

# “One Has to Be God to Countenance so Much Blood”:<sup>1</sup> Violence, Tyranny, and Cruelty in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on God, a tyrannical, egotistical, deceitful, violent unscrupulous, and blood-thirsty divine entity transfixed by all the manifestations of power. His instinct for domination has no limits and he rules absolutely. He even has his son Jesus crucified in his quest for power and to expand his divine control over the world. My work also analyzes differentiated, disruptive, and boundary-breaking practices whose intent is to undermine the power of God and create a path for humanization to take root as an alternative to both an authoritarian God and Christianity.

**Keywords:** Power – God – Jesus Christ – Violence – Religion – Humanization.

José Saramago, a self-proclaimed atheist and the 1998 literature Noble Prize winner, throughout his career as a writer, always maintained that God and religion may not be the only root cause of evil in the world, but they both share great responsibility for its proliferation, given their overriding role and presence in all human cultures. Thus, the author, in all his writings, public-speaking, dialogues with other speakers and many interviews, has made it his mission to call attention to and raise consciousness about the insidious and malevolent effects of both God and religion in our world. The author was a firm believer that an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God who personified goodness, justice, grace, and love could and should rule out all forms of evil. God’s default claim that he had endowed all human beings with free will, which allowed them to make the right choices and do only good actions in their personal lives, if they so had chosen, is somewhat suspect and also an abdication of God’s duty and responsibility, given that he has the omnipotence to control all human actions and deeds.

In many of Saramago’s novels, both religion and God play fundamental roles in plot structure. And in two of his novels, *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* (1996)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (330).

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, I will refer to the novel in this essay as *The Gospel*.

and *Cain* (2009), the clashes or misunderstandings between God/religion and humanity are exclusively their sole concern. These quarrels or conflicts also play major roles, almost strictly negative as socio-ideological constructs of repression and violence, in such works as *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, *Raised from the Ground*, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, *Blindness* and *Death with Interruptions*. In both novels dealing largely with religion, the author carries out a virulent demonization of God and, at the same time, a humanization of Cain in *Cain* and Christ in *The Gospel*, as opposed to the mythologized man-God created by the four evangelists and St. Paul. In several other works, including one that is Portuguese, *A relíquia* by Eça de Queirós and the other French, Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*, again the focus is on the humanity of Christ's divine figure and his desacralization and demythologization. Along similar lines, there are several twentieth century novels that have changed radically the concept of a God-centered world and the image of a Christ carefully crafted by Christian scriptures and by the in-depth epistemological, hermeneutical, and metaphysical theories advanced by the two greatest theologians of Christianity, Augustine and Aquinas regarding the most orthodox and complex theological precepts and beliefs. "Aquino faz em relação a Agostinho, o mesmo caminho que Aristóteles trilhou em relação a Platão. Ele toma o dualismo externo da tradição platônica assumido por Agostinho e interioriza-o. A verdade que só podia ser encontrada 'no mundo das ideias' e alcançada por intuição intelectual, agora está na mente humana, e pode ser conhecida pela inteligência, ela própria um dom de Deus" (Rocha, 61). The blending and the complementarity achieved by these two theological philosophers between Christian doctrine and Greek philosophy really gave Christianity a solid ground to stand on and much greater legitimacy. Some twentieth century novels that have provided a more unique, provocative, and humane vision of Christianity and God are Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Lagerkvist's *Barabbas*, Mailer's *Gospel*, and Ricci's *Testament*.

Now, we turn to *The Gospel*, one of Saramago's masterpieces and by far his most controversial work, given the author's extremely negative and dark portrayal of religion and God in the narrative. The writer's heretical and apocryphal gospel masterfully deconstructs the meanings, symbols, values, and structures of domination of Christianity, that is, its ideological beliefs, which have always been equated with absolute truth and transcendence and, thus, beyond challenge. Furthermore, it also "inverts the traditional moral polarities of the Bible, namely, that God is good, and the devil is bad, to expose the oppressive systems [Saramago] sees as lying at the heart of the Christian evangel" (Cousland, 55). The reader of *The Gospel* will have a radically different version of an evangel, which is diametrically opposed to the four biblical evangels, even if one of the epigraphs is taken from a Luke's letter that he wrote to the most excellent Theophilus, a name that means a friend of God, probably with the intention of transmitting to him a message about the truthfulness of Christ and giving him an account of the history, life

and resurrection of Jesus, as well as to influence him to place his faith in God. That's the essence of Luke's message to Theophilus, a message turned into an epigraph in Saramago's novel. However, his evangel will not influence any individual to place his/her faith in God but rather in humanity and also will warn about the dangers of accepting established and crystallized values and truths, which are the foundation of dogmatic or religious thinking.

There are certain attributes that normally are applied to God: love, grace, justice, compassion, goodness, wisdom, and hope. In fact, these qualities are central to Christian orthodoxy. However, when Saramago imagines God, he comes up with attributes that are polar opposites to the ones just mentioned, as God is demonized and portrayed as a tyrant in the Gospel. As Bruce Longenecker clearly states "[i]n orthodox configurations of Christian faith, hope ultimately rests in the confidence that God is a faithful God who is constant in his love and justice. But what if his hopeful confidence were ill-founded? What if the love and justice of God were to implode into a black hole of divine self-interest and a programme of divinely-sponsored evil? What if Christian hope is really a public-relations dupe that cloaks in splendour what are really the machinations of human manipulation and power? No one considers disturbing but necessary questions of this sort better than Nobel prize-winning author José Saramago, in his unsettling Jesus novel *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ?*" (129). Focusing on these questions posed by Longenecker and seeking to clarify Saramago's chief objectives and reasoning for writing *The Gospel* will be the chief aim of this essay.

Already over a hundred years ago, Friedrich Nietzsche had attacked many concepts and ideas associated with Christianity in *The Anti-Christ*, such as the son of man or son of God, God as a person, kingdom of God, and kingdom of heaven:

The concept "son of man" is not some concrete person belonging to history, someone individual or unique, but rather an "eternal" facticity, a psychological symbol that has been redeemed from the concept of time. The same holds true again and in the highest sense for the God of this typical symbolist [Jesus], for the "kingdom of God", for the "kingdom of heaven", and for the filial relation to God. Nothing is less Christian than the ecclesiastical crudity of God as a person, of a "kingdom of God" that is yet to come, a "kingdom of heaven" in the beyond, a "son of God" as the second person in the Trinity. This is all (if you will excuse the expression) one big fist in the eye . . . of the evangel; a world-historical cynicism in the derision of symbols (Nietzsche, 31).

Nietzsche's virulent attack on how the Christian canon was created illustrates how farcical and flawed is the theological foundation in which Christianity is rooted. Also, as Richard Dawkins wrote in *The God Delusion*, "[t]he God of the *Old Testament* is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving

control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, . . . capriciously malevolent bully” (Dawkins, 51). Although the God of the *New Testament* has become more open and accepting of inclusion, diversity, difference, and heterogeneity because he wanted to enlarge his divine empire, there are still many issues within the new system of religion he created related to conscious and unconscious biases. The Church still needs to position itself better to harness the knowledge needed to foster greater inclusion and diversity. Dawkins has also weighed in about the changes brought about by Christianity. He states that it “was founded by Paul of Tarsus as a less ruthless monotheistic sect of Judaism and a less exclusive one, which looked outwards from the Jews to the rest of the world” (58). Even though Judaism was a tribal religion, one cannot dismiss the fact that Christianity was also mocked by the majority of the people in the Roman Empire as a cult until the emperor Constantine made it its official religion. As well as other religions, Christian faith was spread by the sword, if we bear in mind all the horrors that were committed by both the Crusaders, the Conquistadores, the Inquisition, and several religious wars through the ages to advance the territorial expansion of Christianity and force others to conform to its dogmatic objectives and, in the process, undermine other belief systems.

Although Saramago was a unwavering and extremely fierce opponent of organized religion and the concept of God, he was also a realist and accepted the fact that he was grounded on Western values and mores and that his world view was influenced by the culture that enveloped him on a daily basis. He was very forthcoming about his cultural identity and often would say that he was an atheist produced by Christianity and its values. Or he would say “[s]empre vivi muito em paz com o meu ateísmo e . . . com o fato de estar do lado de fora de qualquer relação transcendental. Mas há uma coisa que tenho muito clara: se é verdade que estou fora da Igreja, não estou fora do mundo cultural criado por ela” (Gómez Aguilera, 89).

As *The Gospel* brings to light, Christianity is borne out of God’s dissatisfaction with his limited spatial scope of influence as God of the Jewish people and his desire to expand his authority around the world. Jesus, as the reluctant son of God, (he may not even be his son; God’s paternity vis-à-vis Jesus is always problematic and ambiguous in the novel), is chosen to carry out God’s mission: enlarge God’s sphere of influence and make him God of a larger group of people. Jesus essentially has no say in the matter for he is in the power of or in thrall to God, even if believes it is otherwise. He has been anointed to execute God’s ambitious aggrandizement objectives for humanity. Jesus simply cannot break the covenant that he has with God, because, as the Lord claims, all “covenants, pacts, or contracts, in which I figure” (*The Gospel*, 312-13) are inconsequential, as “[e]verything in the law of God is necessary, even the exceptions, and since you, My son, are an exception, you are as necessary as the law and I who made it” (313). Why is it that God has chosen a painful and ignominious death for Jesus, such as death on the cross, for his power aggrandizement scheme to really succeed? He explains that he has chosen such a

martyr's death so "that the believers may be moved to greater devotion" (312). Furthermore, God forewarns Jesus: "[D]on't play the lamb to be sacrificed, who struggles and bleats pitifully, for your fate is sealed, the sword awaits. Am I that lamb. You are the lamb of God, My son, which God himself will carry to the altar we are preparing here" (315). In God's view, his control over the final destiny of his son and the whole of humankind is absolute:

My son, man is a piece of wood that can be used for anything, from the moment he is born to the moment he dies, he's always ready to obey, send him and he does, tell him to stop and he stops, tell him to withdraw and he withdraws, whether in peace or in war, man generally speaking is the best thing that ever happened to the gods. And the wood from which I'm made, since I'm a man, what use will it be put to, since I'm Your son. You will be the spoon I dip into humanity and bring out filled with people who believe in the new god I intend to become. Filled with people You will eat. There's no need for Me to eat those who eat themselves (313).

Jesus as a spoon metaphor indicates his market value as a commodity to promote Christianity. Jesus cannot escape his destiny; there is a certain determinism and fatality that controls all his actions. In a specific point in the narrative when Jesus tells God that he will refuse to make miracles, even when the opportunity presents itself, thus, nullifying his project on earth, God responds "that I work miracles both great and small, naturally in your presence, so that you may reap the benefits on my behalf" (314) and further on adds that "even if you persist in opposing My will, and go out into the world and deny you are the son of God, I will cause so many miracles to occur wherever you pass that you will be obliged to accept the gratitude of those thanking you and thereby thanking me. Then there is no way out" (315).

After this close reading of some parts of *The Gospel* in order to get an idea of the foundations that undergird the establishment of Christianity, as Saramago's envisioned it, a critic may conclude that the author is expressing a loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent intervening in History. In some ways he is making this claim and in some other ways he is not. We will explain. A superficial reading of the text may ascertain the veracity of the previous claim because Jesus is incapable of imposing his will on God. In fact, he has been co-opted by him; he is the metaphorical spoon to be used by God to overpower humanity. God's responses to Jesus' queries give the impression that Jesus is a puppet in God's hands. God also does not really pay attention to rational arguments. Any argument that Jesus puts forth is either disparaged or dismissed outright by God. He wants to establish a more inclusive religion, but he wants its foundation to be based still on essentialist, transcendental, hegemonic, absolute, male-centered and

patriarchal values and principles, as well as the most traditional practices of authority. The outcome of all competing truth claims in the new religion will be determined by the power of God and the infallibility and inerrancy of his Word. In his view, there is an equivalency between truth claims and power claims. Nevertheless, a different reading of *The Gospel* does posit differentiated, disruptive and boundary-breaking practices on the part of Jesus, and other characters representing humanity, especially Mary Magdalene. Jesus's mentor, Pastor, also preached the discourse of dissidence and resistance to his pupil. Thus, the idea advanced by God that man was no longer involved in the construction of subjectivity and History is both false and premature. Indeed, Saramago who was a virulent anti-hegemonistic, anti-absolutist and anti-essentialist, as far as any form of religion is concerned, would never write a novel where man was not involved in the creation and the constant redefinition of history, as well as the breaking of boundaries through his actions and words. In fact, the rewriting, the reinterpretation, and the revising of history were the "sine qua non" of all his works. And *The Gospel* does not deviate from this model, as Cristina Cerdeira correctly observes.

Com o *Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* a ficção convoca para um diálogo inesperado toda a tradição ocidental cristã, não para bombardeá-la, aniquilando-a, mas para, parodicamente, corrosivamente, fazê-la falar em tempos novos e não eternos. Roubar desses textos a sua pretensa eternidade é a sua suprema heresia, porque despe-os da aura que os absolutiza para considerá-los tão simplesmente discursos. Não seria essa a cambalhota ardilosa que a segunda epígrafe opera com a retomada da frase histórica de Pilatos: "Quod scripsi, scripsi"? O que escrevi, escrevi, seria, então, não somente o gesto autoritário de quem se recusa a voltar atrás por ser o detentor do poder, mas sobretudo a denúncia irônica feita pelo narrador da ignorância do sujeito enunciador quanto à própria fatalidade da linguagem que, uma vez escrita, se desabsolutiza pois já não pode fugir às muitas leituras que gerará à sua revelia (168-169).

Saramago was a consummate proponent of the major role that humanity had in the creation of reality and the world. His attacks on religion and God were meant to counteract the power games played by religious institutions, games whose goal was to usurp from human beings their role as creators of history. Unfortunately, as Saramago said in an interview with Ferreira Alves, "há nas religiões um contínuo processo de devoramento em que Deus é como um Moloch que necessitasse do sacrifício humano. Imaginando que Deus existe – e não lhe concedo o benefício da dúvida –, Deus não pode, por boa lógica, criar seres para os destruir. O cristianismo na sua derivante católica, que é a que conhecemos, é uma história de sofrimentos contínuos" (web). That's exactly what God, in his own words, says he will do in the

future. In the many conversations that God had with Jesus in the boat in the Sea of Galilee, he, after alluding to his reign of terror on earth and mentioning many pains, sacrifices, tears, and deaths that will occur to construct an assembly, the church which symbolizes his power, goes on for another eleven pages where he catalogs a whole history of violence and blood associated with Christianity. In the earlier years, violence was directed mainly against those who believed in Christ and in later years against those who doubted him – the Inquisition the Crusades and the “Conquistas”. The picture that God presents is so horrifying that Jesus pleads: “Father, take from me this cup. . . I don’t want the glory” (330). However, God is totally oblivious to Jesus’ pleas and to the violence that his desire for power will inflict upon humanity. God is fully aware of the tautological truth that the target of his desire for power is power itself, power for the sake of power, and responds: “But I want the power” (339). Even when Pastor, who is also a passenger on the boat, expresses his willingness to obey God and decides to accept again his authority and dominance over his body, God rejects Pastor’s offer. He declares that “the good I represent cannot exist without the evil you represent, if you were to end, so would I, unless the devil is the devil, God cannot be God” (331). Indeed, the end of the devil, Pastor, would signify the death of God. Goodness existence is co-dependent on evil. God and Pastor are complementary figures or birds of a feather. Pastor is the alter ego of God and, in fact, Jesus notices that there is a strong resemblance between the two men.

Essentially, what Saramago is striving at through his re-writing of the Gospel or an alternative gospel according to Christ is to deconstruct and de-legitimize the concepts of Truth, Wisdom and Justice which supposedly are the cornerstones of Christianity, but which have been used, as Saramago’s new Gospel points out, in a very deceptive manner to oppress people, construct their reality, and force them to accept a fetish, God, the symbolic and religious embodiment of the desire of power. God and his Messiah, Jesus, co-opted by God, did an impeccable job of turning religion into the opium of the people. Saramago’s text also deconstructs Christianity as a grand metanarrative. He shows it to lack credibility and legitimation because it is rooted solely on a quest for power that uses deceitfulness, lies and trickery to advance its cause. Furthermore, he unmasks what has been accepted by mainstream culture as being transcendental, universal, truthful, and ahistorical truths and values, that is, the representation of reality seen from the perspective or lens of God, and thoroughly exposes the contingent, partial, situated, historically embedded, and context dependent aspects of all norms, values, truths. and even theology. Religion is just as discursive and partakes of the same characteristics and limitations of other systemic discursive practices. Linda Hutcheon’s assertions regarding historiographic metafiction would certainly apply to Saramago’s novel: “What it does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world – and that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist ‘out there’ fixed, given, universal, eternal, they are human constructs in history. This does not make them any the less

necessary or desirable. It does, however, condition their truth value” (43).

The truth value of human constructs is what concerns Saramago the most in *The Gospel*. We, as human beings, create all kinds of systems and orders. Saramago does preserve, in his text, the figure of God but to him he is a human construct, as the author himself tells Clara Ferreira Alves in an interview: “Deus é uma criação humana e, como muitas outras criações humanas, a certa altura toma o freio nos dentes e passa a condicionar os seres que o criaram” (“Entrevista”). God is the transformation of the object of desire into a fetish with a life of its own and endowed with the moral authority to dominate and subordinate humankind. We might call it a hostage takeover of the creators by the creation, God, or a ritual inversion of the power structure where God takes over the position occupied by his creators. It is at this juncture that hegemony occurs. Since God has now superior ideological and religious status and is positioned higher in the hierarchical structure due to the inversion, he has the freedom to manipulate the beliefs of those beneath him so that his power is protected. But, as Saramago has demonstrated so well in *The Gospel* and also *Cain* later, people can still resist and express resistance to power imbalances, rebel against or disrupt cultural and religious hegemony, and call into question the oppressive power structure or even tear down the system through violence, as Cain did when he killed all the people who were in Noah’s ark with the exception of Noah who decided to commit suicide, a sin that God cannot ever pardon. For Noah, the end of humanity also signifies the death of God.

Why did the break with Judaism happened when it did and what motivated the resistance against rabbinical strictures and precepts at the time that Jesus lived? To begin with the historical and political situation was appropriate: the Jews had lost their freedom to the Romans and there was a desire in the land for a revolutionary hero to liberate them. Second, the Old Testament was founded in and gave life continuously to the idea of a Messiah. This concept was fundamental for the unity and the preservation of the religion: it gave Judaism stability and it satisfied the people’s desires that someone would deliver them from their oppression and slavery at the hands of the Romans. Martyrdom could then be accepted by Jews as long as the idea of a Messiah was kept alive. For this reason, the *Torah* and the *Talmud*, the books that codify religious law and construct Judaism as a hierarchical, essentialist and exclusionary system based on fixed, eternal, universal, and absolute truths, and values, constantly focused on the coming of a Messiah as a unifying structure. As we can see, the ideological climate was appropriate for the coming of a Messiah. In fact, the political and religious context when the Romans held sway and dominated the Holy Lands favored such an occurrence. Nevertheless, it was left up to Paul to create a magical inversion of the meaningless, ignominious, and even terrifying death of Jesus in the cross, crucified as the King of the Jews, by turning his defeat into triumph. How could a Christian religion with a sound structure, a religion that permeates today all our traditions and is the foundation of Western culture, be created? To achieve his



objective “Saint Paul centered the whole Christian edifice precisely on the point which up to then appeared, to the disciples of Christ, as a horrifying trauma, 'impossible', non-symbolizable, non-integrable in their field of meaning: Christ's shameful death on the cross between two robbers. Saint Paul made of this final defeat of Christ's earthly mission (which was, of course, the deliverance of the Jews from Roman domination) the very act of salvation: by means of his death, Christ has redeemed humankind” (Žižek, 29). What Saint Paul accomplished with his “magical inversion of defeat into triumph” (29) reminds us that even events that occur in the real empirical past are nevertheless constituted and given meaning through selection and narrative positioning. And we, as readers, can only know those events through their discursive inscription.

Saramago's text is also an inscription, and a self-conscious historiographic metafiction that (re)textualizes events that occurred a longtime ago in order to subvert and discredit historical and official documents (the Gospels, the Old Testament, the letters of Paul), which like *The Gospel* are also conditioned by textuality, e.g., the recasting of Jesus' death with a different significance. The objective of the resemiotization of the discourse of Christianity, in the novel, is not to deny the existence of a specific historical and religious period, which serves as the foundation for the creation of one of the two largest monotheistic religions in the world, but rather to question any and all types of knowledge and truths that are textual, and, at the same time, to expose an official system of power that authorized certain representations of reality and prohibited and invalidated others. Why were the texts written by Mathew, Mark, John, Luke and Paul given the status of canonical texts by the Church while many others, around two hundred evangels written by other individuals, including those by Mary Magdalene, were deemed apocryphal? The reason is obvious: the first Christians simply wanted to establish totalizing conceptions of truth, absolute and transcendental foundations of knowledge, and all-encompassing systems of meaning. All the ideas advanced by Jesus and also Pastor, such as plurality, difference, openness, transgression and questioning of old values and norms, transformation of knowledges, critical attitude towards narrations of mythological and religious character, all rooted on power/knowledge, were erased by the Christian system, as it gained greater power with more and more people accepting and converting to the new monotheistic religion. A narrative grounded on postmodernist concepts and practices *avant la lettre*, that is, revolutionary, disruptive, and anti-systemic, did not serve the unification or structural designs in terms of the new Christian religion, as Saramago continuously and lucidly draws attention to in *The Gospel*. The initial church leaders were intent in constructing a grand metanarrative of Christianity and, therefore, there was a desire that all religious institutions and all social, political, religious, and cultural practices be aligned with the theological thinking mode and the conceptual discursive strategies of the Christian Church, established by Paul.

Jesus of the evangels subverts and condemns the legitimacy of Judaism because it was rooted on corruption, immorality, extortion and usury. It had also taken advantage of Judaic scriptures for material gain and to attain power. God saw in Jesus, a person who had condemned the very legitimacy of Judaism, the perfect messenger to amplify his religious reach, from a tribal to a universal dimension. However, if Jesus' message had not also been co-opted by his followers who reread, reinterpreted, and redefined his words and death to construct and also to attain legitimacy for a new religious canon that certainly was antithetical to Jesus' new vision or reform of Judaism, Christianity would have foundered. Ironically, a Jesus who rebels against tradition, the normative, and the legitimacy of a religion, Judaism, is used in due time, by a religion founded on his name, Christianity, that turned out to be the ultimate and enshrined embodiment of tradition, normativity, patriarchy, absolute conception of truth, uniformity of knowledge and fundamentalism in the world. In no time at all, it became the grandest religious metanarrative ever written.

The inscription carried out by Saramago's new Gospel certainly is radically different from previous inscriptions. Saramago's God is a tyrant and a despot interested solely in his power and not in the well-being of humankind. In fact, he will go as far as inventing someone, e.g., the Devil, to blame him for all the evil perpetrated in the world. If there is no opposition to the goodness of God, it must be invented. If people are to escape from the hands of their enemies, those who supposedly force people to live in darkness, a polar opposite of God had to become a reality. The binary, goodness and evil, which in fact is not a binary but two complementary entities, is a necessity of Christianity because it serves to highlight the goodness that is God. However, it also does underline God's arrogance and vanity, two of the worst character flaws of the Saramaguian God.

Christianity founded in the power of the signifier that is God, as Saramago shows us, is an imposture based on deceitfulness, deception, and manipulation of the truth whose chief aims are to convince others of its high moral ground even when many wrongdoings are carried out in its name and human beings have to suffer many injustices. They are also coerced into accepting its symbolic order, its system of signification, as if the fiction in which it is grounded were real. I say as though the fiction were real because God is aware that his authority is a fiction, given that it needs the consent of the faithful, those who have been deceived, to be validated. Without the consent there is no authority and no God. So, he will eternally manipulate the faithful to attain their consent. It's the manipulation, the big lie, that regulates and controls people's behavior and thus their acceptance of God's authority. God's behavior is impregnated by scorn, contempt, cynicism and he holds all people in great disdain and condescension, as if they were all passengers in the ship of fools, a ship where God is the pilot and people are his fools, the sycophantic followers.

However, let's not forget that it is Christianity's search for a defining theme

and a unique and universal viewpoint, as Jane Flax suggests, in *Postmodernism and Gender Relations*, that “require the suppression of the important and discomfiting voices of persons with experiences unlike our own. The suppression of these voices seems to be a necessary condition for the (apparent) authority, coherence, and universality of our own” (633). Consequently, the construction of a powerful episteme of Christianity “requires the suppression of discourses that threaten to differ with or undermine the authority of the dominant one” (633). Saramago does not really see anything constructive in religions, in general: ‘Mas as religiões tanto servem para sobreviver às perseguições como para fazer perseguições, e os perseguidos vão por seu turno refugiar-se noutra religião que fará outros perseguidos. É um jogo entre poderes que se debatem em circunstâncias históricas diferentes. Veja-se as cruzadas, uma crença contra outra crença, uma guerra não entre um Deus e outro, Alá, mas entre dois livros, a Bíblia e o Corão” (Ferreira Alves, web). As the author seems to suggest the legitimization and the authority of all three monotheistic religions is derived from a text, a human construct as the ultimate source of signification.

Unfortunately, as *The Gospel* makes manifest, the struggle for the space where signification and reality intersect and religious events become symbolizable is always extremely violent. The words of the devil to characterize the bloody process of signification and the ideology of the Christian narrative, which was narrated by God in the novel to both Jesus and Pastor, in Jesus’ fishing boat in the Sea of Galilee, during forty days and forty nights of intense fog and darkness, call attention to the fact of a strong intersection between violence and the production of meaning within Christianity to attain the objectives of a new religion that will become, in due time, the grand narrative of Western civilization. However, to achieve such a lofty and high platform, Christianity followed in the footsteps of the war that Rome was waging against the Jewish nation. Among the many events that were occurring in the final years of Christ on Earth, the war stood out. People were

expect[ing] the dreaded insignia of war, which bore the initials SPQR, the Senate and People of Rome, to appear at any moment, heralding the arrival of a punitive force. Under this symbol and that flag, men go forth to kill one another, and the same can be said of those other well known initials, INRI, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, but we must not anticipate events, for the dire consequences of Jesus’ death will emerge only in the fullness of time (*The Gospel*, 118-19).

The analogy made between SPQR and INRI is extremely predictive of the violent future associated with the insignia INRI, in view of what has been seen and will be seen, throughout the millennia, within God’s domains, which is the same as saying the body of God. Violence constantly intersects in the articulation of epistemic practices related both to religion and ethics, which, in turn, shape and modify social, political, historical, and

cultural practices. Although Saramago did not write it, he just implied it in both *The Gospel* and in *Cain*, the world is still captive of and shaped by Judeo-Christian thinking, practices and categories that have not yet been totally superseded or dismantled. We are fully aware that the body of God in John's version of the Gospel undergoes a transformation. "And the Word [God] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14) is much more complex and multi-dimensional than we seem to suggest in this essay. However, we are constrained by the fact that we are critiquing a novel whose chief intention was to lay bare the practices of violence, which undergirded the construction of a Judeo-Christian vision of the world, and still create havoc, influence, and impact negatively the Modern world. And in *The Gospel*, God and Jesus are two different individuals, and the later plays the role of the son who will become a sacrificial lamb at the hands of God. Jesus never perceives himself as part of a trinity that is one or a duo that is one. He is simply a human being not a God figure. His mission was to challenge the corruption of those who interpreted and used *Old Testament* scriptures and rabbinical law for personal gain and unethical ends. He was a reformer and maybe even a revolutionary at his time but never a God figure. That status was only achieved after his death through theological discursive practices carried out by those who supported his mission to eradicate rabbinical corruption from the temple, the symbolic space of rabbinical law and tenets. These practices culminated in Jesus' reinvention and/or reimagination as the Messiah and also the son of God, a person who eventually becomes one with God.

Up to now the focus has been on the figure of God as the ultimate arbiter in the process of signification, the being that dominates the whole and establishes the criteria that is the foundation for the construction of a reality that is governed by certain rules and privileges, as well as specific social and religious relations, which are attained only by the suppression or denial of the experiences and viewpoints of the other(s) and by the rewriting of history.

There is a point in the narrative of *The Gospel* that is extremely important and may radically change our perception of God as evil-incarnate, warmonger, and an egotistical maniac interested solely in power. Jesus had already questioned the authority of the Father, the Biblical God of the *Old Testament*, and had already undermined and debunked semitic law and scripture through his words and actions when he went to Jerusalem, in one year, during the Passover festivities with a lamb to be offered to Jehovah as a sacrifice, as the Passover ritual demanded. Instead of partaking of the ceremony through the offering, — the sacrifice of the lamb —, he decides to skip town with his lamb, an act that was considered sacrilegious at the time and most certainly punishable by rabbinical law (215). However, a few years later, this same lamb gets lost in the desert and in the process of searching for the animal, Jesus not only finds the lamb but also runs into God who immediately demands that he sacrifice the lamb. Jesus, although he hesitated at first, decides he has no choice in the matter and agrees

to obey the orders of God and sacrifices his lamb to honor him (221). Although his action may seem innocuous at first, in fact, it is not, due to future repercussions for humanity. It is an action charged with great signification because it is, at this precise moment, that Christianity, as a symbolic system and a more inclusive religion than Judaism, is constructed. The non-refusal of Jesus in face of God's demands and considering that Jesus has stripped off his garments when he entered the desert because he was entering a sacred space, is tantamount to accepting God's authority and of being co-opted by him. Jesus had given over his freedom to God, he had created an object (God) that had taken control of his life. From now on, the creation (God) was free to devour His creator (Jesus) for God had power over Jesus. Also, Jesus could not any longer be a creator, he could only be created for he had exhibited weakness. He had simply failed to challenge and usurp the phallic imperative represented by the father. His reality, his symbolic value and meaning, would be determined forever by external forces and by the law of the father. He had lost control of his destiny. From now on, it would be up to God to control the role he would play in Christendom, which ends in a cruel and violent manner when God sacrifices his own son Jesus, death by crucifixion, in order to use him as a martyr/victim, which, in God's opinion, is the best way to propagate faith because of the tremendous surplus value of martyrdom for religions. By failing to overthrow the patriarchal structure, Jesus has a tragic and ignominious end. By acquiescing to his father, he contributes to his own undoing, as David Frier observes: "Jesus's central failing, therefore, is that he does not succeed in freeing himself from the centripetal force represented by the authoritative figure of God and his Word" (381). Likewise, Helena Kaufman addresses the issue of Jesus' inability to become independent from his father and, thus, experiencing the consequences of his failure to overthrow the patriarchy. "The suffering here [at the cross] means acceptance of passivity with regard to the father's authority in order for the Oedipal crisis, the castration threat, to be resolved. Saramago's Jesus yields to his authority, suffers death by crucifixion and as we may infer, receives the reward of becoming one with his father-God" (435).

Although Christ failed miserably to overthrow patriarchy, he was, nevertheless, supported by the theological vision of Paul who molded the traumatic and ignominious events surrounding Christ's crucifixion, death signifying the redemption of humanity, as the cornerstone for the expansion of Christianity. Others followed Paul and they too contributed to the creation of a powerful and organic system. Paul's "rereading of the death of Christ gave Christianity its definitive contours. He did not add any content to the already existing dogmas – all he did was to remark as the greatest event, as the fulfillment of Christ's supreme mission (reconciliation of God with mankind), what was before experienced as traumatic loss the "defeat of Christ's mundane mission, his infamous death on the cross" (Slavoj Žižek, 78).

Christ could have been a Raimundo Silva of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* who placed a *no*, where a traditional *yes* had always been written and thus endorsed with a simple two-letter word a different perspective of the siege of the city to be inscribed, the correct historical one, which also became a reinterpretation and a redefinition of Portuguese History itself. An act of insurrection or sabotage that violated and changed radically the official history of Portugal. Had Jesus been Raimundo and had answered God with a categorical “*no*” instead of a “*yes*”, Western Civilization, as we know it, probably would have been radically altered. Likewise, there would never have been a novel, written by a Portuguese author, whose title is *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*.

Pastor, the devil, when he questions Jesus upon his return in order to seek information about the lost lamb, Jesus expresses himself in words that confirm what has been stated previously. “Where’s the sheep, and he explained, I met God. I didn’t ask you if you met God. I asked you if you found the sheep. I offered it in sacrifice. Whatever for. Because God was there and I had no choice. With the tip of his crook Pastor drew a line on the ground, a furrow deep as a pit, insurmountable as a wall of fire, then told him, you’ve learned nothing, begone with you” (222). The declaration made by Pastor, the devil, that Jesus’ lack of learning, as an apprentice under his tutelage, besides being an allusion to Jesus’ abilities as a student, is also an acknowledgment that a new episteme has been born. The fact that Jesus does not have the will power to violate taboos, rules and creeds imposed and sanctioned by a God and his inhuman system of religion rooted on sacrifices to God has rendered Christ useless in the struggle and resistance against the arbitrariness and the oppression of the incoming symbolic religious order desired by God, the continuation of the patriarchal order with the father at the helm.

In fact, probably unbeknownst to Jesus at the time, he had taken the first steps in the construction of another religious grand narrative. It is Jesus’ refusal to violate sacred principles and to resist the orders of God that facilitates the creation of a much more powerful divine entity and to Jesus’ own crowning as the son of God, forever condemned to be the son of the Father and to act in the “Name of the Father.” Even today many of our discursive practices are still grounded solely on the “Name of the Father,” and Jesus is partially to blame, because he became a means to an end: his affirmative answer shored up the entrenched power of God and made humanity even more prone to the evil designs of the Father. In the desert, Jesus lost his agency and became an object or a helpless puppet at the hands of God, a Master puppeteer, to carry out his ideological scheme through a reign of terror in a much larger domain, as it was his intention.

Jesus’ thoughts and words at the end of the novel, when he is on the cross and close to expiring, sound somewhat hollow. As he reflects on his demise, he claims “that his life had been planned for death from the very beginning. Remembering the

river of blood and suffering that would flow from his side and flood the globe” (396-7), he realized that he had been deceived by God, his crafty Father. Saramago's Jesus did deconstruct the original words that he said, as he was about to expire, putting total blame on God's shoulders for his victimizing humankind. However, it is not only the now more powerful God who must be forgiven, for after all He is also a creation of a man, Jesus, also known as the Messiah, who was not able to seize the moment in the desert where he sacrificed his lamb because God demanded it. Through this unfortunate sacrifice, Jesus becomes both a slave and a puppet of his own creation, God himself. Therefore, Jesus must be also blamed and must be forgiven for his creation, the latest iteration of God, a much more powerful entity than the God of the Jewish people. Jesus coincidentally universalized the figure of God, although he had lived a life dedicated to the humanization of the universe. However, he is not totally an innocent victim, as he claims, because he participated in his own victimization, even if unwittingly.

The new version of God, a Christian entity, consents in a callous and fraudulent manner to his own son's Crucifixion and later, in a wider struggle for power, tortured to death countless other human beings to satiate his quest for power. God is totally unmoved by the ignominious spectacle he is witnessing in Golgotha, a skull-shaped hill in ancient Jerusalem. His response, a smiling face in the open sky above, is both a celebration and a metaphor for his divine cruelty and indifference, both tinted and tainted with sadistic overtones. Furthermore, it reveals God's innate inability to feel either shame or remorse. God is smiling because he executed perfectly an ingenious Machiavellian scheme *avant-la-lettre*. He had trickled Jesus into an ignominious martyrdom to achieve his ultimate goal without his son realizing it, until it was already too late. God's trickery makes him even more of a paragon of wickedness, malfeasance, and selfishness and that's how he will rule his enlarged domain in the future. However, it is mission accomplished, as far as he is concerned.

It seems, as if he has already read Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Given his eternal omnipresence and omnipotence, he understands well what a prince's role is to attain specific policy objectives. “Everyone admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word” (*The Prince*, 52). Thus, an intelligent and cunning prince could always find victims just like God did and does, because ‘his deceits always succeeded according to his wishes, because he well understood this side of mankind.’ (53). In this particular instance, Machiavelli was referring specifically to Pope Alexander VI of whom it is said that he never did what he said (53). He notoriously always found someone who would allow himself or herself to be deceived. As the highest representative of God on earth, he certainly carried himself impeccably in his role as a great pretender, in many ways following in

the footsteps of God. No wonder, corruption and evil were and still are so rampant in Church affairs. As *The Gospel* underscores, faith and integrity were often in short supply, given that they were worthless qualities for those that seek power. On the other hand, craft was usually quite abundant.

By victimizing and sacrificing his son Jesus, through deceitfulness, I might add, God now has the ideal salesperson to achieve the greatest possible market share for his unique brand of religion, Christianity, for there will be many more consumers who are willing to buy it, given that it is both a superior and more universal brand and it has a major advantage, a so-called marketable diabolical plan to be used as a tool over other religions and gods that are also contending for market share with Christianity. As God tells Jesus, the diabolical plan he has, is turning Jesus into a martyr: “My son, that of victim, which is the best role for propagating [and selling] any faith and stirring up fervor” (311). With martyrdom as its foundation, Christianity will have the perfect advertisement that will allow it to commodify the product (religion) that it is selling to consumers. As Cousland wrote in José Saramago’s “Kakaggelion: The ‘Badspel’ according to Jesus Christ”, the god of Christianity is in a challenging “competition with other gods for the allegiance of consumers” (64). However, Christianity does not have to worry about other competing religions because Paul had the expertise to optimize the commodification of the newest religion for profit. With his novel ideas, cunning and his genial interpretive approach to the symbolic meaning of the Crucifixion of Christ, he turned Jesus’ death into a tangible and saleable product, which served faultlessly the religious needs of large numbers of people. In a somewhat crude manner, Cousland also claims that

[h]umans are [also] commodities that can be bought and sold, not only at the slave market but in the religious sphere as well. Once they are commodified, they become dispensable; their death becomes meaningful only in terms of the debit column—their red blood transmuted to the red ink of the balance sheet. [...] And, as becomes clear from Saramago’s abecedary of saints and Jesus’s vision of the future of Christianity, this type of exploitation does not come to an end with Jesus’s death; rather it endures to this day. God’s adherents have continued to devour each other in the name of orthodoxy, in the name of conquest on behalf of the one true religion, and in the name of the strictures God has ostensibly imposed upon his people (64-5).

Besides, Jesus Christ by the time he was crucified already had a whole entourage of disciples, apostles, and evangelists who could spread his word, his anti-status quo message of dissidence, change, revolution and humanity, a message that is



subsequently re-directed when Jesus Christ becomes the Messiah, a divine entity who is not only complementary with the Father but is also undistinguishable from him. He is deserving of worship and a temple to carry out his mission is founded. The Church, the community of the new Christian faith, a worship temple initiative started by Paul who built the first church, will in due time breed many theologians, mostly men, who create the ideological and theological super-structure that Christianity needed to become a powerful system or organization. Among the group of men were Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Ambrose, Jerome, Anselm, Bonaventure, Isidore of Seville, Anthony of Padua and Lisbon, and countless others too. Two women are on the list: Teresa of Ávila and Catherine of Siena. Women do deserve to be represented in the seats at the table of the Lord and they are. However, these two women, in my opinion, are used as a smokescreen for the fact that the Church is a global carrier of the misogyny virus. Finally, there is a whole procession of martyrs who will die for the sake of their Christian faith, in what God calls, “an endless tale of iron and blood, of fire and ashes, an infinite sea of sorrow and tears” (321), all of them working, writing, warring, preaching, proselytizing and dying to expand the domain of Christianity on Earth. The House of the Lord, the Church, which is also the guardian of the symbols of power and the infinite reach of Christianity, will have a foundation that “in order to be truly solid, will be dug in flesh, its walls made from the cement of renunciation, tears, agony, anguish, every conceivable form of death” (320). These words seem to reproduce impeccably the images that Saramago created to describe the horrors and abuse suffered by the lower-class people who were forcefully taken from their homes and sent to the village of Mafra to help build the Mafra Convent, in *Baltasar and Blimunda*, in gratitude to the Lord for having given an heir to the throne of Portugal to King John V. Actually, this miracle prince never made it to the throne because he died as a child, but that’s another story.

The true face of God in *The Gospel*, as Salma Ferraz affirms,

é de um Deus dominador, cruel, patriarcal, machista, capaz de planos maquiavélicos, impiedoso e perverso, que não se importa com os seres humanos, pelo contrário os utiliza para realização de seus propósitos malignos, irônico e sarcástico, egoísta e despótico, um ditador que faz escolhas inexplicáveis, que se compraz em sacrifícios e tem um gosto especial por sangue, que faz do seu próprio filho uma cobaia, traçando para ele um destino do qual não pôde fugir, um megalômano que possui como heterônimo o próprio Diabo e mantém perigosas relações em ele. Na composição da face de Deus no *ESJC*, o autor elabora o que podemos chamar de heresia saramaguiana que consiste na demonização de Deus, transformando-o no grande vilão do seu evangelho profano . . . [e] ateológico (247).

In reality, God is a crafty, unscrupulous and selfish auto-promoter who is totally indifferent to the suffering that he has caused and is still causing humanity. Saramago would certainly love to see a world without the insidious influence of religion and God, as well as other oppressive systems of meaning, but, so long as human beings exist, that is an impossible mission. Man desires the infinite and transcendence and thus gods are created to fulfill those needs or voids. Man has also many other desires and other systems of meaning are created, which are subsequently used in the sense of domination, the same as religion. Humans are systemically oppressed and imprisoned in a prison-house of religious language of their own making without almost any exits in order to fulfill their desires. And if there are any exits, those are reserved to the privileged few. And infinity and transcendence do not exist beyond the human body, in Saramago's opinion. I am convinced that Saramago's vision of the universe had more similarities to John Lennon's song "Imagine" than to the prison-house of language that he had to face constantly as both a writer and a human being, especially with its references to a future with no hell below, only a sky above, no countries and no religion to die for, and the world as one. "Imagine" is a song that is at the core of Saramago's worldview.

However, the idea that Lennon's "Imagine" world will become a reality is less than zero. If there is no God or Christianity, then other entities, symbols or even ideas will replace them and create similar conflicts, terror, and wars. In fact, with the greater secularization of the world in the last two centuries and a sizable growth in people who claim they are either self-proclaimed atheists or are part of a religious denomination but don't practice it, the search is already on for a replacement for God and religion. According to Terry Eagleton "[t]he HISTORY of the modern age is among other things the search for a viceroy for God. Reason, Nature, Geist, culture, art, the sublime, the nation, the state, science, humanity, Being, Society, the Other, desire, the life force and personal relations; all of these have acted from time to time as forms of displaced divinity" (44).

For Saramago, this displacement of divinity should have occurred a long time ago. In his opinion, God and religion do not serve any longer the best interests of humanity and a secularization of the world grounded on humanizing concepts, values and norms is in order. Organized religion has forgotten the principles, ideas, needs, the quest for freedom, the sense of sharing and the revolutionary zeal that gave birth to Christianity over two thousand years ago. As Christianity became organized, it turned more and more into an oppressive ideological system of control and domination that was more interested in the quest for power and aggrandizement than in caring for the soul and the spirit of human beings. It also became a closed and dogmatic system where its precepts, principles, norms, truths, and symbols acquired eternal, absolute, universal, and transcendental value. They just became crystallized in time and unchangeable. They were beyond questioning because they represented the Word of God, which is tantamount to the rule of law. To safeguard the system and make it even more powerful it became violent and tyrannical and began to commit all kinds of atrocities, evil deeds, and it spilled rivers of blood either

to maintain the faithful in order or to force others to abandon their religious principles and values and accept the true faith, Christianity in this case, even though they were antithetical to their view of the world, as if their culture was inferior or no culture at all. The others were barbarians or uncivilized and, thus, they had to change their ways, or they would suffer the consequences of their disobedience. Hannah Arendt has claimed that “violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power” (35) and I am sure that Saramago agrees with her. The author viewed the institutions of religion as merely coercive and violent superstructures that used their power to rob humanity of its dignity, integrity, beliefs, respect, values, and self-awareness. Many despicable and atrocious acts committed against other human beings were carried out in the name of a God that according to Saramago only exists in our heads. He is the tyrannical, blood-thirsty, violent, egotistical, and unscrupulous God of *The Gospel* for which Saramago reserves most of his criticism with just reason. However, to be fair, the criticism should also have been directed at those who hide behind God’s power to commit all kinds of abuse, atrocities, evil and barbaric actions. The rule by a God who is invisible is the most tyrannical of all rules because God can never be asked to answer for his actions or explain what he did to others. Humanity must be forced to answer for God and those who hold the key to the power of Christian institutions are ultimately responsible to answer for God’s crimes against humanity and for the things that he does that horrify us. People who do extraordinarily horrible deeds and actions can’t just hide behind “I was just following orders” because that’s never a valid excuse. Even if they are supposedly following the orders of God, it is still not valid.

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