 128.

dismissing revolutionary politics because there have been examples in history that show that it then moves into the control of totalitarian regimes. He is openly skeptical of the turn to ethics in critical theory because he argues that these theorists use “the horrors of Gulag or Holocaust as the ultimate bogey” as blackmail in an attempt to curtail any openness to radical political work even knowing full well of the “corruption, exploitation” that is common in liberal-democratic regimes.<sup>96</sup>

Žižek’s discussion about totalitarianism follows the thought of figures like Barth, Negri and Badiou. He does not believe in a common linkage between Nazism and Communism. He explains that totalitarianism was “the key weapon of the West in the Cold War ideological struggle” and that as a “stopgap” was used as a way of “taming free radicals.”<sup>97</sup> (One can see how it was used in some sense against Barth when he at the very least tried to calm down Cold War fears against the Soviet Union). In fact, according to Jodi Dean, Žižek separates the two forms by looking at the way each tries to cover up the internal class struggle found at the heart of society and by the different ways they control and classify enjoyment.<sup>98</sup> Dean writes that the idea of totalitarianism as a conceptual lens to study fascism and communism is “too broad, too embedded in a simple liberal framework of consent versus force.”<sup>99</sup>

Žižek makes the assertion that communism, even in its Stalinist form, has a redeemable element as opposed to Nazism, which has nothing redeemable about it.<sup>100</sup> One of the reasons he believes this is that “Stalinism still conceives of itself as part of the Enlightenment tradition, within which truth is accessible to any rational person, no matter how depraved he is, which is why he is subjectively responsible for his crimes.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, Žižek contends that communism has its roots in the movement that has led to the opening up of democratic expression across the globe. This is an interesting move by Žižek because it attempts to link up communism with the progressive movements that came out of the Enlightenment. In one sense, he is arguing that a chastened communism may have more liberatory power than liberal democracy to the extent that politics is thought outside of the democracy versus totalitarianism paradigm he claims is currently the status-quo.<sup>102</sup> Sharpe and Boucher suggest that what makes Žižek’s analysis “novel” is his “political emphasis on the differences between fascist, Leninist and Stalinist governments is a vital part of Žižek’s political resistance of today’s hegemonic ‘liberalism or totalitarianism/ fundamentalism’ opposition.”<sup>103</sup> In addition, Dean writes: “One of the merits of Žižek’s critique of totalitarianism is thus the way that it addresses directly the horrors of Stalinism in order to create a space for this work of recovery.”<sup>104</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 48. He accomplishes this through the lens of Lacan’s Four Discourses.

<sup>99</sup> Dean, *Žižek’s Politics*, 48; Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 3-4.

<sup>100</sup> Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 148.

<sup>101</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 125. Žižek responds to the idea presented by revisionist historian Ernst Nolte on the idea that Nazism was directly a response to Communism. By simply saying that Nazism and Fascism are responses to Communism and in one sense repeat practices found within Communism, one is saying that Communism is the original sin and responsible for this evil. Also see page 126 and Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), 289 and 292.

<sup>102</sup> See Julia Hell, “Remnants of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt, Heiner Müller, Slavoj Žižek, and the Re-Invention of Politics,” *Telos* 136 (2006), 76-103 and Matthew Sharpe, “When the Logics of the World Collapse—Žižek with and against Arendt on ‘Totalitarianism’,” *Subjectivity* 3 (2010), 53-75, for a comparison of how both Arendt and Žižek try to rethink politics after the dark times of the twentieth century. Also see Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 2-3, where Žižek sees the signs of the defeat of the radical Left in that Arendt has almost taken on the status of untouchable authority.

<sup>103</sup> Sharpe and Boucher, *Žižek and Politics*, 89.

<sup>104</sup> Dean, *Žižek’s Politics*, 51.

Nazism, according to Žižek, was simply a reaction to events; it is directly opposed to the greatest ideas of human freedom that came from the Enlightenment. He contends that “the fascist spectacle of violence” was the way the Nazis did not allow any real change to occur.<sup>105</sup>

[Hitler] acted to prevent the communist threat of a real change. His targeting of the Jews was ultimately an act of displacement in which he avoided the real enemy – the core of capitalist social relations themselves. Hitler staged a spectacle of revolution so that the capitalist order could survive. The irony was that his grand gestures of despising bourgeois self-complacency ultimately enabled this complacency to continue: far from disturbing the much-despised “decadent” bourgeois order, far from awakening the Germans, Nazism was a dream which enabled them to postpone awakening. Germany only really woke up with the defeat of 1945.<sup>106</sup>

Indeed, Hitler did not really come up with anything new. Rather, he played upon the fears and prejudices found among the German people.<sup>107</sup> These fears expressed themselves in a racial hatred toward the Jewish people. Thus, communism is a universal movement for the rights of workers while Nazism is a racial doctrine aimed at a particular race. Moreover, Žižek asserts that the resistance among the people in the Soviet Union was greater than among the German people during Hitler’s reign.<sup>108</sup> In other words, the ethical element in communism helped fuel the resistance toward the leadership of the Soviet Union, while one would have a difficult time finding this ethical core (or any ethical core for that matter) in Nazism. There is definitely some hypocrisy in the way that Stalin and the Soviet Union pretended to live up to the ideas found in communist documents yet failed so miserably. However, even though Stalin’s government was hypocritical, it is still, according to Žižek, better than Nazism, which is openly racist and bellicose. He contends: “Precisely as Marxists, we should have no fear in acknowledging that the purges of Stalinism were in any way more ‘irrational’ than Fascist violence: paradoxically, this very excess is an unmistakable sign that Stalinism, in contrast to Fascism, was the case of a perverted *authentic* revolution.”<sup>109</sup>

Therefore, Žižek declares that “in Nazi Germany, there were no figures who advocated ‘Nazism with a human face.’ . . . Although, in terms of their positive content, the Communist regimes were a dismal failure, generating terror and misery, at the same time they opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations which, among other things, enabled us to measure the failure of really existing Socialism itself.”<sup>110</sup> In addition, one example Žižek uses to illustrate this point is that popular culture still features communist symbols while it is taboo to use Nazi symbols; in other words, communist symbols are not prohibited like Nazi symbols because the potential danger is not there.<sup>111</sup> This example also serves Žižek’s claim that liberal democratic countries are not as put off by communism as they are by the Nazis.

Conversely, Žižek claims that Stalinism is thus more perverse than Nazism. Why does he go this route in his thinking? Was not Žižek’s point that at least with the communist tradition there is a redeemable element? Why now claim that Stalinism is more perverse than Nazism, especially in light of the Holocaust? Žižek responds:

Of course, I think that the Holocaust was horrific (my god, it is gross to even have to say that), but for me, Stalinism was even a greater philosophical problem than Nazism. For example, there is a basic difference between Stalinist and Nazi victim status, from a simple phenomenological approach. Under Nazism, if you were a Jew, you were simply killed, no

<sup>105</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 218.

<sup>106</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 209-10.

<sup>107</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 285.

<sup>108</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 291.

<sup>109</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 128.

<sup>110</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 292.

<sup>111</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 289 and *The Universal Exception*, 124.

questions asked, you had nothing to prove . . . Under Stalinism, of course, most [victims] were on trial for false accusations; most of them were not traitors. Nonetheless, there is one interesting feature: that they were tortured or through some kind of blackmail forced to confess to being traitors.<sup>112</sup>

Žižek's point is that with Nazism/Fascism you were simply guilty for being a Jew; it was a matter of who you were as a human being. However, with Stalinism there was a potential for anyone to be a victim; the perverse side of this was the matter of getting a confession of guilt from the victim for a crime that was never committed. This perverse side of Stalinism was one element that stained the communist movement and other socialist expressions.<sup>113</sup>

Why does Žižek spend so much time talking about Stalinism? According to him, "Fascism is relatively easy to explain. It is a reactionary phenomenon. Nazism was some bad guys having some bad ideas and unfortunately succeeding in realizing them. In Stalinism the tragedy is that its origin is some kind of radical emancipatory project. In the origins you had a kind of workers' uprising; the true enigma is how this project of emancipation went so wrong."<sup>114</sup> Therefore, theorists should begin to spend more time analyzing the way communism gave birth to Stalin than continuing to analyze different kinds of fascism.

As seen in the previous section on Barth, Žižek likewise asserts that radical theory (and the Marxist tradition) is a necessary movement serving as a buttress to liberal democracy and capitalism. In addition, one finds in both thinkers the idea that Christianity fits better with some forms of socialism than capitalism particularly in its preferential treatment toward the poor and its examination of structural violence that stems from unregulated capitalism. However, one gets a sense from both thinkers that Christianity is also different than these political philosophies. Both Barth and Žižek note that whereas Nazism was definitely trying to define its roots in the Christian religion, communism is openly atheistic.

What exactly is democracy then for Žižek? He writes that "a phenomenon that appeared for the first time in ancient Greece when the members of the *demos* (those with no firmly determined place in the hierarchical social edifice) presented themselves as the representatives, the stand-ins, for the whole of society, for the true universality."<sup>115</sup> In other words, democracy from its origins had a liberatory potential; purely practiced it still does (as does liberalism).<sup>116</sup> When so-called democratic movements fail to live up to the democratic ideals, Žižek believes that it is necessary for voices from the Left to challenge the basis of the democratic procedure itself.<sup>117</sup> He writes what democracy looks like in the present under liberal democracy:

'Democracy' is not merely the 'power of, by and for the people'; it is not enough simply to claim that, in democracy, the will and interests (the two in no way automatically coincide) of the majority determine decisions of the State. Democracy – in the way the term is used today – concerns, above all, formal legality: its minimal definition is the unconditional adherence to a certain set of formal rules which guarantee that antagonisms are fully absorbed into the agonistic game. 'Democracy' means that, whatever electoral manipulation takes place, every political agent will unconditionally respect the results.<sup>118</sup>

In other words, Žižek is attempting to uncover the illusion that both those on the Left and the Right have about the democratic procedure as an almost transcendent point that insures a pure political venture. He borrows from Marxist thinker Gregor Lukács the idea that "democratic struggle should

<sup>112</sup> Žižek, "Interview with Slavoj Žižek."

<sup>113</sup> Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, 61-88.

<sup>114</sup> Žižek, "Interview with Slavoj Žižek." Also see Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 127.

<sup>115</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 183.

<sup>116</sup> Žižek, "Interview with Slavoj Žižek."

<sup>117</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 57.

<sup>118</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 53.

not be fetishized; it is merely one of many forms of struggle, and its choice should be determined by a global strategic assessment of circumstances, not by its ostensibly superior intrinsic value."<sup>119</sup> The best example of this is in the neo-conservatives desire to spread liberal democracy across the globe. Žižek declares that "is it not precisely that those who pose today as global defenders of democracy are effectively undermining it?"<sup>120</sup> By pushing this agenda on other cultures, is not the whole expression of democracy then being ruined? Žižek's analysis works because he is not merely joining the argument that one can simply look at empirical evidence to see that the liberal-democratic works best but instead challenges its defenders for not being faithful to their own beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

One of the first questions to ask is so what? What fundamental lesson do we learn from both Barth's and Žižek's appeal that Nazism is fundamentally different than communism and their critical stance against anticommunists? The fact that Barth before and during the Cold War and Žižek after it notice the trend to demonize communist thought and the Soviet Union especially perhaps leads to the conclusion that the movement to equate Nazism with communist thought is just one way to dismiss any type of socialist theory or radical politics as a viable political option; they each point out that this is an ideological move. It is a means to say that socialist thought leads ultimately into a totalitarian nightmare. Therefore, we are stuck with a paradigm that is roughly based around the liberal-democratic model principally because it will prevent the excesses of either fascist or communist regimes. Furthermore, describing the twentieth century as the bloodiest and most violent century because of totalitarianism is another way to dismiss the actual progress of this past century. For example, civil rights and anti-colonial movements were only really realized in the twentieth century. Of course the way this came about had some violent moments. However, one must understand, and as Žižek constantly reminds us, that ideas that provoke radical change will meet strong resistance, as history has illustrated.<sup>121</sup>

Both Barth and Žižek are not constructive thinkers in the sense that they are attempting to build their own coherent social-political systems. In fact, they constantly point out in their writings that a presupposition to their thought is that any system is imperfect because imperfect human beings are the authors and actors of these theories. They are to some extent at fault for being infamous for shelling out criticism without taking the time to prescribe concrete ways for reformation. This may be just another sign of how difficult it is to posit some type of radical politics in the light of Christian theology. Each thinker tries to ascribe some type of purity to their ideas while at the same time advocating action in the present time, which makes both their positions closer to a deconstructive approach than either would probably want to be identified with.<sup>122</sup> Barth and Žižek can be accused of speaking about controversial topics and in one sense adding to the controversy as seen in the way they tend to almost speak more favorably about Stalin in order just to buttress the anti-Communist rhetoric.<sup>123</sup> What Jehle says about Barth could also be applied to Žižek as well: "Barth among other

<sup>119</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 54.

<sup>120</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 55.

<sup>121</sup> With regards to violence, Žižek often makes statements like the following: "If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, then, crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough. Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do." See Žižek, *Violence*, 217. However, Žižek's main examples for the most violent acts of revolt were performed by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.; see Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 148-9.

<sup>122</sup> Roberts, "Militant Love," 182.

<sup>123</sup> The best example is Žižek's use of Lenin. See Žižek (ed.), *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (New York: Verso, 2002) for a book he edited that contains a number of Lenin's writings. In this same book Žižek asserts his retrieval of Lenin: "Lenin' is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite the contrary, *the Lenin who is to be retrieved is the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which the old co-ordinates proved*

things was a great democrat. He wanted nothing to do with an authoritarian state that kept a close watch on its citizens, even though he was a times accused of totalitarian thinking."<sup>124</sup> Their work is not a defense of the Soviet Union or Stalin, but a call for a more critical examination at the greatest example of a radical progressive institution's rise to power and then eventual collapse. A sober look at the historical record will at least be open to the attempt to get away from metaphysical accounts of good versus evil as the answer to the reasons of the various movements in history. This fact is probably a small consolation to the actual systemic violence of the Stalinist system or the number of people killed under communist governments, yet it is to have the sobriety to dig deeply into the real mistakes made in the name of emancipation via radical politics.

Moreover, the fact that Barth and Žižek are not historians but instead are responding via theoretical reason may not convince some. However, this prejudice toward non-specialists is a trend that should be challenged. In fact, placing Barth simply in the role of religious thinker who has nothing substantial to add to the trend of political thought is a mistake. Barth's work should be considered in the tradition of thinkers like Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky and others who saw some connection between Christian ideas and to emancipatory politics; if he is included into this radical tradition then contemporary radical thinkers who have now turned to Christian texts may find much that is useful.<sup>125</sup> This route moves away from the conservative neo-orthodox reading of Barth to instead see him as a critical thinker reacting to the social-political issues of his day. Barth's goal as a Leftist thinker was to at least provide a voice against the righteousness of the non-communists systems especially because he saw the tendency to ignore their own inherent problems. In our own day, Žižek seems to be attempting the same thing even in his theological writings where he finally attempts to explore some constructive ideas of a fighting collective. The aim of this paper is to at least see how paying attention to Barth political works can open up a critical religious-political discipline that moves away from having the theological or political institutions ignoring each other; more work in this area may produce something other than the somewhat vague solutions about real socialist-democracy offered by Barth, Žižek and other radical thinkers.

What does this mean for the current state of Christianity and its relationship to political power? The Christian tradition has been seen in history as having the potential to progress or to regress; it can be a source for things like civil rights or for an inquisition. It can be easily manipulated by both those on the Right and the Left of the political spectrum. However, in the present context in the United States, Christianity, especially its fundamentalist and evangelical traditions, has become synonymous with the conservative wing of the Republican Party and the neo-conservatives. Liberal democracy is then interpreted as a Christian ideal against all other modes of ideologies. One must be honest that liberal democracy, in fact, has created a good life for a large number of people (a fact that both Barth and Žižek acknowledge), yet it is not a perfect system; it has also created a miserable life for many others. This is one of the problems in the present world and because there appears to be not even a chance for a Barthian pragmatic, democratic socialism to have a forum at least in the US, there seems to be little chance for anything to change soon. The problem stems from an almost unquestionable fidelity placed behind the belief of the ultimate goodness of the liberal-democratic

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*useless, and who was thus compelled to reinvent Marxism. . . . The idea is not to return to Lenin, but to repeat him in the Kierkegaardian sense: to retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation."* See page 11. Also, see Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 147-8 and Žižek, *Violence*, 8. It is out of the scope of this paper to bring in Žižek's use of Lenin, but it is keeping with his overall project that he does not see the Leninist movement as a betrayal of Marxism.

<sup>124</sup> Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream*, 4. See Barth, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, 58.

<sup>125</sup> For example, I think that adding Barth's socialist speeches to the Verso Radical Thought Series (which includes such figures as Winstanley, Müntzer and Jefferson), perhaps introduced by Žižek, would be a good place to start.

cause. One does not ask questions of it because its purpose is to spread freedom; it is a holy purpose. Žižek poignantly notes the irony in this type of rhetoric:

It is the United States which is now, as the defunct USSR was decades ago, the subversive agent of an international revolution. So when Bush recently said, 'Freedom is not America's gift to other nations; it is God's gift to humanity', this apparent modesty nonetheless, in the best totalitarian fashion, conceals its opposite: yes, *but* it is nonetheless the United States that perceives itself as the chosen instrument of its distribution!<sup>126</sup>

Instead, one of the best ways to be faithful to one's political position is by being willing to be even more critical of the tradition one finds oneself in.<sup>127</sup> Here is where Barth's warnings are especially poignant in noting the aim of the gospel is to disrupt and shake the weak foundations that human beings stand upon. This disruption does not only occur within the church but also in the socio-political world. One must remember that Barth's most famous writings were in response to issues within the socio-political world in that his Romans commentary challenged any attempt to make the nation's god synonymous with the Christian God. Barth must be given credit for going against the flow of Cold War rhetoric and by perhaps hoping that the post war reality would have had a continuation of the great alliance among the Allies in the reconstruction of war torn areas. His distrust of the actual revolution of 1919 did not mean he abandoned his own pragmatic socialism; it instead led him to be more critical and open to new flows of thought within the tradition. His understanding of God, humanity and theology allowed him to follow through with his critique.

One thing that both thinkers illuminate for us is to not settle for a naive acceptance of rhetoric about democracy, but to hold out and fight for real, concrete democracy. What Barth and Žižek have tried to warn us about is not that liberal democracy is completely bad and that socialism is the only good, but that the main problems with liberal democracy, especially the type espoused by some American theorists, is that it is treated as an almost perfect system, a God given gift to humanity; in short, behind this view is an ideology that sometimes uses theological reasoning to reinforce it. Perhaps more attention to the theological roots and rhetoric of our politics is the first step to practicing a critical Barthian and Žižekian analysis, even when it may not always be popular and when you might be labeled totalitarian.

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<sup>126</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 291.

<sup>127</sup> See Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 145-9.

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