

Redeeming Jesus: Reading Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According  
to Jesus Christ* as Parable

Samuel Smith

Messiah College, Fall 2000

When the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago received the Nobel Prize in Literature in the Fall of 1998, the Nobel committee identified Saramago as a novelist “who with parables sustained by imagination, compassion and irony continually enables us once again to apprehend an elusory reality.” As many readers recognize a certain allegorical cast and potential in much of Saramago’s fiction, and as many ancient, especially biblical, parables have been presented or interpreted in an allegorical fashion, the remarks from the Nobel committee in Stockholm make a certain kind of sense with respect to Saramago’s fiction. But I believe that Saramago’s fiction, and especially *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, reads parabolically in another sense—in fact, that sense perhaps suggested by the Nobel committee’s phrase “to apprehend an elusory reality.” In this essay I wish to identify this parabolic character in Saramago’s most controversial novel. In the opening section I present Saramago’s parable, giving myself over to complete sympathy with his understanding of religion and his representation of Jesus. Until you experience and feel the power of Saramago’s fiction and the poignancy of his critique of Christian dogma, I don’t think you can adequately respond to his challenge to communities embracing Christian religious faith. In the closing section of this essay I will offer some personal reflections on Saramago’s insightful parable which I have shared with my students when we have read his text together at Messiah College.

## I

A prominent New Testament scholar has claimed that “parable is always a somewhat unnerving experience,” and that a listener’s response will often be something like “I don’t know what you mean by that story, but I certainly don’t like it” (Crossan 39). I suggest that readers who identify themselves with some form of traditional, orthodox Christianity<sup>1</sup> will experience Saramago’s fiction as a parable as parable is described by John Dominic Crossan in *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story*. According to Crossan, parable is that genre which “subvert[s] the world created in and by myth” (42), the kind of story that challenges *conventional* orthodox understandings and behaviors from within. For Crossan, myth is the dominant story/ideology through which a people understand themselves and their history. Myth provides a reconciliation between conflicting perspectives and realities. Parable “shows us the seams and edges of myth” (38), revealing the constructedness of a dominant story/ideology and creating “irreconciliation where before there was reconciliation” (38). And parable is “story grown self-conscious and self-critical” (40), disposing it to a reflexivity we now often associate with postmodern texts. Parable is an essentially deconstructive genre which is open-ended, satisfied with the exposure of an aporia, leaving reconstruction to the hearers/readers. In subverting myth, parable offers “the reverse of what the hearer expects” (50), generating both hermeneutic desire and resistance in the listeners.

Perhaps Crossan’s most accessible example of this occurs in his reading of Jesus’ story about a man going down the road, a story more familiarly known as “The Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:30-35).<sup>2</sup> Crossan convincingly argues that the radical nature of Jesus’ story hinges on his choice of a Samaritan as the “hero” of the story; Samaritans are “socio-religious outcasts” for the Jewish audience listening to Jesus’ parable. The result is a story that shocks, probably even

offends, its audience, crossing and challenging their presupposition that Jews (good) do good and Samaritans (bad) do evil. Jesus reverses this, presenting a narrative in which a Samaritan enacts and inhabits the kingdom of God while pious Jews (priests and levites) remain outside the kingdom. If the audacity of Jesus' story is not apparent to you, consider Crossan's contemporary analogues for the story:

The storyteller is a priest in a Roman Catholic pulpit in Belfast. The wounded man "lived on the Falls Road," that is, obliquely, he was one of us. A member of the I.R.A. passed him by. So did a Catholic nun. A Protestant terrorist stopped and helped him. Fill out the details. What is the reaction of the hearers? Second story: The storyteller has just returned from Vietnam at the time when American soldiers were still fighting there and is on the evening news. The wounded person is a woman correspondent for NBC. Those who pass by without helping her are, first, an American Green Beret and second, a South Vietnamese soldier. She is saved, finally, by a guerilla fighting with the Viet Cong. Fill out the details. What viewer reactions will be mailed in to the station? (86-87)

As these analogues make clear, and as Crossan points out, if Jesus wanted to tell a story about loving your neighbor, he would have made the helpful figure a Jew. Instead, Jews get a story which suggests to them that their enemies are also good people who are capable of living the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> Understood in this way, Jesus' story is "an attack on the structure of expectation and not a story which inculcates assistance to those in distress although, of course, it takes absolutely for granted that assistance is required in such a case" (Crossan 87-88).

In Crossan's description of parable it is also important to recognize that

parable is not an antimyth, and it must be carefully distinguished from such. It is a story deliberately calculated to show the limitations of myth, to shatter world so that its relativity becomes apparent. It does not, as parable, replace one myth with another. Like satire, parable keeps us humble by reminding us of limit. Like satire, parable is intrinsically negative. It is in fact the dark night of story, but precisely therein and thereby can it prepare us for the experience of transcendence. (42-43)

I wish to argue that this is precisely what Saramago's *Gospel* does, exposing the limitations of orthodox Christian myth, humbling us as Christians, and "preparing us for the experience of transcendence." Succinctly, Saramago's narrative negotiates a position between belief and unbelief in orthodox Christianity (epistemologically) which opens the possibility for profound belief (existentially).<sup>4</sup> And he primarily achieves this by telling a gospel story which crosses and transgresses our expectations for a life of Jesus, much as the parables of Jesus crossed and transgressed the moral and religious expectations of his listeners.

Saramago begins his gospel with a lesson reminding us that we have been trained to see and to read in particular ways. We begin reading *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* only to find ourselves "looking" at what must be an early Renaissance engraving which depicts an all too familiar scene: the crucifixion of Jesus. Saramago's narrator deftly draws us into this picture, repeatedly confirming our "knowledge," our ability to recognize or determine the identity and

passions of the various figures appearing in the engraving. But we also discover that despite our thorough training in how to read the crucifixion scene we can be mistaken, especially when we must negotiate and distinguish between four women who are all named Mary. Indeed, we find we must change our minds about which woman is the Magdalene; our initial prejudice focused on a low-cut dress enclosing an ample bosom, but a second prejudice turns us away from that certain sign to another “more” certain sign--long, disheveled *blond* hair. Saramago is demonstrating, of course, that we have all been trained to see, view, read, understand life and the story of Jesus in a particular way. How can he challenge our deeply engraved predispositions to view Jesus in some particular (orthodox) fashion? Is it possible, unless we can also be made aware of the extent to which our view of Jesus is an interpretation of a representation of an interpretation of a representation of an *event* open to differing representations and interpretations? Saramago reminds us that we have not a gospel, but *gospels*.

In this instance, Saramago effects a parabolic fissure in an apparently stable interpretation of an old story by marking a solitary, marginal figure in the engraving and revising him--*the figure in the engraving we have the fewest assumptions about*--in a way that splits open the lens of our vision, opening our seeking eyes still wider to light. We realize now that Saramago's gospel will be a miracle gospel, giving the blind something more than sight and the deaf something more than hearing. The marginal figure is a man who is walking away from the crucifixion, carrying a staff and a bucket. Our best habitual surmise is that this is the man who offered Jesus the sponge filled with vinegar and water in order to slake his thirst. The narrator informs us that this man has been unjustly maligned, “accused of having given Jesus vinegar out of spite and contempt when he asked for water, but the truth is that he offered him vinegar and water because at that time it was one of the best ways of quenching thirst” (7). We discover the

“true” identity of this man, according to this gospel, at the end of the novel, which is this gospel’s crucifixion scene. And we only discern the identity of this figure by way of a small clue not included in the engraving (because the head of John the disciple blocks our view--a characteristic touch on Saramago’s part): a small bowl left at the foot of the cross.

After we’ve read this text, and this gospel is a text, we realize that the man with the bucket and staff is Pastor, an enigmatic shepherd who mentors the young Jesus for four years after the death of his father, Joseph. As readers of this gospel we often find ourselves uncertain as to whether Pastor is an angel, the devil, or something else. Pastor tries to teach Jesus a way of life that honors life, one which refuses to shed the blood of innocents for religious gain, whether these be children in Bethlehem or passover lambs at Jerusalem. Jesus begins to follow in this way, marked by his refusal to sacrifice his own lamb at Passover (the analogy is obvious to readers of other gospels). But Jesus finally falls subject to his previous and more deeply-rooted synagogue training. Encountering Jehovah in the form of a pillar of smoke in the middle of the desert, Jesus gives in to this deity’s demand that he sacrifice the very sheep he had earlier spared. When he returns to Pastor and tells him what he has done, and how he has become God’s son, Pastor dismisses him with the remark “you’ve learned nothing.” Jesus encounters Pastor once more before his crucifixion when Jesus, Jehovah, and Pastor have a forty-day conversation in a boat in the middle of a mist-covered sea in Galilee (I have more to say about this encounter later). Here Pastor takes Jesus’s bowl and promises to return it when it will fulfill its purpose, which turns out to be to collect the blood of Jesus as it falls from his crucified body. The marginal figure with the bucket and the staff in the engraving turns out to be Pastor, who has returned to perform one final compassionate deed toward this most “innocent” lamb, Jesus. Jesus “merits” this compassion because he had, but without success, tried to die as someone

other than God's divine son. The effect of reading Saramago's parabolic gospel is such that when we return to the engraving, or to the other gospels, we read the story of Jesus quite differently. In fact, we can never read the same gospel--we have renewed vision, perhaps a more ethical vision, with which we make sense of the execution of Jesus and determine a meaning for his life in relation to our own.

Saramago relies on a number of other subversive writing strategies for effecting a new gospel about Jesus as parable. To begin with, the reader discovers quickly that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is not told by Jesus at all--the novel's title cannot be reconciled with its narrative: we receive this tale from an omniscient narrator, whose voice is patient, compassionate, understanding, intelligent, skeptical, and given to irony. And the narrator is clearly our contemporary, often inviting our complicity with the use of the first-person plural: "As everyone knows, when women are pregnant, they are given to strange cravings and flights of fancy, some of them worse than those of Mary, which *we* shall not betray lest *we* tarnish the reputation of this mother-to-be" (Saramago 27, my emphasis). Saramago's narrator forces us to remember that we lack that which we most require if we wish to have certainty about the person and life of Jesus: a narrative from Jesus himself.<sup>5</sup> Crossan quotes Ben Belitt (who is speaking of the parables of Borges and Kafka) identifying the wisdom of parables as a wisdom which serves "what might be called an epistemology of *loss*. Their value, as knowledge, is to enhance our 'consciousness of ignorance' . . ." (Crossan 60). This is precisely what Saramago's Jesus fiction does: makes us aware/conscious of how little we really know (about) Jesus while purportedly filling us in on the numerous significant details of his life and mind.

Another way in which Saramago's gospel crosses our expectations is that the first half of the novel is given over to the life, thoughts, and anguish of the young Joseph, the father of Jesus.

There is an illuminating darkness in this part of the narrative as Joseph finds himself burdened with the heavy imposition of a moral struggle resulting from what could be identified as his obedience to the incorrigible will of God. This moral struggle “inadvertently” results in the “accidental” crucifixion of Joseph at age 33. He is removed from his cross by the twelve year old Jesus and his mother. The effect on the young Jesus is, as we might expect, profound. While this event shocks the reader, as the fulfillment of an intense inner moral struggle (why didn’t Joseph go warn the people of Bethlehem instead of running off with Mary and Jesus right away? how can Joseph not be responsible for the deaths of those children?) Joseph’s crucifixion is subversively faithful to the spirit of the canonical gospels, especially that of Matthew.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, Jesus preternaturally shares his father’s guilt in his own dreams, and when he realizes the guilt his father carried for the past twelve years, he takes it for his own. This, of course, prefigures what Jesus’ “Heavenly Father” will ask of him, and it suggests the unusual way in which Saramago will insistently position himself between belief and unbelief, as he emphasizes the way the gospel of Matthew privileges ethical behavior and action over belief and knowledge, the possibility that *doing* the will of God may be married to *disbelief* in the will of God.<sup>7</sup> I will return later to the ethical issue raised here, as I believe it is Saramago’s most insistent theme, his primary concern--exposing the failing reconciliation offered by Christian orthodoxies between Jesus and their images of God (or God-constructs).<sup>8</sup>

Third, while many of the events narrated in Saramago’s *Gospel* are faithful to events narrated in canonical gospels, making his Jesus quite recognizable to orthodox readers, Saramago both “restores” omissions by those gospels and offers alternative accounts and motivations for those gospel events which he “faithfully” reinscribes (e.g. the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, the young Jesus discoursing in the temple, the resurrection--*under erasure*--of

Lazarus, etc.). The effect of these alternative accounts is to “show us the seams and edges of the [Christian] myth,” to create “irreconciliation where before there was reconciliation” (Crossan 38). Perhaps the most poignant example of this strategy is the subversive irony introduced by Saramago’s account of Jesus’s temptation in the desert wilderness. After spending four years as a shepherd, working with an older shepherd who we later discover is the Devil in disguise, Jesus encounters a very biblical manifestation of the Israelite God when he goes searching for his lost sheep. This God appears as a pillar of cloud and requires Jesus to sacrifice the sheep, which he had saved from certain death by sacrifice three years earlier. Jesus succumbs to this temptation, partly because he is so impressed by God’s appearance, partly because he cannot overcome thirteen years of religious training in the synagogue (this God requires absolute obedience, even if commanding slaughter), and partly because this God has promised him power and glory after his death. This particular scene identifies one of the primary motivations for Saramago’s parable: Saramago’s ethical difference with Jewish and Christian tradition. Saramago (and his narrator) cannot believe in a God for whom “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.” Or in a God who needs innocent children to die in order to prophetically signify the arrival of His Son. Or in a God who requires and destines so many violent deaths: the blood of the martyrs, innocents, and “enemies” of God--all human beings, all children from the womb of God and for whom God ought to have unqualified and unconditional compassion.

While these strategies counter our expectations as Christian readers, however, the challenge which most definitively (in Crossan’s sense) marks Saramago’s narrative as parable is this exposure of a traditional Christian God as an unethical and inadequate God. To be brief, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* presents to us a Jesus who is more ethical than the God who is supposed to be his Father according to orthodox tradition. To generate and sustain belief in God,

the patient, compassionate, generous, and intelligent narrator of Saramago's tale must identify and reject the ethically impoverished God implied by some orthodox readings of the canonical texts. This is the sense in which Saramago, if we can identify his feeling with his narrative voice, negotiates a space between belief and unbelief, between his will/desire to believe and the unbelievability (because unethical) of orthodox stories about Jesus as Christ. Yet Saramago's most surprising and effective paradox is that he must see his Jesus damned in order to redeem him. Clearly the villain in this gospel is the God who demands Jesus's sacrifice—Richard Preto-Rodas appropriately compares Him to “a Moloch-like figure who wreaks havoc as He pleases to affirm His absolute power” (15)—so He can have a larger piece—and perhaps the whole—of the world's religion/power pie. Dissatisfied with being a tribal deity with limited scope and power, Jehovah, using apparent supernatural power (perhaps a little mirrors and fog), manipulates Jesus into the role of atoning sacrifice. It does not matter that Jesus resists the use being made of him and that he views the meaning of his death differently: if anything, he can only atone for the sins of God, as he cries out on the cross that men must forgive God, “for He knows not what He has done” (377).<sup>9</sup> Thus Saramago's Jesus, for all his love, compassion, and ethical idealism cannot control how he is finally interpreted, constructed, and used by this God, by this orthodoxy. Jesus may have lived his life as a parable, but he is quickly domesticated as a new myth.<sup>10</sup>

This parabolic apex is the skeptical Saramago's most skeptical moment. But his apparent unbelief is strangely balanced not only by Jesus's own superior ethical understanding, but also by a striking moment in the narrative, as Jesus, Jehovah, and the Devil (ironically *and* fittingly—another parabolic reversal—named Pastor) sit in a fishing boat in the middle of the sea of Galilee negotiating the details for the end of Jesus and the beginning of Christianity. As the conversation curiously turns to the possibility of an eventual challenger to the dominance

anticipated by this particular God (Jewish) who wants to be a universal deity (Christian), something quite unexpected and precariously momentary occurs:

[Pastor, the devil, is speaking] No one in his right mind can possibly suggest that the devil was, is, or ever will be responsible for so much bloodshed and death, unless some villain brings up that wicked slander accusing me of having conceived the god who will oppose this one here. No, you are not to blame, and should anyone blame you, you need only reply that if the devil is false, he could not have created a true god. Who, then, will create this hostile god, asked Pastor. Jesus was at a loss for an answer, and God, who had been silent, remained silent, but a voice came down from the mist and said, Perhaps this God and the one to come are the same god. Jesus, God, and the devil pretended not to hear, but could not help looking at one another in alarm, mutual fear is like that, it readily unites enemies. (328-29)

The best candidate for this hostile god is Allah—a God whose followers have often presented him as being just as demanding of human blood and total world dominion as the god Saramago’s text exposes. But how do we identify the voice coming down from the mist? Is it possible that Saramago is pointing to a transreligious God at this moment, a Being similar to Paul Tillich’s “God behind God,” or God beyond God, i.e. the Real or Unnameable suggested by idol-constructs, signs worshipped as signifieds in churches, temples, mosques, cathedrals, and synagogues? If so, this would determine the parabolic character of Saramago’s fiction. His story prompts us to reconsider the orthodox story about Jesus as an atoning sacrifice and the unethical

and horrible violence funded by orthodox Christian religious traditions again and again throughout Church history. But Saramago does not offer this parable simply as an attack on Christian orthodoxy. Saramago's *Gospel* subverts orthodoxy in a way that makes belief in God possible, a belief which the violence of much orthodox interpretation inhibits, even prohibits, in ethically sensitive souls like those of Saramago's Jesus and his narrator.<sup>11</sup>

It is during this conversation (which lasts for 40 days) that Jesus learns from God that Joseph's overhearing of Herod's plan to slaughter Bethlehem's children and his subsequent neglecting to warn the parents of those children was all planned--to the detail--by God.<sup>12</sup> In short, Joseph, like Judas, performed the will of God to perfection and then found himself ground down into dust by the millstone of guilt. When Jesus realizes he must die as God has planned and considers the suffering that will follow for centuries to come as a result of this, he tries to insure a different interpretation of his death and of his person by identifying himself as King of the Jews. It is an effort to die as just another Jewish political threat to Rome, hoping to deflect any identification as God's Son. But God shows up in time to miraculously confirm Jesus's Sonship at the crucifixion. At this moment Jesus cries for humanity to forgive God, "for He knows not what He has done" (377). But Saramago's narrative has made it clear that it can hardly be true that this God doesn't know what He's doing; He knows exactly what He's doing, and it is diabolical. Jesus has been tricked and used. But such words about needing to forgive God make no sense to his hearers, and so his words are eventually reconstructed in a canonical account that will reconcile the irreconcilable: parable is domesticated into myth.

It is precisely this institutional habit that Saramago exposes and challenges. Following Levi-Strauss, Crossan proposes that "myth performs the specific task of mediating irreducible opposites" (35). Orthodox Christian myth reconciles the radical Jesus who can be discerned (or

constructed) in canonical gospel texts with the stolid institutions of the Christian religion. For Saramago, a truly ethical Jesus cannot be reconciled to a Christianity which funds a deceitful and diabolical Deity. This is particularly true of the state church in Portugal, the Roman Catholic Church, which has historically served and shared a bed with a series of tyrannical governments in Portugal, from eighteenth-century monarchs to twentieth-century dictators, and often manipulated Portugal's large peasant population into inordinate sacrifices and poverty in the name of God. In his Nobel Prize speech, Saramago reflects on this in relation to his grandparents, who were

primitive peasants obliged to hire out the strength of their arms for a wage and working conditions that deserved only to be called infamous, getting for less than nothing a life which the cultivated and civilised beings we are proud to be and are pleased to call—depending on the occasion—precious, sacred or sublime. Common people I knew, deceived by a Church both accomplice and beneficiary of the power of the State and of the landlords, people permanently watched by the police, people so many times innocent victims of the arbitrariness of a false justice. (7)

The (Portuguese) Church and its dogma about Jesus are very much complicit in this victimization of the innocent and “the arbitrariness of a false justice.” If Saramago remains outside “the fold” of the Church, he does so in a way that would perhaps be commended by fellow Catholic Simone Weil: “social enthusiasms have such power today, they raise people so effectively to the supreme degree of heroism in suffering and death, that I think it is as well that a few sheep

should remain outside the fold in order to bear witness that the love of Christ is essentially something different” (*Waiting for God* 81). The “social enthusiasm” of Christian religion results in the “suffering and death” of the long list of martyrs Saramago catalogues in his novel (ongoing sacrifices to a God who requires blood), and the few sheep who must “remain outside the fold” are figures such as Pastor (and his flock) and Jesus, as well as Saramago himself. Only by doing so can they “bear witness” to a greater love (reflected in some canonical testimony to the life of Jesus) and God whose compassion carries beyond the need for vengeance and the smell of blood in the nostrils.

Disturbed and unsettled as many Christian readers may be at this point, they must recognize that the events of the life of Saramago’s Jesus, along with his teachings, could be manipulated or, if you prefer, transmuted/translated into the Jesus of the canonical gospels, into the Jesus of orthodoxy, especially if we privilege Matthew’s gospel. For Saramago insists on the question, what do we know about Jesus, really? Perhaps Jesus was a better man than we have been led to believe. Perhaps, too, Saramago succeeds in restor(y)ing to us (who, we?) the mystery both of God and of humanity, subverting the dark desire for mastery over Infinite and finite alike. Crossan makes this distinction between myth and parable:

The more useful distinction might be between mythical religion, a religion that gives one the final word about “reality” and thereby excludes the authentic experience of mystery, and parabolic religion, a religion that continually and deliberately subverts final words about “reality” and thereby introduces the possibility of transcendence. (105)

Speaking of Saramago's text, we can say that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* subverts orthodox Christian mythology in order to reintroduce the possibility of transcendence, the possibility of a God beyond and greater than that which many Christians have constructed and/or inherited, the possibility of a God we can both believe in and *love*.

## II

*Jesus returns, only to tell a different story*

*Returning home,  
greeted  
by his father's  
grave,  
his elder brother  
master  
now  
of flock and field,  
the prodigal  
passes by.<sup>13</sup>*

I believe that one of the primary reasons I find myself admiring and discovering meaning in Saramago's fiction is Saramago's narrative voice, which reflects Saramago's disposition. Saramago's Nobel Lecture makes it quite evident that his narrators are very much versions of himself as a perceptive mediator of what he witnesses in the lives of his characters (they who teach him so much he becomes their apprentice). As I mention in the first part of this essay, Saramago's narrative voice is characterized by compassion, patience, a genuine concern for human beings, and a sense of irony than can sometimes slide into a skeptical humo(u)r. What you discover as you proceed in any Saramago fiction since *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982, 1987) is that you could wish for nothing more than for God to perceive your own life, your own

humanity, in the fashion of Saramago's narrator. Truly such a God would understand you--such a God would be like the father of the prodigal son. So while I recognize that Saramago repeatedly exposes many flaws and even unethical elements in Christian dogmas, especially a dogma of substitutionary atonement by means of a blood sacrifice, I partially accept this examination because I come to trust the examiner: Saramago's narrative voice wins me over. (I am, by the way, sketching out a separate essay that examines Saramago's use of narrative voice in his later fiction.)

I also admire Saramago's care: he isn't taking Christian faith lightly or simply dismissing it. His treatment of the Christian religion affirms its significance and power. His texts indicate that Saramago clearly has faith. But he does not put this faith at the service of an institution (Church) or creed (dogma) which requires participation in what he finds unethical (the shedding of blood and substitutionary atonement for sin); Saramago holds out for the Real. In fact, he insists on this, even demands it, despite his ostensible atheism (he has said in an interview that "to be an atheist like me requires a high degree of religiosity" [Preto-Rodas 18]). Indeed, I liken Saramago to the character of Job (another powerful drama/parable). He refuses to accept conventional constructions of (or dogmas about) God that seem unethical to him, challenging contemporary Eliphazes, Bildads, and Zophars with his own sense of truth and integrity and what that requires of any God. In other words, I imagine Saramago holding out for an encounter with the Voice that speaks from Job's whirlwind, the Unnameable who answers Job's questions with a non-answer. Not that I think Saramago would for a minute be satisfied with the kind of non-answer Job gets, but Saramago would find consolation in the experience of Real Presence. Then again, it seems clear from his texts that he finds human compassion and love sufficient. And he would be the first to observe that we often dream both voices and whirlwinds.

Because he is so Job-like in his questioning and in his insistence that God be both ethical and accountable (God must practice what Jesus preaches in the Sermon on the Mount if the trinitarian deity is to have any hope for integrity), I accept Saramago's resistance and determination to remain outside the fold until he sees something more worthy in the practice of Christian religion in his culture/world. I make a distinction between the spirit which gives life and the letter which kills, and Saramago deftly and unrelentingly exposes a destructive literalism that often characterizes human expressions of the Christian religion and God. The God before Whom many Christians are asked to bow much more closely resembles Moloch in both His daily and eternal operations than a Jesus like Luke's who continually reaches out in compassion to heal and embrace fallen humans, much like the father in his story we call "The Prodigal Son." If the Christian God is imaged as a Moloch, then that image of God must be rejected and cast down as an idol unworthy of human reverence and love. Second, Saramago is much concerned with forgiveness, both with the need for humans to forgive one another, and for humans to forgive God. Of course, if God is (presented as) a Moloch, then that God desperately needs our forgiveness. Indeed, if a culture/world represents God as a Moloch, then it is more ethical to be an atheist in such a world/culture; living as a disciple of Jesus in such a world would require rejecting its God. But in the testimony to his own life, Jesus images another God, a God characterized by a compassion and understanding toward humans which creates a new world where forgiveness and forgiven-ness enable genuine community—the kingdom of Go(o)d. We all transgress, and we all experience the continuing need for reconciliation and renewal. The Christian doctrine of incarnation promises this in a unique way, precisely because the Human who bears God's understanding provides God with a more feeling comprehension of human

suffering, both in the body's and in the soul's alienation: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In closing, I return to my own little Jesus fiction with which I began this section. It represents an attempt to parable a truth in my own experience with Christian religion. Fortunately, I'm not going to explain it; any discourse about my creative text will miss what it is doing and what it might do, even as my discourse about Saramago's fiction in no way captures the irreducible complexity of the story he tells. But I can say that what my poem shares with Saramago is its implicit understanding that, whether exchanged between humans or exchanged between humanity and God (to introduce a great mystery at a moment when this essay must provide a closure!), forgiveness is always a transaction between persons. Saramago's Jesus cries out for humans to forgive God, but as it becomes clear that this God is a construct, a dogma, an orthodoxy, there really can be no forgiveness. How does one forgive a dogma? How does one forgive orthodoxy? This would be absurd. But surely we can forgive those who have committed terrible acts of violence or those who have inculcated humans, especially children, with dogmas that affirm and generate the use of violence, forgoing the compassion and non-violence of Jesus. I believe Saramago's fiction finally turns on this possibility: human love, especially expressed in compassion and forgiveness, can redeem human transgression. If we are looking for the kingdom of God, this is it. And I find that very much in consonance with the story Jesus tells about a father who embraces his wasteful and self-serving son without needing to revenge himself on his son's betrayal of all that he values. Thus my little poem affirms both Saramago's unbelief and his belief—or the place between (or beyond) these which he inhabits.<sup>14</sup>

## Works Cited

Crossan, John Dominic. *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*. Eagle Books, 1988.

Preto-Rodas, Richard A. "Jose Saramago: Art for Reason's Sake." *World Literature Today* 73.1 (Winter 1999): 11-18.

Saramago, Jose. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. Giovanni Pontiero, trans. Harcourt Brace, 1994 (1991).

-----, "The 1998 Nobel Lecture." *World Literature Today* 73.1 (Winter 1999): 5-10.

Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*. Harper and Row, 1973 (1951).

## Endnotes

1. In Saramago's case, it is the orthodoxy of Roman Catholicism in Portugal. The significance of this particular historical and cultural context for Saramago's encounter with the Christian religion becomes quite apparent to anyone who reads Saramago's fictions. In fact, the Portuguese government censored *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, barring its entry as Portugal's candidate for the prestigious European Literary Prize in 1991 "under the pretext that the book was offensive to Catholics" (Saramago, Autobiography for the Nobel Prize Web page; see [www.nobel.se/laureate/1998/saramago-autobio.html](http://www.nobel.se/laureate/1998/saramago-autobio.html)). But Saramago's parable is by no means limited in its application to Roman Catholic Christianity.

2. Luke supplies an editorial frame which redacts the story to his interpretive purposes, casting the story as an answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?"

3. Interestingly, I was present at a Thanksgiving service (Fall 1999) for local Baptist congregations where the feature speaker retold this parable in a way very similar to Crossan, only he made the Samaritan a Marxist lesbian (and a Jew! she was also a registered Democrat!). In doing so, he gave the story the kind of challenging power Crossan imagines for Jesus' original story. Unfortunately, he stopped short of pointing out to his audience that at the moment when she gave herself up to help a wounded Evangelical, this Marxist lesbian was enacting and inhabiting the kingdom of God.

4. Consider as well, however, that parables also reveal or recognize the non-meaning of isness (identified by Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet admired by Saramago, in these lines: “Because the only hidden meaning of things / is that they have no hidden meaning at all. / That is stranger than all the strangeness.”), and perhaps thus parables may make belief and unbelief (in a dogmatic or creedal sense) equally irrelevant/unnecessary.

5. This is in some ways reflected in the irony of the novel’s title: an epistemological appeal to an authority we do not have. Jesus did not tell his own story--all our versions are fallible and interested. But even if Jesus gave us his story, we would not have the Jesus of history or the history of Jesus. We would have a text (a parable).

6. Saramago also makes much use of the Gospel of John, thus relying primarily on just those gospels which have been most privileged in Roman Catholic tradition since the medieval period. I believe Saramago would find the gospels of Mark and especially Luke more amenable to his ethic of compassion and love. In fact, if Saramago read English, and I could obtain his Canary Island address, I’d mail him a copy of fellow Roman Catholic Albert Nolan’s superb little book entitled *Jesus Before Christianity*, which highlights Luke’s gospel as a counter to the traditional Catholic reliance on Matthew and John.

7. Cf. Matthew 25.31-46 where one’s identity as a sheep or a goat rests entirely on one’s ethical behavior, without any concern for creed or dogma, and the redacted story of the two sons in Matthew 21.28-31a.

8. While recognizing the constructedness of “God” is important, I also believe it is important to realize that *Saramago is not deconstructing God or Jesus*. He is deconstructing a particular human imagining of God and Jesus, a particular way of reading and employing what our canonical gospels testify to; if you equate that human imagining/representation of God with the One Who Is (the Unnameable), you render Saramago a Josiah, an idol-smasher who insists on the unrepresentable otherness of God. Saramago performs his imaginative and narrative deconstruction on the basis of an ethic which he clearly believes superior to that of (his experience and his nation’s history with) the Roman Catholic Church, an ethic of compassion and forgiveness that entails the refusal to avenge or punish. Cf. Matthew 5.43-48.

9. This cry is prefigured in the narrator’s earlier parabolic suggestion that God must confess His sin before humanity; humanity judges God, God becomes accountable to humanity: “When, O Lord, will You come before mankind to acknowledge Your own mistakes” (113). Readers familiar with the biblical text may recognize the Jobean character of Saramago’s narrator in such instances.

10. There is some resonance here with Saramago’s fellow Roman Catholic Simone Weil’s definition of “force” in her famous essay on Homer’s *Iliad*: force is “that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man [sic] into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him.” In Saramago’s view, this happens twice to Jesus. First, in its extreme form, when the Romans crucify Jesus. Second, when the Church turns Jesus into the blood sacrifice for atonement, into the door to God, the path to salvation, the bridge to Heaven. Perhaps it should be argued that this is what Saramago opposes—not the first form, which is fate, but the second, which hurries the former for those who are compelled to follow the path of Christian martyrdom. Saramago can live with the corpse of Jesus, but not with

the “thing” resurrected in his name, which is then composed and compressed into a force perpetuating similar subjections upon countless humans (most notably peasants or those outside of, and subject to, the structures and institutions of power that f(ound their oppression with a religion *about* Jesus). If Saramago can restore to Jesus his soul—his humanity, perhaps his readers will not lose their own.

11. In another parabolic maneuver, Saramago also allows the Devil to offer a counter-proposal to Jehovah’s plan for a new world-conquering religion: forgive the Devil and readmit him as one of the lowest angels and spare humanity the pain that will inevitably ensue otherwise. God quickly rejects this offer.

12. This is only one of a number of problems created by Matthew’s *midrashim* on Hebrew scripture.

13. This is an original poem, now published: *The Christian Century* (July 26, 2003): 9

14. I wish to thank all my colleagues who graciously read and commented on an earlier draft of this essay: Clyde Ross, Doug Jacobsen, and John Yeatts. Their combination of encouragement and critical response significantly improved this paper and pushed me toward a more precise and honest representation of my reading of Saramago’s *Gospel*. I especially thank John Yeatts for pointing out that there are some Christian orthodoxies (e.g. Eastern and holiness/Anabaptist traditions) which do not embrace a substitutionary theory of atonement but imagine instead a God who (in Jesus) suffers with us—as we suffer with God—for “the world’s purification and redemption.” Perhaps a God who reconciles with humanity as a fellow-sufferer would solicit belief even from an “atheist” like Jose Saramago. In any case, John Yeatts’ comments identify the relativity of terms like “traditional Christianity” and “Christian orthodoxy.” This means Saramago’s *Gospel* will be more parabolic for some Christians than for others; I find myself quite content to acknowledge this qualification to my thesis, and I have adjusted some of my language to reflect this.