
Ironic Parody of Secular Religion: The Judas' Syndrome in the 2024 Paris Olympic Opening Ceremony

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ABSTRACT

The opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris started a controversy especially among Christians and between Christians and secular artists. It was the display that typically presented what looked like the sacred moment of Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples featuring Barbara Butch with a halo around her head surrounded by drag queens and dancers and Philippe Katerine in nude fashion painted in rainbow colours. This essay used that drama as a point of departure to present a discourse on modernity and the secular religion within the methodical experimentation of the possibility of ironic parody of self in connection to the Judas syndrome. I concluded by calling attention to the ethics of responsibility, moral consciousness and sensitivity over and against the vulgarity and arrogance of modern freedom.

Keywords: Olympic Games, Judas' Syndrome, Irony, The Feasts of the Gods, the Last Supper etc.

INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF SECULAR RELIGION?

What is secular religion? And how do we live in such a time as the age of secular religion? These are questions that at best would be seen as ironic from the beginning, if irony on a certain level move beyond just the obvious and constitutes that which is organized or found as a conundrum which it cannot escape. Irony in this context is the inescapable of that which is the reality of life. This can be either a joy or a burden, but the irony plays much stronger when it is a burden. Something that cannot be set aside for someone or something to feel a sense of total freedom that is popularly assumed to be possible. Irony is not just the presence of the obvious in a hidden manner but it

is an inescapable contradiction, a paradox that keeps life open from within itself, and also open without itself, surely beyond itself. The idea of religion is something that the secular age may wish to have dismissed ever since the dawn of European Enlightenment.¹ The age of religion has been largely viewed and dismissed as the age of superstition and actual delusion. To be free then means to move beyond religion to a new age of secular, or ordinary life that is organized by ordinary thinking. Thinking itself is transcendence (cf. Ernst Bloch). This is surely the occupation of the philosophers. To think means to move from within oneself, beyond oneself and certainly beyond any sense of confinement or limitation to life. Imagination is the major idea, it is the governing term of the occupation. It calls attention to the creativity of thinking and sets in motion that which is possible. The process of thinking in the secular age sets in motion to the potentialities of human reasoning to its destination. The destination of human reason is the construction of the desirable. This is at the heart of the secular age, the age of freedom from within oneself over and against all

¹ “The very definition of enlightenment, with its insistence on the idea of individual autonomy or self-determination, is not only not contrary to religious matters- indeed, religion is its central point-but also intimately associated with it through their common origin in that central concern of the Christian experience: salvation. Regardless, enlightenment indicates a way of life whose goal is not to transcend the earthly world, but rather to remake and perfect it through constant questioning and self-questioning.” See Joao de Azevedo e Dias Duarte, “Enlightenment and Religion: Rupture or Continuity?” *Hist. Historiogr. Ouro Preto*, v. 13, no. 32, (2020) 83-114 see p. 107. For more on the meaning of Enlightenment and its relation to religion and the secular culture of the West William Bultman and Robert Ingram, *God in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1977); Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670- 1752* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Anthony Pagen, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013); David Sorokin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985);

ideas that seem to limit the possibility of the adventure of life into the world of actual desire and imagination. The imagination of human mind is the translation of the quest of the heart which keeps the mind occupied with what is meaningful to it in a given context of life.

Religion is seen in the secular contexts of life as a given tradition that basically sets limits to the actualization of the potentialities of the nature of man. The masters of suspicion namely Nietzsche, Feuerbach and Marx gave birth to the new age of secular thinking and living in fulfilment of the imagination of Kant and the making of the new man. The new age will be punctuated with the rise of the new man who is absolutely free from within and without. This is a man who has no burden of religion and no burden of social alienation. The age of religion is only but fantasy to so many who saw the past from the lenses that their master constructed for them. The work of discernment of the actual voice of God and the direction of the will of God's truly essence of life was missed in the long gaze into the wide horizon of the society. The secular mind wandered off from the point of God's own revelation to the speculative struggle to grasp the totality of God on the scale of possibility. The man that has been formed and called by God now has gone far away into the foreign land of imagination in search of God. This was the beginning of the rise of secular religion. The paradox is on the keeping of the word "secular" and "religion" next to each other. The expectation of popular culture is the death of religion in the rise of secular society. It will remain an unacceptable challenge to expect secular life and ideology to be a form of religion. But it remains a form of religion as long as there is something as an anchor or protection which appeals to the sense of belief or faith which eventually leads to trust as a willing reliance on the viability of what is believed or trusted. If a person claims to have no faith at all, he or she is only speaking hypothetically or in the popular paradox of human reasoning. The action of thinking itself is an exercise of faith. This is surely the sense of reliance in something or someone, whether tangible or intangible, but it is nevertheless, an act of faith. The forms of faith eventually lead to a tradition from within the self as a continual habit of believing or trusting the object of faith. This is the beginning and the movement of life into a new direction from the former way of life and living to a new one. There is no possible escape from religion as a tradition, there may only be

the movement from an older form of tradition or religion into a new one. What has emerged in the secular age is not the abolition of religion as religion, but the replacement of traditional understanding and practice of religion with a new sense of religion that fits the imagination of the new generation.

In other words, the new world system is understood only with reference to the old. The new age of secular culture and religions is only the movement from the traditions that understood themselves from and within older categories of life especially with reference to religion as an anchorage. The three main pillars of life are religion, law and relationship, in other words, faith, justice and politics, or faith, order and socialization. The rise of secular religion did not abolish the traditions of the past but only found ways of expressing them differently from what they used to be. This is the point of parody in life and religion. Parody in this sense is not just the negligence of the obvious but the tearing down of the pillars of the past. Parody is a deliberate movement of the boundary stones of history in order to find another pointer to the new view of the same history.² It may be ironically challenged that history has never been the same, and there can never be such a thing as the sameness of reality in history. This agrees with the endless flux of reality as in the thinking of Heraclitus. Be that as it may, history remains empty without the inner elements that bring it to bear and sustain its movement, namely, faith, traditions and action. All of history hangs on these keys without which it becomes only an empty tale or only a fantasy, a dream that never comes true.

FREEDOM AND CREATIVITY

Another aspect of the new turn of humanity especially from the 18th and 19th century age of reason over faith, and the gradual abolition of religion and its power over humanity, is the self-discovery of humanity in the 20th century which came in as the pure age of freedom.³ This is human freedom against the

² Nil Korkut, "Kinds of Parody: From Medieval to the Postmodern," A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences of Middle East Technical University, In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature, (October, 2005). For the meaning, functions and definitions of parody see, p. 2-17.

³ Cf. F. J. Wertz, "The History of Humanistic and Existential Psychology: The Possibility and Cultural Contexts of Renewal in Science." In L. Hoffman,

domineering interest and power over another human being. The 19th century as the Christian era has passed especially in Europe only when it was dawning on the African continent. This is the ongoing irony between the dialectic of religion and freedom that could be seen as the signature of the last century. The human maturity in science and technology has rendered religion the thing of the past. This is why most first worlds today see themselves in the post religious era. The idea of religion takes them back to the age of human dependence over the supernatural, while this new age of secular thinking and action has moved them away from such childlike life of uncertainty into the mechanical age of human creativity.

Freedom is creativity. Human essence has shifted from the discernment of the ultimate purpose of God in one's life to the personal choice of one's own set purpose and its actualization. This kind of move in the arena of the creative life makes the human fully alive and free as an agent that is the sole owner of his or her own will. F. Nietzsche has preached the doctrine of doom over all those who still cling to religious interest and ideologies as still slaves and senseless people in themselves.⁴ Religiosity is primitivism while the essence of life is freedom. To Nietzsche there is only action in life regardless of its consequences. The freedom to act according to the freedom of his will makes the human being truly set free to be him or herself. The will to power has been his staying key to the doctrine of power and action as the essence of living.⁵

The will to power comes to its fulfilment in the self-development of human interest to do just something. This may be something else. Something different whether good or bad. Yahweh challenged the gods of the nations to prove their worth as gods

D. Hocoy & E. DeRobertis (eds) *APA Handbook of Humanistic and Existential Psychology* (APA Books).

⁴ Cf. Ken Gemes, and Simon May (eds) *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Lucy Huskinson, *Nietzsche and Jung: The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites* (London: and New York: Routledge, 2004); Gary Shapiro, *Archeologies of Vision: Faoucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Gary Shapiro, *Nietzsche's Earth: Great Events, Great Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016).

⁵ Cf. Diego van Vacano, *The Art of Power: Machiavelli, Nietzsche and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

by doing just anything either good or bad (cf. Isa 41:18-23). The meaning of the action is found only in its performance. And the performance will be the actual demonstration of the being of the subject. The gods of the nations remained mute, they did nothing, and that sealed them off from the status of being anything. This is why in biblical tradition the gods of the nations are only idols. They are nothing, because they do nothing. To Nietzsche, the will to power in moving oneself to action, any action at all makes the difference in the world of things. The essence of men and women as agents of random action in Nietzsche's world remained the fulfilment of their purpose or worth. Morality is not built or discerned in the quality of the action nor it is even a vital aspect of the consequence of living. To those who situate life mainly within the essence of freedom as creativity set themselves free to do anything without any interest to its moral or social value. The presence of self in space and time is enough to saturate life with the movement of the agent. This turns the world upside down from being a particular journey of actual sense to the disorientation of life from within itself to random actions. No one can see the true essence of life in endless freedom. This is the unleashing of chaos from within into the limitless space of the world of space and time. The human self, evaporates into the thin air of interest. This is the new turn of creativity into the age of desire, interest and fantasy. This is the maturity of modernity into the different cities or worlds from within.⁶

⁶ Cf. Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000). In his reflection on being human and the structuring of cities and civilizations Ward explains that, "The city is humankind's most sophisticated image of order: social order promoting personal order, and both concomitant with cosmic order. In the collection of the city there are so many histories-of founders and buildings, of families and highways; histories of personal, spiritual and material. Cities are both planned and lived, developed and experienced" (p. 2). He goes further to express his concerns for the contemporary city saying, "The concerns of this book lie with the contemporary city. Insofar as that city inherits a geographical mapping and a monumentality from its past, insofar as that city has been shaped by past theological understandings and imaginings of what significance of cities has been and is; insofar as walking through the present city is a passing through the time-frames, spacings and ideologies of the city that constitute the conceptual oxygen we breath whilst walking- then this book reviews that past. But the dominant concern of the book lie with living in the contemporary city, and what that means theologically" (p. 2).

Everyone to his or her own tent (my apologies to the historians of Israel).

The similitude and simulacra of the endless desire pushes the human being into the secular age without reason.⁷ The most dangerous factor that Hannah Arendt mentioned as the key to the crimes of Adolf Eichmann was thoughtlessness.⁸ This is the lost of the true essence of the self as the constituted agency of being which is expressed through meaningful actions and not random and tasteless decisions. The thoughtlessness of Eichmann in Arendt's analysis did not reduce him to being a monster. His actions of killing millions of people in the Nazi era heightened the temptation to consider him an incarnation of evil, the prime evil itself. But then his actions as the random movement of self, according to set orders of his controller has made him a typical example of the new human being of the secular age. The human being of the secular age adheres to the religion of self. The self is the god of the human which he or she has recreated in their own image. From their life and actions, God is no longer Almighty as the free agent of divine action and that is worthy of distinctive recognition and worship, but rather the human person has turned himself or herself as the almighty who now assumes power over God. This is the move back to the age of primitivism where the human being is no longer liberated from the slaving claws of the gods.

The advent of the new age into the world of new desires and interest strips men and women of their given freedom and dignity into the new slave mentality of mythical servitude. The idea of religious movement from *cultus corporis* into *cultus privatus* has rendered the new human being into a god and the

⁷ Ward explains that, "Utopian civic structures are crossed by a medieval politics of oppression, the future technopolis by the nationalism and imperialism of the past. The twenty-hour day is divided into two working shifts of ten hours; the clock and the great rotation cogs of industrialism dictates production. Power, paranoia, hysteria, madness-are viewed as the other, repressed side of the sharp-edged city with its geometric surfaces...." (p. 31). In the modern secular world, cities are turned into something else, they are "radically eclectic places where each pursues his or her own consumer interests under the ever-watchful eye of surveillance cameras read to pinpoint when radical difference flares up into riot" (p. 28).

⁸ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Publishing, 2006).

chief priest. The rise of individualism from the general era of human self-discovery through science has redirected the self to go not only outside God but also outside itself. The interest of being free and creative now turns the human being into another object and not only the subject of action. The distance in the new age of living without reasoning and life without true religion has become the enslaving technic that keeps the new human being as a slave of interest into the fantasy world of the mythical. In this world there is no salvation, and with these gods there is no essence or purpose or order or destiny, everything begins and ends in a meaningless fantasy. Life lived in shadows now gives momentary texture that makes the human being subservient to anything that attracts his or her attention regardless of their quality of either being good or bad, useful or useless. The sense of creative interest has reduced the idea of freedom to any kind of choice, once the choice is made it is assumed that the human being has achieved a certain purpose and leaves the actual self, the inner being open and ruptured from within, deserted and hungry of meaning and divine filling. The powers of the new world of secular freedom are driven by a force that is from outside the self which insidiously moves the self into a new mentality of self-loss and enslavement in the guise of new power and new interest. This is the Judas syndrome that I will now turn to explain.

WHAT ABOUT THE JUDAS' SYNDROME AND THE SECULAR AGE?

The Judas imagery here is from the historic person who was sometime the disciple of Jesus on the streets of Galilee and Jerusalem. Judas was one of the disciples that were trusted to be useful agents among the Jesus followers to be able to take care of others. But inwardly, Judas had a new agenda, his interest was not the obedience of the voice of his master but rather the actualization of his own personal interest. The only useful will for him was that from which he can benefit. Judas Iscariot grew to be the symbol of betrayal, ingratitude, selfishness, deceit, self-made evil, and self-destroyed agency. The Judas' syndrome can be explained as the inner human desire for power and freedom for the actualization of self-interest.

Firstly, Judas opened his heart to the devil which is the evil spirit of deceit and falsehood (Luke 22:3; John 13:27). The devil filled Judas of himself and moved Judas beyond himself. The irrationality of Judas was not only the result of human ignorance, thoughtlessness, or forgetfulness. But rather it is the manifestation of the maturity of the self to explore other boundaries beyond the given boundaries of God's will and desire. The human freedom to go on life-adventure became lose to test the waters of interest and pride beyond the bounds of reason and the purpose of life.

Secondly, Judas went to the chief priests and bargained with them (Matt. 26:14-16). This syndrome in him was instrumental in moving him to change company. He has been with Jesus for more than three years, he heard the message of Jesus as he announced the dawn of the Kingdom of God and how he subverts the powers of evil and the powers of Roman empire. Instead of Judas to remain resolute to the new transformative and liberating revolution of Jesus, he allowed himself to wander off to a strange place, to meet with the enemies of the vision of Jesus in order to actualize his self-interest.

Thirdly, he asked them what they could offer him (Matt. 26:15). Judas presented his heart to the chief priest as that which was bent on betrayal at a price. Money answers everything, the saying goes. Judas could not discern the danger of money and wealth from Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. He could also not discern the value of loving God over wealth in Jesus' approval and acclamation of the nameless widow who gave all her savings for the sake of fulfilling the will and interest of God and not self. Judas first betrayed himself before he betrayed Jesus. Judas sold himself cheaply into the endless market world of interest that knows no value for self, God and world. The value of money, silver and gold has replaced for him the value of trust, friendship, communion, love, forgiveness, and glory. Judas reduced himself to the symbol of self-greed, self-interest, and self-destruction in his quest for vain glory.

Fourthly, Judas collected the money and gave them the signs to identify Jesus in the thickness of the darkness (Matt. 26:48). Judas loved money more than Jesus. This is the essence of the Judas' syndrome. This is the bane of all people who embrace

the tempting sounds and sights of the secular age and its new religion of power and wealth.

This idea of the Judas' syndrome plays out more often than not in different selves and organizations where money rules beyond reason, faith, sense and good desire/interest. Money is the essence of selfish interest. People agree to do whatever they would be paid from. The value of money has replaced the value of life, God and religion in our time. This has in one way or another been played out often than not in and through the different engagement and entertainments that we crave, give and receive. The human worth is now in how much they own or how much they can give. This has been the leading factor at the 2024 Paris Olympic games opening ceremony which presents a show that ironically generated countless emotional outrage and the expression of anger more visibly than approval and enjoyment. It aroused more of chaos and division than the structured unity and solidarity that was possibly meant. The ironic reigned more than the admiration or the enjoyment. This certainly came from the Christian religious groups of the world who watched and other religious faiths who wanted to stand in solidarity for the sanctity of the central tradition of Christianity and religion in general.

In the following section, I will present the brief report of the Olympic games opening ceremony presentation and the kind of outrage it generated in the aftermath which is still an ongoing debate (as at the time of writing).

THE PARIS OLYMPIC OPENING CEREMONY AND ITS AFTERMATH

Yan Zhuang from the *New York Times* explains the Paris Olympic games opening ceremony in the following brief account, saying, "In the performance broadcast during the ceremony, a woman wearing a silver, halo-like headdress stood at the center of a long table, with drag queens posing on either side of her. Later, at the same table, a giant cloche lifted, revealing a man, nearly naked and painted blue, on a dinner

plate surrounded by fruit. He broke into a song as, behind him, the drag queens danced.”⁹

This kind of depiction easily brings to mind the case of the journalist of *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper who was killed by Islamic extremists in France because he presented a depiction of the Prophet of Islam. To him it was only an art work, but to Muslims around the world it was a serious disrespect to their prophet. In like manner a similar magazine depiction problem of the prophet of Islam happened in Denmark by a cartoonist. These and many similar depictions aroused the whole world to serious religious protest and even killings of people in the name of protecting of the Islamic religion. From such events and more devotions to religious ideas Miroslav Volf explains how religion or faith is very deep and indispensable to people’s life and cultures around the world.¹⁰ Similarly, the Paris Olympic depiction became a very emotion arousing depiction which made many Christians around the world and from many denominations or traditions to react quickly and angrily by condemning such dramatization and what he saw as ridiculing of the Christian sacred tradition of the Last Supper of Jesus Christ.

I surveyed few newspaper articles in which many people displayed their heartfelt disagreement and concern over the Paris event.¹¹ According to Jonathan Tobin: “What was shown was a fairly obvious parody of Leonardo Da Vinci’s ‘Last Supper,’ featuring a plus-sized, halo-clad woman described by admirers as an ‘LGBTQ icon’ surrounded by drag queens in the attitudes of the Christian apostles, as well as a scantily clad man in blue paints and others in various states of exposure.”¹²

⁹ Cf. Yan Zhuang, “An Olympics Scene Draws Scorn. Did It Really Parody ‘The Last Supper?’” *The New York Times* Published July 28, 2024, Updated July 30, 2024. Accessed August 4, 2024.

¹⁰ Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

¹¹ I will only make reference to the articles either by name of by author’s name, these are online articles with no page number, thus I will not mention pages on my source entry.

¹² Jonathan S. Tobin, editor-in-chief of JNS (Jewish News Syndicate) July 29, JNS, 2024). (cf. “The Last Supper” performance at the opening

He also complains that, “In this manner, a sacred scene of Christianity was held up for ridicule.” “What makes this outrage all the more insufferable and troubling is that it was included in an event that is supposed to transcend not just politics and world affairs, but also to bring us all together in one global community to cheer for excellence and fair competition.” Apart from the “bad taste” and “disrespect” to Christianity, “...the networks that run it and the sponsors that pay for it are telling us that they share the organizers’ derision for one faith that is associated with Western culture.”

This is demonstration of the new world order within a maturing secular religion in which “Christians are obviously not welcome, and that should trouble everyone, whether or not the share this faith.” Tobin concludes that, “The war on the West is as much a war on Jews as it is on Christians.” In as much as group culture wars or marginalization actions are carried out with less regards to actual sense of love and respect to the other, it should be clear here that Christianity, Judaism and the Western life and cultures are not the same. This is the most dangerous ideological understanding of Muslims around the world, many think that whatever the West does is in the favour of Christianity or it may be the depiction of Christian life or religious identity. Christianity has its foundation in Jewish Old Testament religion. The Judaism of Jesus day and the Apostolic era was a serious contravention of the Old Testament law of love for God and neighbour, thus it was subverted and rejected by Jesus Christ. Jesus came in the flesh as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial order in order to make peace between humanity and God. The rebellion of humankind found its resolution in Jesus who came as the Way and the Door back to God the Father and the harmony of humanity within themselves and also with the whole of creation (cf. Joh 10, 14). In like manner, Jesus is still the mediator between God and the Jews and Christians and everyone who looks up to him and obeys his call to salvation and rest (Matt. 11:28) but Jesus is not the cultural product of the West. Christianity is neither a Jewish nor a Western religion, Christianity is instead the religious understanding and life that demonstrates the revelation of God in the human flesh for the sake of reconciling

human beings and all of creation to God. The church is the presence of Christ in community, thus the sanctified community of God's love and grace, which shines as light to the whole world. Contempt to the West is not contempt to Christianity. Nevertheless, Christianity is open to every culture and context in the world because of its cosmic nature and textures. Yet, there is no need to reduce it to a cultural phenomenon when in actual fact it is a spiritual dimension of reality.

On further reactions in anger, dissatisfaction and rebuke from Christian leaders around the world, it should be noted that Rt. Rev. Stefan Oster said that "the depiction of a 'queer Last Supper' had marked a 'low point' in the otherwise impressive opening ceremony."¹³ "Among the Anglican reactions, the Bishop of Worcester, Dr. John Inge, condemned the 'Festivity' scene as 'unnecessary and highly offensive,' adding in a post on X that 'the secular elite would not dream of mocking other faiths in this dreadful manner.'"

From Asia, "The United Christian Churches of Korea joined the global protests, however, expressing "anger and disappointment' at the attack on Christianity." They saw the display of vulgarism and the violation of the spirit of "tolerance."

France's Orthodox Bishop said it was offensive to Christians in France and beyond, "questioning their country's foundations of faith."

From the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the point is, "The opening ceremony scenes, it said, would offend 'every civilized person who recognizes the right to faith and respects religious symbols.'" The WCC's General Secretary the Revd Professor Jerry Pillay, wrote in a letter to the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Thomas Bach saying, "The Last Supper is essential to Christian beliefs and practice, and any form of misguided message is clearly unacceptable, and, worst still, any expressions of mockery of what Christians

¹³ Jonathan Luxmoore, "Citation of Dijon painting fails to defuse Christian anger over French Olympic 'Last Supper' *tableau*." *Church Times* July 31, 2024. Accessed August 4, 2024.

hold sacred and deeply theological shows the highest form of disrespect and insensitivity.”¹⁴

The President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Revd Dr. Frederick Brent Leatherwood also sent a letter to Thomas Bach (the IOC President as above) in which he says, “Regrettably, an obscene image made its way into billions of homes around the globe last week where families had gathered to watch the start of the Olympics. Of course, I am speaking of the scene in the opening ceremony depicting Leonardo da Vinci’s rendering of the ‘Last Supper’ featuring LGBTQ activist Barbara Butch and a host of drag performers and dancers.”¹⁵ He continues that, “Christians around the world have raised an uproar about the inappropriate spectacle.” He then concludes his letter by saying, “President Bach, please lead the IOC to uphold the values of respect and morality that it claims to support. My team and I at the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission are willing to aid in helping your organization to identify religious scholars and experts to ensure this type of mockery never happens again.”

From the Vatican, Pope Francis sent a letter to the Archbishop of Paris, Laurent Ulrich giving his blessings and good hopes for the Paris Olympics in which he said, “The Olympic Games, if they remain truly “games”, can therefore be an exceptional meeting place between peoples, even of the most hostile.” He further added, “I therefore hope that the Paris Olympics will be an unmissable opportunity for all those who come from around the world to discover and appreciate each other, to break down prejudices, to foster esteem where there is contempt and mistrust, and friendship where there is hatred. The Olympic Games are, by their very nature, about peace, not war.”¹⁶

From Zhuang’s report “The event’s planners and organizers have denied that the sequence was inspired by ‘The Last

¹⁴ Cf. Jerry Pillay, A Letter International Olympic Committee, Geneva, July, 29, 2024.

¹⁵ Cf. Frederick Brent Leatherwood, A Letter to Thomas Bach, *The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention*, July 29, 2024.

¹⁶ Cf. “Message of the Holy Father for the Olympic Games 19, July, 2024. *From Saint John Lateran*, 27 June, 2024. Accessed 6th August, 2024.

Supper”, or that it intended to mock or offend.”¹⁷ The Olympic Games spokesperson Anne Decamps explains and apologizes that they meant no “disrespect to any religious group” and that they were “sorry” to whoever takes “offence” at their performance. They were not trying to mock Christianity or anything sacred. They said that they were inspired by Dionysius at a marriage banquet.

“THE FEAST OF THE GODS”

Jonathan Luxmoore found an explanation that, “A Dutch art historian, Walther Schoonenberg, said in a weekend post on X that he believed that the scene had been based on *The Feast of the Gods*, painted in the 1640s by Jan van Bijlert, depicting Dionysus, Apollo, Poseidon, Minerva, and other Ancient Greek divinities.”¹⁸

Some Christians are only outraged for their lack of good knowledge of history especially that of ancient Greek myths etc. But from the WCC letter issued by Prof. Pillay he rejoins that, “We are mindful that responses have been made public that the references to that scene is to depict Jan Harmensz van Biijlert’s ‘The Feast of the Gods’ (1635)- the Olympians gods celebrating the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, with Apollo (not Jesus) crowned at the center of the table and Dionysus in the foreground. However, it is unthinkable and questionable that the organisers of the Paris Olympics did not give any consideration to the similarities to the Last Supper and the controversy it was bound to raise among Christians and other people of faith.” From a theological-historical perspective, I must raise the question that why must there be similarities between the feast of the Gods and the feast of Jesus to his disciples? Surely one subverts the other! is there any quest or prophetic expectation from nature that found expression and fulfilment in the Last Supper event of Jesus and his disciples?

¹⁷ Yan Zhuang, “An Olympics Scene Draws Scorn. Did It Really Parody ‘The Last Supper’?” *The New York Times* Published July 28, 2024, Updated July 30, 2024. Accessed August 4, 2024.

¹⁸ Cf. Jonathan Luxmoore, “Citation of Dijon painting fails to defuse Christian anger over French Olympic ‘Last Supper’ *tableau*.” *Church Times* July 31, 2024. Accessed August 4, 2024.

These are open questions that I think should stimulate further theological-historical research and reflections.

From Tobin's point of view, "What is offensive is the idea that there is idealism involved, even if Olympian hypocrisy about amateurism is a thing of the past. The notion that the Olympics transcend politics has always been a myth." Two main points are clear from these explorations that constitute the problem and outrage of the Olympic ceremony, and these two things are insensitivity and politics. Every action is a text, thus what is the message that the Olympic recent text presents to the world on behalf of the West, humanity, politics and religion?

THE IRONY AND THE CULTURE OF NEW SECULAR RELIGION

The new secular religion begins and ends in the belief in freedom. This is freedom of the self. Freedom that is self-defined and self-determined. In relation to the ideas of Feuerbach and Nietzsche this sense of freedom is the best religion that can ever be in the experience of man. No human being is expected to believe in freedom for God's sake for the sake of another person. The belief in freedom is meant only for one's self and for the sake of the actualization of self-interest and freedom. This is what Immanuel Kant has presented to the world of European Enlightenment as the autonomy of human reason. Although he was known for the critique of pure reason. Kant was a connoisseur of human reason. His ideas led to the high points of Hegel's dialectics of reason for the sake of the human discernment and creativity of a new world order. This is the new religion without religion. This came to be at the dawn of the new world after the so-called "death of God" philosophy. It still continues as a secular order, a religious one at that because of its root in certain belief systems of life in nature and outside nature and even over nature. The triumph of humanity over nature is the new height of the achievement of the scientific world. For man to begin to live he first must conquer nature to release himself or herself from perpetual captivity. But the irony still remains the human dependence to nature will never be overcome. The nature of life in nature and throughout the history of human existence is that of dependence and not independence. It will be much better if we learn to doctrine of coexistence, cooperation, or interdependency. The brutality of human beings over nature is what ecotheology and philosophy

seek to address. Left to themselves human beings in the new age of science and the era of religion without religion is to continually be the master of life and nature in determinism and consumption.

The new culture or lifestyle that merges from the secular age is that of an irony of a new religion that claims to be no religion. Its denial of the existence of God is only a wishful abstraction which at best makes a longtime promise to answer the question of science and solve the puzzle of the ambiguity of life in the world. But what continually be the experience of human beings every now and then is the impossibility of the negation of the reality of God no matter how much the idea is set aside. The theoretical model of phenomenology only helps to try to make distinction as to the intended being of God as God and the identification of the no-gods as nothing divine at all. The movement of life back to the stage of nature to many is the most elemental idea of living a free life without God to fear, and no judgment to expect. The natural state of things does not exclude the reality of God. Even nature is the gift of God. Nature itself is supernatural. It came be by the command of the God of creation. Thus nature itself is helpless in the hands of the living God. This is an irony not for nature, but for those who belief in nature as that which excludes or negates the being of God. Nature in other words is given as symbolic text of the being of God. Every true interpretation of nature leads to the mystery of the presence of God. This is the beginning and the end of irony in the modern world. It may not be news to note that the human man of freedom has not and cannot escape the reality of God.

Perhaps this kind of irony as a twist in reality when the tables are always turning against settled expectations and/or fix intentions remains the reason why the Olympic artist played the drama to the gods. It is ironic that the display has nothing in its historic context to do with games. It was meant for a feast. Surely the pile of fruit in front of blue painted and singing Philippe Katerine may conjure the spirit of feasting; feasting with the gods, but then to see the connection directly to sport remains a puzzle. Nevertheless, everything can be discussed on the platform of modern entertainment, in order to help relax the minds of those who want to watch the Olympics to feel uplifted and free in their spirits to enjoy the modern. Sadly, the ironic turn of things happened to many minds, certainly not all. The

depictions evoked more public disgust and anger from religious and cultural perspectives than the initial relaxation and happiness that were actually intended.

Barbara Butch sat at the center of the table and presided in such a way that many who watched later interpreted that as her dramatization of Jesus at the table with his disciples. She was ironically badly insulted and threatened instead of being welcomed and praised for her actions. The so-called DEI (i.e. diversity, equity and inclusion) which was meant to be the culture of the new world for global unity and togetherness in plurality turned out to be a case for religious contempt and the display of secular arrogance and flirtation with fetish festival and primitivism mythology. The preparatory message of Pope Francis for the self-discovery and appreciation of people in their diversity was terribly neglected and the vulgarity of self-interest and self-religion of entertainment took the center stage. The joy of the Pope turned to sadness just at the beginning of the ceremony. His voice of depth of wisdom and respect was turned to disrespect and utter contempt. Nobody was willing to listen to the Pope. The floor was made available only to those who want to play and dance and sing any song of their interest in order to while away the time and to display the maturity of the modern world into nudity and human whimpishness.

Good entertainment came from events that communicate virtues or attune the mind to feel free into the healthy world of imagination. This was why high Lords and Kings kept clowns in their palaces and homes, but in the case of the Olympics “the clowns are not funny.”¹⁹ The clowns at the Olympics ironically turned exclusively vulgar in their depiction of imageries that were directly appalling to their spectators. The clowns could see their own points but could not see the joy and freedom that those ideas made. Everything turned dismay and confusion at the threshold. This is the irony of the modern world. Entertainment that only turns painful and long in its texture and hardly crafted to win the applause of its spectators. No doubt some enjoyed everything like the flash of lightening. Those who might say they enjoyed might have only been

¹⁹ Jonathan Luxmoore, “Citation of Dijon painting fails to defuse Christian anger over French Olympic ‘Last Supper’ *tableau*.” *Church Times* July 31, 2024. Accessed August 4, 2024.

entertained by the colours and the collection of artists that sat or surrounded the table but surely not clearly in tune with the ancient history or the mystical dynamics of the entire show. The clowns were not funny, they said, they were only frightening and boring.

In the explanation of the spokesperson the play was not meant to show disrespect to any religion but sadly it did. When I watched the exchange of ideas between Piers Morgan and Cenk Uygur the idea that Christians have lost their sense of humour was the point that took the stage.²⁰ Morgan complained sadly as a Catholic that he was offended by the show but Uygur saw nothing wrong with it. Morgan pressed further and ask what could have happened if any imagery of Islamic religion is used in such a public comedy (?). He was met with long silence from Uygur because ironically Christian history and sacred imageries can be misused for public entertainment but certainly not Islamic. Islam is now more respected and protected by modernists whether they are religious or not.

According to Prof. Pillay of the WCC this display evoked anger and “controversy among Christians and people of other faiths.” In my view, I am more worried about the reactions of “people of other faiths” and those who claim to be none religious. It may be said that we are all in a free world in which everyone can do what he or she likes. But the idea of human right is not the idea of privilege but responsibility. Human sense of care and sensitivity should be at the heart of human right. No human being has the right to trample on the rights of others. The rights of others must be morally and socially useful for them to qualify as rights that will lead to useful engagement and the communication of goodness. People of other faiths here will at best think less of Christianity as an unserious religion. The display of nudity is a self-deconstruction from the world of honour and shame. The depiction of many ladies or girls taking over the table is a clear display of the horror of matriarchal future domination and the social estrangement of men. The social ethics of welcoming is now reduced to marginalization-game of the modern world. In either the depiction of a Christian

²⁰ Cf. Piers Morgan, “Nobody Cares She’s Black. She’s Terrible!” *Destiny vs. Officer Tatum vs. Cenk Uygur*. On Piers Morgan Uncensored. YouTube. Accessed 4th August, 2024.

similar symbolic tradition or the replay of an ancient mythical wedding feast, what counts is the social, moral and spiritual interest of the others and not self.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to end by making reference to two of Paul's rules for moral and spiritual ethics which will help us to be able to navigate the labyrinth of the modern age of secular religion of desire and fantasy.

Firstly, to the Church at Corinth Paul said, "If eating meat will cause my brother to sin" (1 Cor. 8:12-13 cf. Rom 14:21). This is said in light of the interpersonal debt of love that all believers in Christ should have for one another. The life of the other is more than mine (Phil. 2:1-4). No one should be willing to sacrifice the sanctity of the life of his brother or sister in the name of his or her own personal freedom. Christian freedom is collective and it can be profitable when all believers see one another as loving friends and free family members, no one is lord over any, but all are free children of the household and free citizens of the Kingdom of God. It is only in conscious and compassionate freedom that Christians can live above the power of the spirit of the time.

Secondly, Paul also said, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is profitable" (1 Cor. 6:12). He said this in his address to the Corinthians whom he knew as people of pleasure and sense of self-freedom. They had the interest of trampling over each other for the sake of the personal interest of a few. The context then was like what we have now in the shadow of the empire whose interest is more on its economic power and materialistic enjoyment. Every kind of entertainment is welcome as long as it fulfilled the fantasy of the mind. The soul may be impoverished in the name of the pursuit of cultural pleasures and social interest. The spiritual is not the core, that is why the carnality of the church became so evident and the ruin thereof also eminent.

In the case of the Olympics, we can lower our emotions and cool our temper by saying it is after all an entertainment. Just a show. Yet, deep within us feeling the guilt of the dishonour that we have done to ourselves and our traditions. In this case the

tradition of loving God above all else and loving our neighbour as ourselves. What is left for us is not only gloomy analysis of a known tragicomedy, but the ongoing discernment of the meaning of religion in a secular modernity, and the distinctions between worship and mere entertainment, or the cross and the stylus.

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