

AWAKENING DANGEROUS MEMORIES

Michael Kirwan

THE WORLD SHOULD HAVE COME TO AN END on 31 October 1988. The fact that it did not is all down to the self-sacrifice of Donnie Darko, who was able to discover a 'portal' into the space-time continuum, which he then reversed, at the cost of his own life. ('He got smooshed. By a jet engine.')

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That is the plot, or part of it, of the cult movie *Donnie Darko*. The film as a whole, especially the director's cut, is a lot less easy to summarise. It sprawls ambitiously between several genres, citing high-school romantic comedy, psychological thriller, *Back to the Future* time-travel, and general 'coming of age' heroics. Jake Gyllenhaal gives a fine performance as Donnie, the tortured adolescent whose visions—specifically of a six-foot bunny-rabbit named Frank—are the product of either paranoid schizophrenia or supernatural intervention. This flawed masterpiece sends out quiet but insistent spiritual, even christological, signals. They inspire no more than hints and guesses, admittedly, but there is enough here to keep the theologian happy. *Donnie Darko* is a very clever piece of movie-making about human meaning, discernment of spirits, forgiveness, redemption, eschatology and apocalypse, which never rams a message down the throat of its adolescent audience. It is a remarkable achievement, and here I should like to follow up some of its hints and gestures towards belief, more than twenty years after its averted Armageddon.

¹ *Donnie Darko* was written and directed by Richard Kelly in 2001. 'Jake Gyllenhaal stars as Donnie, a borderline-schizophrenic adolescent for whom there is no difference between the signs and wonders of reality (a plane crash that decimates his house) and hallucination (a man-sized, reptilian rabbit who talks to him). Obsessed with the science of time travel and acutely aware of the world around him, Donnie is isolated by his powers of analysis and the apocalyptic visions that no one else seems to share.' (Tom Keogh, review at <http://www.amazon.com/Donnie-Darko-Blu-ray-Jake-Gyllenhaal/dp/B001JNND8A>) The script is available at http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/d/donnie-darko-script-screenplay.html.

In Britain the years since 1988 have been marked by considerable political and cultural change, with the Thatcherite ideology of economic liberalism giving way to New Labour's attempt at a 'Third Way'.² They have also seen the foundation and development of the Jesuit Volunteer Community (JVC). During this time both poverty and prosperity have left their mark on the places where JVC does its work: the inner cities of Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham. And, welcoming a new diversity of volunteers, JVC itself has grown and changed, becoming a European and even worldwide adventure, rather than just a British one.

What does it mean that throughout this period, and despite its seismic changes, young people have consistently chosen to give themselves over to a year-long programme of volunteer work and communal living? And what does it mean that they have done so under the banner of the Jesuits, and in conformity with JVC's four core values of spirituality, community, social justice and simple lifestyle? What is the theological significance of the success of JVC?

The Endangered Self

My guide for addressing these questions (in addition to *Donnie Darko*) is the German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who in turn draws on the 'messianic' thinking of the Jewish Marxist Walter Benjamin. What has concerned Metz in much of his writing is *the fragile health of the religious self*. He maintains that the current crisis of Christianity is not about the gospel message itself—which remains as powerfully attractive as ever—but is rather a 'crisis of the subject' who has been charged with transmitting that message. Under late capitalism the individual subject has become a weak, even endangered, species, and it is very difficult for this poor creature to sustain an authentic and confident grasp on the sacred.

This is a paradox. The 'Enlightenment subject' presupposed by contemporary Western political thinking is supposed to be strong and in

² 'It is a *third* way because it moves decisively beyond an Old Left preoccupied by state control, high taxation and producer interests, and a New Right treating public investment, and often the very notions of society and collective endeavour, as evils to be undone.' (Tony Blair, 'The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century', in *The New Labour Reader*, edited by Andrew Chadwick and Richard Heffernan [Cambridge: Polity, 2003], 28)

control, independent from tradition and community. In the modern age, freedom can only be achieved with respect to the self, to its particular dreams and desires. But Metz came to appreciate the ways in which modernity, by over-privileging the individual subject, actually undermines that subject—to the point of threatening its very survival. Anyone who severs their connecting ties—with the traditions of the past and the claims of community—is sawing away at the branch on which he or she is precariously perched. For without these ties the individual is left exposed to the forces of unfreedom that are also to be found in modern societies, for example political or commercial manipulation.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of what Metz is saying here. Our modern sense of self, shaped by the heroic striving to be an autonomous subject, is so distorted that it inevitably has a distorting effect on the Christian message as well. Christianity becomes privatised, 'bourgeois'. It is on this issue of the 'distorted subject' that a disagreement opened up between Metz and his Jesuit teacher, Karl Rahner (although they remained close, and respectful of each other). Rahner's argument for 'theology as anthropology'—asserting that every individual human being, by virtue of being caught up in the human dynamics of love and intellect, is open to the self-giving of God—has been immensely important for contemporary theology and spirituality. But Metz questions this optimistic view: if the human subject has been twisted out of shape and manipulated by the modern world, surely we need to take into account his or her deformed perception of God?³

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This paradox of the endangered self weighs heavily upon Donnie Darko. 'You're weird', his girlfriend, Gretchen, tells him. 'I'm sorry', says Donnie. 'No, I meant it as a compliment', she reassures him. Donnie admits to her that he has had 'behavioural problems', which he has overcome. His fragility remains, however. He is a 'troubled young man', who faces the task of discernment about his visions: first of all, deciding

³ The most dramatic example of this for Metz is the almost total failure of German Christians, both individually and as a collective, to resist Nazism before and during the Second World War. As a young soldier, whose schoolfriends were killed by an Allied attack, Metz was only too aware of this catastrophe. But he refuses to see the disaster of Nazism, including the horrors of the Holocaust, as an isolated case. The paralysis of what he calls 'bourgeois Christianity' began much earlier, with Christianity's domestication by the Enlightenment, and it continues in our inability to respond with any adequacy to the injustices and sufferings of the developing world.



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whether Frank the giant bunny-rabbit is ‘really’ a manifestation of his illness and medication, or a genuine supernatural visitation. If the latter, is Frank divine or demonic? The theme of destruction as a form of creation runs through the film. The set text for Donnie’s English class is *The Destructors*, a short story by Graham Greene, while later in the film Frank summons Donnie out of a cinema in order to commit an act of arson. The cinema is screening *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Most poignantly, Donnie breaks down in a therapy session under the weight of his tortuous questioning about the existence of God. The pressure either of belief or of unbelief seems unbearable, until his therapist informs him that there is, after all, such a thing as agnosticism. This is important. The apparently idyllic American small town where Donnie lives is incapable either of genuine belief or of scepticism. Donnie’s real ‘enemy’, as it turns out, is neither militant atheism nor the suave moralism of fundamentalist Christianity, but the sinister platitudes of a creepy New Age guru, Jim Cunningham (played by Patrick Swayze). According to Cunningham, all of life’s challenges can be located on a ‘Love–Fear’ continuum, and our task in life is to move along the grid in the right direction: more Love means less Fear. In a splendid confrontation, in front of his whole school, Donnie denounces Cunningham’s self-help vacuities and calls him the ‘fucking anti-Christ’. But if this is so, then who is Donnie?

The 'Cunningham Way' of self-emancipation bears more than a passing resemblance to what Metz condemns as 'bourgeois Christianity'. The Enlightenment ideal of freedom, according to Metz, is the exercise of one's potential and capacity in the pursuit of personal happiness and fulfilment. But this entails both minimising one's own pain and suffering, and insulating oneself from the affliction of others. In late capitalism this has in turn led to a brutalisation of people's attitudes towards suffering, not least as it is presented through the media. With the television remote control we can simply switch channels if the images are too distressing. 'Rolling' news stations often present reports of a catastrophe—an earthquake or a massacre—with trivial news items such as sports results scrolling across the bottom of the screen. Capitalism never allows us to dwell for too long on the suffering of others. Metz writes:

Catastrophes are reported on the radio in between pieces of music. The music continues to play, like the audible passage of time that moves forward inexorably and can be held back by nothing. As Brecht has said, 'When a crime is committed, just as the rain falls, no one cries: Stop!'⁴

Under such conditions it is easy for people to feel like powerless spectators and to give up on politics and on working for social transformation.

In contrast to such detachment, Metz talks about *the subject of suffering*. He and Walter Benjamin draw attention not to the optimistic, evolutionary history of the victors, but to the forgotten history of the victims. The 'freedom' of the human subject now includes the freedom to suffer, and 'to suffer the suffering of others'.⁵ Through the 'dangerous memory' of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we experience history as a history of the dead and of those who suffer.⁶ The

⁴ Johann-Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980), 170–171.

⁵ Johann-Baptist Metz, 'The Dangerous Memory of the Freedom of Jesus Christ: The Presence of the Church in Society', in *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, edited by John K. Downey (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999), 95.

⁶ In an essay entitled 'The Courage to Pray' (*Love's Strategy*, 157–166), Metz maintains that 'the history of mankind seen as popular history is basically the history of religion, and religious history in the final analysis is the history of prayer—the prayer, above all, of those who have suffered and died anonymously (157–158).

inspiration of Walter Benjamin for Metz is nowhere more evident than in Benjamin's powerful parable of the Angel of History:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁷



Angelus Novus, by Paul Klee

Another important aspect of the distorted subject that has emerged in modernity, according to Metz, is its enslavement to the principle of *exchange* (Metz is drawing here on the Marxist analysis of commodification). Whereas in the past the subject was established through cultural conditions or political systems, now it is the marketplace which adjudicates all the norms and values of human life. This means that all aspects of life, including values, traditions and relationships, are capable of being substituted: in modernity, anything can be bought and sold. Here once again is

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Fontana, 1973), 259–260.

the flip-side of values which in themselves seem to be positive: of course people must be free to change their ideas and beliefs, their work and career paths, and so on. Yet when people themselves become interchangeable, and therefore dispensable, or when the right to 'reinvent' oneself is endlessly asserted to the exclusion of other rights, then we have the opposite of freedom. The logic of capitalism values the individual only as a unit of labour or as a consumer.

Metz has been putting this case for over thirty years, and yet it seems to have an especially modern relevance. It is at least arguable that some of the ambivalence and hostility towards contemporary Islam is born of envy at a religious tradition that has preserved such rich communal resources for identity, discipline and solidarity. The current upsurge of liturgical traditionalism within the Church, which is especially attractive to young people, surely confirms this sense of a subject that is in danger of losing its roots.

Liturgical traditionalism is often tied up with a kind of defensive nostalgia for a simpler, more certain world. Metz and other political theologians draw attention to this element of fear or anxiety that we find among a number of conservative thinkers: these often start out as liberal or progressive, and become less so as the processes of change seem to be too swift, too complex and too unpredictable. This is one understanding of 'fundamentalism': an assertion of resistance towards the frightening and uncontrollable forces of the modern world which seem to threaten traditional identities, both individual and communal.

For Metz, however, the Christian response should be offensive, not defensive: 'theology should address believers at those points at which their identity as persons is most threatened by the social and political catastrophes of history'.⁸ Being Christians should never be about seeking to anaesthetize ourselves against our vulnerability (this is the goal of the 'bourgeois' subject). Rather, faith 'is just the capacity to affirm and live an endangered identity'.⁹

The most recent version of this challenge, perhaps, is a paralyzing 'weariness with being a subject' characteristic of postmodernity: what

⁸ J. M. Ashley, 'Johann Baptist Metz', in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 241–255, here 247.

⁹ Ashley, 'Johann Baptist Metz', 247.

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Metz calls a 'second immaturity'.¹⁰ The contemporary apathy towards politics, for example, causes to him to wonder whether we want to become Enlightenment subjects after all. There is a 'sleepiness' about today's Western society which is deadly for the same reasons as the narcolepsy that overcame the conscience of German society during the Nazi period. For Metz, it is important that the Church keeps alive the 'dangerous memory' of Jesus Christ, so as to break through this sleepiness. 'The shortest definition of religion: interruption.'¹¹ A key word for Metz is 'anamnesis', which is derived from the Greek word for remembering, but more exactly means 'unforgetting'. We need to overcome our forgetfulness of victims, past and present; and this remembering is dangerous because it means exposing ourselves to the suffering of others. 'Anamnesis' is also the term used to describe our prayer at the eucharist, in which participants are told to break bread 'in memory of me'. To fulfil the command of Jesus, to break bread so as to keep alive his dangerous memory, is to strive for a 'messianic' rather than a 'bourgeois' Christianity. It is to recognise that there will be an end time, and that the Messiah will return.

In Benjamin's parable, the Angel of History wants to arrest and interrupt, like Jesus: 'to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed'. But to do so is impossible, because the forces of progress hurl him into the future; the victims of history lie forgotten by the wayside. This curious parable caused Metz and other theologians to think about the task of the Messiah, which is precisely to enter into solidarity with the victims. To do this effectively would be, in the terms of *Donnie Darko*, to reverse or suspend the space-time continuum—to make the dead present to us once again. And to do this requires the resurrection.

For a Christian, the call to social justice is precisely an affirmation of faith in the resurrection. Without such faith the task is hopeless, since no matter what I do, the one I am helping is only going to be swept away by the tide of history. My assistance will only ever be a

¹⁰ See Metz, 'Karl Rahner's Struggle for the Theological Dignity of Humankind', in *A Passion for God*, edited by J. M. Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 107–120.

¹¹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 170.

sticking-plaster. But if the Messiah, through me, is standing beside that person, making sure that he or she is not forgotten, my solidarity is a messianic act. The same goes for my personal prayer, and for my life in community expressed through the eucharist. In these actions, I am praying that my fragile, buffeted self, and the selves of my companions, will survive; that our vulnerable and ambiguous sense of who we are will be preserved and strengthened by God over time, and not be swept away. This is the hope that, as Paul puts it, 'you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit' (Ephesians 3:16). For a Jesuit, and for Christians working within the Jesuit ethos, this also means having the confidence to hand that self over, in the astonishing prayer of St Ignatius called the *Suspice*: 'Take, Lord, receive, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will' (Exx 234). After all, God will do a much better job with them than I can.

Transforming Love

Of course, not all JVC volunteers use this kind of language to describe their residential year and its impact on their lives. It is probable that for some there may be only the merest glimpse of what is at stake. Certainly, quite a few have been grateful, like Donnie Darko, for a space somewhere between brash theism and an equally brash atheism. The 'culture war' between the 'New Atheists' and fundamentalist religious believers makes it all the more important that there should be safe exploratory places within the Church where faith is respected in its coming-to-be as well as in its mature form. This has not always been easy.

I recall a discussion in 2002, when I was chair of the JVC Management Committee, about how we should respond to an invitation to cooperate with the Evangelical Alliance. The invitation required consent to a robust declaration of faith in Christ and in salvation through Christ alone (understood pretty much as penal substitution—Christ taking our just punishment on himself). How were we to explain that, although we were certainly a faith-based organization, generously funded by the Society of Jesus, we would be unable to sign up to such a declaration, because it denied our volunteers this 'agnostic' space, and with it an ethos in which searching was respected?

The penultimate scene of *Donnie Darko*, entitled 'Dreams', opens on the morning after Donnie's death, upon a world that has been redeemed, but is unaware of its redemption. The camera pans over the characters as each awakes from troubled sleep, to the sound of the song 'Mad World'. In this moment the film affirms the Christian intuition of a love that heals and transforms from and through death.

If the Jesuit Volunteer Community continues to flourish, it will do so, as it has since its foundation, because there are young and generous adults who are drawn by this intuition. They will see, or come to see, their faith as 'the capacity to affirm and live an endangered identity', which will move them in turn to cherish the vulnerable identity of others. Their sense of self will indeed be fragile, but adventurous and capable of radical transformation within a short space of time, given the right experience and environment. They will recognise the core values of JVC as a way of opening themselves up to the height and the depth to be found within themselves, in others, and in God, however they choose to name God.

But if Johann Baptist Metz is correct, these volunteers will also need a keen sense of how the odds are increasingly stacked against them. The call to explicit faith in Christ remains the same, always. The 'endangered subject', on the other hand, who must receive that call and respond to it, is perhaps even more vulnerable than twenty years ago. The media continue to undermine and brutalise people's sense of selfhood, and of the boundaries between real and fantasized selves. In politics we all wait to see what the impact of the 'Obama effect' will be, and it is possible that we are going to witness a rebirth of mass participatory politics which will make all of us genuinely more free. Metz's historical warnings remain, however, and others have extended and deepened their implications.

The idea of the 'State of Exception', propounded by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben and others, describes the tendency within modern politics to institutionalise 'states of emergency', so that they become the norm.¹² The security measures put in place so as to propagate the 'war on terror' have ceased to be 'exceptions' at all, but are becoming constitutive elements of our normal world. If authors such as Agamben

¹² This is predicted, like so many things, in Orwell's *1984*, with its state of perpetual war.



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are correct, the noose which Metz sees around the neck of the modern subject is tightening, making it that bit more difficult to work for and to achieve community, simple lifestyle, social justice, and a sense of joyful belonging to God and before God.

For the next few years, those who volunteer for JVC will do so in another 'exceptional' context, that of economic recession. A short article in *The Economist* surmises that this recession will probably be markedly different from previous ones. On the whole (by contrast with the 'hunger marches' of the 1930s, and the angry protests of the 'winter of discontent' in 1979), we can expect neither heroism nor revolutionary anger:

This time, economic woe will most likely lead neither to doughty heroism nor widespread tumult, but rather to grumpy disengagement: an accelerated and sullen withdrawal into private concerns; a quiet and further fraying of the democratic bonds in an already atomised society.¹³

Metz once suggested that the ecclesial role of priests, brothers and sisters in religious congregations was a very specific one.¹⁴ They are like the stunt men and women in an action thriller, often unnamed, but essential to the movie. Certainly, we turn up to watch a James Bond film so as to admire Daniel Craig (and the attractive women who accompany him). But we also want to see people leaping out of burning helicopters, or fighting suspended over a pit of alligators, or

¹³ *The Economist* (1–7 November 2008), 42.

¹⁴ Johann-Baptist Metz, 'Passion for God: Religious Life Today', in *A Passion for God*, 153.

whatever—and you can be sure that the pretty Hollywood stars are not doing any of the really dangerous stunts. This is what the Church is like: it needs exceptional but largely unnamed heroes and heroines who, by their willingness to live on the edge, manage to keep alive—for the whole Church—the ‘dangerous memory’ of Jesus Christ. Most Jesuits I know would hope that the Jesuit fits this description. I would hope and believe that the Jesuit volunteer does so as well. If it is true that the prevailing mood for the next few years is to be one of ‘grumpy disengagement’, then these are the men and women who will provide the heroism and the anger.

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