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Post-Gulag Christology: Contextual Considerations from a Lithuanian Perspective

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Abstract

This article aims at enriching the global theology of Jesus Christ by offering a contribution to Christology from an Eastern European perspective. Such Christology emerges in the context of the experience of the Gulag era as interpreted in the following period. From the viewpoint of one Baltic nation, Lithuania, the author draws on an influential image of popular culture to develop christological insight and delineates the work still to be done in Christology in Eastern Europe.

Keywords

Eastern European theology, post-Gulag Christology, Rupintojelis

A worldwide conversation in Christology has been taking place over recent decades, during some of which theological voices of Eastern Europe were silenced. Now many of these voices are free to speak; this article represents one line of thought emerging to contribute to the global effort to answer for our day the Gospel question, "Who do you say that I am?" In the context of Lithuanian experience, my article offers a test case for contextual Christology from an Eastern European perspective by critically reflecting on the theological implications of the Communist era, of which the system of the Soviet Gulags symbolically stands out as an unmistakable and grim token.

Since most readers are scarcely familiar with this grievous reality, I first describe the context in which my interpretation of post-Gulag Christology emerges and why the

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Gulag experience calls for a new attempt to "name Jesus Christ again."[1] Then, drawing on the experience of the Gulag era, especially the theological significance of a powerful image of popular religious art in Lithuania, I develop some insights into a post-Gulag interpretation of the mystery of Christ. Finally, I explore the challenges that, in my view, Eastern European theology and Christology are facing, and ways to move toward new life-giving possibilities. In doing so, I follow the aspiration of Vatican II to engage theology in local contexts and cultures so they can "contribute to . . . the revelation of the Savior's grace"[2] (*Ad gentes* no. 22).

The Gulag and Post-Gulag Contexts

In this article, the notion of "Gulag" is a pinnacle of and represents the unjust and often radical suffering experienced not only by the subjects of the Soviet system but also, in various forms, by people throughout Eastern Europe. Though the era of the Gulags suppressed christological discourse, it nevertheless shaped a christological consciousness that needs further articulation in the post-Gulag situation of Eastern Europe. "Gulag" is a problematic term, but before I describe the Gulag and post-Gulag contexts from the Lithuanian perspective, let me briefly clarify what is meant here by "Eastern Europe."

For convenience, I usually refer to Eastern and Central European countries as "Eastern Europe," a definition created during the Cold War and used synonymously with the term "Eastern Bloc," by which was meant the rest of Europe to the East of the territories of "traditional" Western countries. Since this definition represents a Western perspective, I retain the distinction "Eastern" and "Central" Europe when referring to the works of authors who refuse to be defined by dominant Western culture, thus honoring their right to claim who they are—the right that was for decades denied by the Communist regime.

Abuse of human rights stood at the center of the Gulag experience. As Anne Applebaum points out, "Gulag" represented not only the system of Soviet slave labor, where people often were worked to death; it "has come to mean the Soviet repressive system itself, the set of procedures that prisoners once called the 'meatgrinder': the arrests, the interrogations, the transport in unheated cattle cars, the forced labor, the destruction of families, the years spent in exile, the early and unnecessary deaths."[3] Even though forced labor camps were officially abolished in 1960, their modified "offspring" were in operation until 1987 when head of state Mikhail Gorbachev began to dissolve the Soviet Union's political camps altogether. Thus, the Gulag era coincides with the whole period of Communist repression in Eastern Europe.

Throughout this period, the scale of Communist repression in Lithuania, my home country, amounted to genocide. About 800,000 Lithuanians, almost one quarter of the

1. Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad 1990) 145.
2. *Ad gentes*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church no. 22, *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America, 1966) 612.
3. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) xv–xvi.

population, were lost to Communist persecution—deportations, executions, incarceration, the murder of the political opposition, forced emigration, and so on.[4] The rest of the population, predominantly Catholic, was deprived of freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom of thought and speech; even remembering their origins and identities was deracinated: history was falsified, and memories were replaced by effigies of propaganda.

In the post-Gulag period, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the experience of suffering under Communism and its implications became the focus of research and academic discourse, especially in the social sciences. The need to interpret this experience in a life-giving way and to heal memories is especially emphasized. For instance, a recent Lithuanian study revealed that a large number of the victims of the Soviet era are affected by, among other symptoms, posttraumatic stress disorder characterized by persistent remembering or "reliving" the stressor in intrusive "flashbacks" or by an inability to recall important aspects of the traumatizing event.[5] On the societal level, authors of various nationalities analyze the power and the impact of the political myths used to reinforce Communist ideology by replacing the individual, religious, and national memories with those proposed by and born within the regime.[6]

Though in psychology, sociology, and political science the post-Gulag experience is relatively well investigated, theology and Christology that speak from the perspective of this experience are still rare. The next section explores the question, Why is such reflection needed and what is the main focus of post-Gulag Christology?

Why a Post-Gulag Christology?

Christological reflection from an Eastern European perspective is not yet common in theological writings. Even less is it done from a post-Soviet or Lithuanian perspective: we do not exist on the "maps" of theology.[7] That absence is felt even in the language of the dominant theological-historical discourse. Whether one writes of European Christology or the transition from Eurocentric to World church, "Europe" most often means Western Europe. For instance, liberation theologian José Ignacio González Faus writes, "In Europe the historical Jesus is an object of investigation, whereas in

4. For more see Dalia Kuodytė and Rokas Tračevskis, *Siberia: Mass Deportations from Lithuania to the USSR* (Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2004) 2–20.
5. Danutė Gailienė, "Fifty Years On: The Long-Term Psychological Effects of Soviet Repression in Lithuania," in *The Psychology of Extreme Traumatisation: The Aftermath of Political Repression*, ed. Danutė Gailienė (Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2005) 67–107.
6. See *Politische Mythen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, ed. Heidi Hein-Kircher and Hans Henning Hahn (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 2006), especially the essay by Vasile Dumbrava, "Vergangenheit–Denkmäler–Diskurse Erinnerung und Vergessen in der MSSR/Republik Moldova" 123–46.
7. Even new edited collections on Christology, such as Robert Lassalle-Klein, ed., *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), do not include any articles from an Eastern European perspective.

Latin America he is a criterion of discipleship."[8] Such usage of the word "Europe" reflects a lack of awareness of the complexity of Europe and is quite oblivious of the historical reality of the millions of people in Eastern Europe who were persecuted and even martyred during the Gulag era, precisely because they were choosing the way of discipleship.

Some recent publications attempt a more inclusive usage of "European," but they do not embrace a completely European perspective, and contributors to such an endeavor are usually based in the Western schools of theology.[9] The presence of absence, therefore, remains and challenges theologians of post-Communist countries to find their own voice and to tell their God-story. Paradoxically, absence is a very likely locus of God's transforming presence; absence evokes the Easter experience of the empty tomb.

Since we speak from a different political-historical experience, we also need to find a language that reflects and respects that difference. Whereas for many Western theologians Auschwitz draws the dividing line, and they speak of pre- and post-Holocaust Christian theology, our Christology is primarily post-Gulag Christology. Christology certainly cannot be the same "before" and "after" Auschwitz, and the horrors of the *Shoah* have left deep scars on the face and in the heart of Eastern Europe. In Lithuania alone the scale of the genocide of the Jewish population changed the demographic and moral face of the country dramatically and left many wondering how such an evil was possible: 90 to 95 percent of the Jewish population (about 220,000 victims) was eliminated between 1941 and 1945.[10] The end of World War II, however, did not mean the end of calamity for Eastern Europe. Rather, it meant an occupation and the beginning of a new destruction; it meant, in Steven Rosefield's term, a "Red Holocaust" or, better said, a "Red Shoah"[11] of Eastern Europe.

Hence, in the context of all human sufferings brought about by the 20th century that Phillip Kennedy calls "a barren terrain of corpses" and "a dreadful dystopia,"[12] the "Red Shoah" was (and still is) one of the most lasting experiences of social suffering. Therefore, post-Gulag Christology cannot but look, first of all, for the suffering Christ. Nevertheless, this is not the only important title, and its meaning cannot be automatically transferred from other Christologies. Below I explore how the Gulag experience interpreted in tandem with a popular Lithuanian religious image brings a new note to

8. Quoted in Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 50.
9. Phillip Sheldrake, "Spirituality in a European Context," *Spiritus* 11 (2011) 1–9, for example, embraces a broader European perspective.
10. Arūnas Bubnys, *Holokaustas Lietuvoje: 1941–1944 m.* (Vilnius: Lietuvos Gyventojų Genocido ir Rezistencijos Tyrimo Centras, 2011) 11.
11. Although the term *Red Holocaust*, proposed by Steven Rosefield in the book of the same title (New York: Routledge, 2010), is often used to describe the political violence by Communist regimes in various countries, I prefer here to use the word *Shoah* ("catastrophe," "calamity," "destruction") rather than *Holocaust*, whose original meaning is "burnt offering."
12. Phillip Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians: A New Introduction to Modern Christian Thought* (New York: Tauris, 2010) ix and 13, respectively.

the understanding of Christ. I explore the power and ambiguity of the image quite intentionally, since I am convinced that the epistemological value of the image or symbol should be reclaimed against the post-Enlightenment tendency to give in to conceptual rationalism.

Christ as *Rūpintojėlis* and Beyond

The popular Lithuanian image of *Rūpintojėlis* is a powerful source for post-Gulag Christology. This image has been appreciated and reclaimed particularly during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania marked by the aforementioned genocide and mass deportations. *Rūpintojėlis* is a traditional wooden carving representing Jesus seated, his head, crowned with thorns, supported by his right hand and with his left hand resting on his knee, in deep thought and sorrow. In Lithuania, this woodcarving is often found in cemeteries, homes, and roadside shrines. Indeed, the famous Lithuanian writer Vincas-Mykolaitis Putinas points out in his poem entitled "Rūpintojėlis," its proper place is "by the . . . road where our afflictions daily travel heaving lonely sighs."[13]

13. "But why do you, my dear wakeful God, / Why do you sit worrying by a flat road / By the flat road where our afflictions / Daily travel heaving lonely sighs?" ("Bet kam gi tu, budrus Dievuli mano, / Prie lygaus kelio rūpestėliu rymai? / Prie lygaus kelio, kur vargų vargeliai / Vieni per dienas dūsaudami vaikšto")—translated from "Rūpintojėlis," in Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Tarp dviejų aušrų* (Kaunas: Raidės spaustuvė, 1927) 16 (all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated).

The One Who Sits with You in Your Sorrow

In Lithuania, whose crossroads so often were trampled by military powers from East and West, the image of *Rūpintojėlis* has a long history. It is believed that *Rūpintojėlis* developed from a representation of a human person brooding over suffering, but little is known about its origin before the 14th century, when it was first found in Germany. By the beginning of the 16th century, this image came to Lithuania from Poland and became one of the most influential and still highly relevant religious symbols. *Rūpintojėlis* represents Jesus shortly before his crucifixion. In the medieval tradition, it was often associated with the prophet Jeremiah lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem and prefiguring the Suffering Messiah.[14] Some art historians link the appearance of the *Rūpintojėlis* image with the *Devotio Moderna*, which stressed the human nature of Jesus, a model for the faithful to follow. In the political turmoil of the 20th century, *Rūpintojėlis* gradually evolved into a portrayal of Christ who is pondering and taking on the ills of humanity.

Whereas the *Rūpintojėlis* image had been present for several centuries, the name of *Rūpintojėlis* emerged only in the 20th century. Art historians propose that it was preceded by two names: "*smūtkelis*" (from Polish *smutek*, "distress") and "*Aprūpintojas*," and "*Rūpintojas*," which can be roughly translated as "Caretaker."[15] The current name, *Rūpintojėlis*, is the affectionate form of "*Rūpintojas.*" Due to the complex history of the development of this image, in English publications, *Rūpintojėlis* is often referred to as "Pensive Christ," "Christ in Distress," and, more often, "Worrying Christ," reflecting an assumption that the root of the word is "*rūpestis*" ("worry"). It is much more likely, however, that "*Rūpintojėlis*" derives from the verb "*rūpintis*": to care, attend, tend, be concerned, heed, provide. Thus, "*Rūpintojėlis*" primarily and literally means "(Dear) One who cares" or "(Dear) One who provides." Moreover, the meaning that many people now intuitively associate with this image is "One who sits with you in your sorrow." I suggest that the development from "*smūtkelis*" to "*Rūpintojėlis*" marks a shift in the predominant interpretation of this sacred image: initially conceived as an invitation to suffer with Christ and to renounce sin that causes Christ to suffer, it has become an occasion to contemplate Christ suffering with and for us.

The roughness and the relative shapelessness of the Christ figure of the 20th-century woodcarvings of *Rūpintojėlis* suggest that it is a representation of the all-inclusive humanity of Jesus that overcomes ethnic, gender, age, geo-political, and other differences that might preclude the viewer's ability to identify with it. This image appeals to one's senses. Seeing, holding, touching it, and smelling the wood prompts one to think of embodiment as the most obvious characteristic of human existence and the fundamental arena of divine–human interaction. In relation to theology, it not only calls for historical consciousness, but also prompts reflection on our received Christology and its implications.

14. Gabija Surdokaitė, "Rūpintojėlis lietuvių tautosakoje ir liaudies skulptūroje: pagrindiniai sampratos aspektai" (*Rūpintojėlis* in Lithuanian Oral Folklore and Folk Sculpture: The Main Aspects of Conception), *Tautosakos darbai* 40 (2010) 139–59.
15. Ibid. 139.

The image of *Rūpintojėlis* as described above suggests that our implicit popular Christology is predominantly a Christology from below: it begins with the humanity of Jesus, the man of sorrow and compassion. This image powerfully conveys the meaning of "compassion" as the passion of love that chooses "co-suffering." *Rūpintojėlis* sitting along our roadsides, at our crossroads, in our cemeteries, and in our homes primarily represents Christ with us in our human fate. It both evokes painful memories and witnesses to the hope that those memories can be redeemed. *Rūpintojėlis* represents God who is on the side of the oppressed, the least, the voiceless and insignificant, crowned with contempt and humiliation, stripped of their human dignity and denied the right to claim their identity and place.

Similar to the *Misa Nicaragüense* in Latino spirituality, *Rūpintojėlis* embodies a "cry to Christ Jesus to identify himself with us and to be in solidarity with us instead of with those who destroy us."[16] But it goes beyond that cry, for it mediates the trust that Jesus has already identified with us and with all who are "not us," but who undergo suffering. It is also a symbolic representation of kenosis, as theologian Shawn Copeland once observed: "The meaning of kenosis is not to give up divinity, but to take us in."[17] As in Latino theology, which sees an embodiment of the crucified Christ in "crucified peoples" of history, so too for Lithuanians popular religion becomes a source of theodicy.

Rūpintojėlis, the image of the suffering and the caring Christ, implies that the redemptive work of Christ counteracts evil by descending into the suffering and reclaiming its meaning in the light of the paschal mystery. *Rūpintojėlis* therefore suggests that salvation in Christ can be interpreted as his victory over the evil that affects the human condition. Though the evil of sin brings alienation and death in all its forms and abolishes meaning and truth, Christ who is the victim and the wounded healer saves by appropriating the human story to himself. In him the stories of heaven and earth meet. Consequently, humanity is assumed into God's story, which carries it to ultimate fulfillment. Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas writes poetically of *Rūpintojėlis* as heaven embracing earth: "My dear God, is it true that our dreams of longing / Have called you from the sky to our crossroads? / Or, perhaps, you were brought from our earth / by the dream of those bright autumn nights?"[18]

The Experience of Christ in the Gulags: In Him, with Him, and through Him

The experience of being taken into God's story through Jesus Christ as *Rūpintojėlis*—one with all who suffer—was lived out by the Christian women and men imprisoned in the Soviet Gulags. Bearing unjustifiable radical suffering, they claimed their identity, dignity, and freedom for discipleship in Christ, and in him they found the ultimate

16. Ada María Isasi-Días, "Christ in Mujerista Theology," in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003) 157–76, at 157.
17. Quoted from a personal communication.
18. "Dievuli mano, ar gi mūsų godos / Tave prie kelio iš dangaus atprašė, / Ar gal tos šviesios rudenio naktužės / Tave iš mūsų žemės išsapnavo?" (see n. 13 above).

meaning of their lives. Many examples bear witness to such an explosion of grace in the midst of radical suffering. Some of these examples, especially encountered in the memoirs, letters, and prayers of the Lithuanian women of the Gulags,[19] constitute a valuable source for post-Gulag Christology. A memoir book, *A Radiance in the Gulag* by prisoner Nijolė Sadūnaitė,[20] is one story available to English readers. The book's title itself speaks of the paradox of light born in the darkness, a thematic, compelling "undercurrent" of the book. As Silvia Foti notes, "Sadūnaitė's story is an inspirational account of how she defied the KGB by never losing a grip on her steadfast belief in God and truth,"[21] nor on her humor. Her story has been described as a contemporary Catholic counterpart to the *Diary of Anne Frank*.

Another example of christological consciousness shaping a radical discipleship is the life of a distinguished Lithuanian Gulag prisoner, Adelė Dirsytė (1909–1955). A Lithuanian laywoman and schoolteacher, she was arrested by the Communists in 1944 for Catholic and civic consciousness-raising activities. Following eight months of interrogation by the KGB, Dirsytė was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment in the Gulags. Enduring frequent torture, humiliation, extremely hard labor, and hunger, she nevertheless remained a teacher who provided support for the girls and young women of the Gulags. After several months of torture for her activities in the camp, Dirsytė returned to her place of imprisonment physically disfigured and unable to say what had been done to her, but she remained unchanged in her commitment to others. The place and circumstances of her death in Siberia are unknown. In the Gulags, she compiled a prayer book, later known as *Mary, Save Us*, that was used by Siberian prisoners.[22] One of her "eucharistic prayers" testifies to the radical transformation and the "symbolic exchange" that comes when heaven meets earth in Christ:

> O Lord . . . / accept my suffering / and fatigue, humiliations, / tears of longing, / hunger, and cold / all my soul's infirmities; all my efforts . . . / With a grateful heart, / I shall accept all / from Your hands: / powerlessness, endless longing, / contempt, neglect / and disregard, the loss / of those dearest to me / and of my liberty. . . .[23]

19. See Ligita Ryliškytė, "The Women of the Gulags and Nelson's Paradigms of Evil: Becoming a Sign of Hope against All Hope," in *And God Will Wipe Away All Tears from Their Eyes: A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women*, ed. Jadranka Rebeka Anić et al. (Zagreb: Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences, 2013) 101–16.
20. Nijolė Sadūnaitė, *A Radiance in the Gulag* (Manassas, VA: Trinity Communications, 1987).
21. Silvia Foti, "Nijolė Sadūnaitė: A Radiance in the Gulag," *Lituanus* 34.2 (1988) 71–73, at 71, http://www.lituanus.org/1988/88_2_04.htm. "KGB" stands for *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*, translated into English as *Committee for State Security*. It was a dreaded military security agency responsible for many atrocities committed against the citizens of the former Soviet Union.
22. Adelė Dirsytė, *Mary, Save Us*, trans. Kęstutis A. Trimakas (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2005).
23. Ibid. 34–35, 38–39.

The poetic lines assert that what is received by God is taken into God's story, transformed, and given back as God's own story. Thus, with Christ, through Christ, and in Christ, the capacity to live as if the reign of God were already a present reality and the grace to defy the law of death is received. Such "eschatological reversal," as Susan Nelson called it,[24] takes human imagination, heroic courage, and trust, but is ultimately effected by God's transformative power.

Hence, the *Rūpintojėlis* image coupled with the Gulag experience points toward God, who in Jesus freely chooses to co-suffer with humanity and thereby radically transforms human misery. This speaks of God's transformative power manifested in sufferers not (yet) having their suffering taken away but in receiving it as bread received by God on the eucharistic altar. As in the eucharistic transubstantiation, the transformation of suffering does not change the "accidentals" of the suffering but its substance: the sufferer is empowered to receive his or her suffering with and as Christ. Thus, post-Gulag Christology sheds light on how salvation is experienced in our already-but-not-yet world: like partaking in the Eucharist, what one eats and drinks (the suffering) still looks like bread and wine, but its substance is changed, and one becomes what one receives, that is, a putting on of the suffering Jesus. Salvation is in-breaking *with, in*, and *through* the human condition by bringing a new meaning to it and by empowering one to live the graced reality that the law of sin and death does not have the final word, but love does.

So far we have seen that in Christ as *Rūpintojėlis*, the transcendent God in relation to the world chooses to act according to the inner dynamic of God's being, namely, the gratuitous outpouring of love. This love is primarily manifested as the solidarity of the "One who sits with us in our sorrow." The witness of the Gulag prisoners, however, emphasizes that God's solidarity with us has a transformative effect: it empowers the sufferer to defy the rule of evil. It must be noted, however, that the idea of solidarity conferred through the image of *Rūpintojėlis* and pertinent to the Gulag experience, is primarily Christ's solidarity with people as innocent victims. It still needs to be extended by taking into account the biblical and patristic notion of Christ's solidarity with all persons as (potentially penitent) sinners.[25] Without such development we would have a quite narrow and heterodox understanding of what salvation in Christ is about. Thus, the image of *Rūpintojėlis*, like all symbols, is not unambiguous: it confers an idea of God's solidarity, but might be

24. Susan L. Nelson, "Facing Evil: Evil's Many Faces: Five Paradigms for Understanding Evil," *Interpretation* 57 (2003) 398–413, at 409.

25. The word "sinners" here is preceded by parentheses with "potentially penitent" following insight offered by Jeremy Wilkins who insists on the distinction between two kinds of Christ's solidarity. According to Wilkins, Christ assumed the place of sinners before God not *as sinners*, but *as penitents*, and therefore he is in solidarity with us *as penitents*. Wilkins grounds his logic in the presupposition that sin is not of God, but grace, which undergirds conversion, is. Thus, Christ's divinity demands making this distinction, for intrinsically he cannot be associated with anything that is not of God. See more in Wilkins's paper "The Dereliction of Christ: Some Principles" presented in the Thirty-Ninth Annual Lonergan Workshop, June 17–22, 2012.

misread in terms of what kind of solidarity it is. This leads us to the question of the ambiguity of interpretation of *Rūpintojėlis*.

The Ambiguity of Interpreting Christ as *Rūpintojėlis*

Charles Hefling suggests that "language draws clear distinctions; symbols, as the derivation of the term suggests, 'throw together.'"[26] What could the symbol of *Rūpintojėlis* in the context of the Gulag experience "throw together"? In this section I explore some ambiguities of the *Rūpintojėlis* image as interpreted in the post-Gulag period and the related challenges facing post-Gulag Christology.

A God of the Righteous?

To reiterate, God's solidarity conferred through the image of *Rūpintojėlis* as interpreted in the context of the Gulag experience is primarily perceived as Christ's solidarity with innocent victims. And yet, the revelation of Jesus Christ as attested in the New Testament and interpreted in church tradition speaks first and foremost of God's solidarity with all people as (potentially penitent) sinners. God's salvation is intended to heal the victims as well as the perpetrators. God as revealed in Christ is not a God of the righteous, but of sinners. Post-Gulag Christology thus faces a challenge to recognize God as the one who sits down with the victim and perpetrator alike.

To meet this challenge, post-Gulag Christology first needs to expand the understanding of the redemption brought by Christ. While in the Gulag era the prevailing focus is on the transformation that empowers the innocent to defy the rule of evil, in the post-Gulag period, the notion of salvation as healing comes to the foreground. For Eastern and Central Europeans, healing is primarily a healing of memories. As Czech theologian Ivana Noble points out, we first need to ask how we can understand the presence and activity of God in the difficult memories of the past that are both passed on and denied their voice in our cultures. For Noble, Christ's redeeming power is manifested in replacing our distorted memories with healed memories.[27] Remarkably, as in the case of suffering, the theme of the symbolic exchange, where Christ receives what is broken and gives it back transformed, is underneath again. But such an expansion of the notion of salvation also encompasses a step forward: in salvation as overturning the rule of evil *and* healing broken memories, God's solidarity with the perpetrators can be imagined as gratuitous forgiveness.

Furthermore, reclaiming an older interpretation of the *Rūpintojėlis* image that, since the 17th century (according to the available historical studies on Lithuanian folklore),[28] used to highlight the penitential dimension of the popular piety related to

26. Charles C. Hefling Jr., *Why Doctrines?* (Boston: Cowley, 1984) 72.
27. See Ivana Noble, *Theological Interpretation of Culture in Post-Communist Context: Central and East European Search for Roots* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010); "Memory and Remembering in the Post-Communist Context," *Political Theology* 9 (2008) 455–75.
28. Surdokaitė, "Rūpintojėlis lietuvių tautosakoje ir liaudies skulptūroje: pagrindiniai sampratos aspektai" 147.

Rūpintojėlis might aid in our attempt to speak of God who is in solidarity with us as sinners and who desires to reconcile all, sufferers and perpetrators alike.

A Helpless God?

The *Rūpintojėlis* image mediates not only the compassion and solidarity of God, but also, as a symbol of the brokenness and quasipassivity of Christ, it can question God's omnipotence. The *Rūpintojėlis* image communicates the idea of a God who indeed remembers his people. But is this God capable of helping them? Looking at such an image of God may lead one to conclude that, in the words of Etty Hillesum, "You cannot help us," and "we must help You to help ourselves."[29] Such a conclusion could translate union with Christ to active mission for the sake of God's reign. It could also, however, lead to an understatement of Christ's divinity, resulting in the failure of the symbol to communicate God's salvific involvement in human history. The lasting impact of the atheistic ideology and propaganda experienced in the Gulag era heightens the risk of undermining Christ's divinity.

As Jean-Luc Marion points out, if the gaze of the viewer stops on the image itself and "ceases to overshoot and transpierce itself,"[30] the image fails to mediate the presence of the life-giving source that lies beyond its immediate meaning. Consequently, when God's solidarity with us in the suffering Christ as *Rūpintojėlis* catches the attention of the onlooker, it can be mistaken for God's helplessness, not the Lover's free choice to bear our destiny and offer God's own destiny in return.

Even if the gaze "overshoots" the image of *Rūpintojėlis* and ascends to the life-giving source itself, it primarily focuses on the eschatological dimension of the hope offered through Christ. When the "now" imbued with suffering offers scant signs of the present activity of God in the world, the ultimate triumph of Christ at the end times seems to offer a radical hope that alone can counterbalance the weight of radical suffering.

Along with the experience of the radical suffering in the Gulag era, the popular interpretation of the *Rūpintojėlis* image as encountered in Lithuanian folk tales of the 19th century also contributes to an emphasis on the eschatological reward. The well-known Lithuanian folk tale involving *Rūpintojėlis* tells the story of an altar boy who passes by the *Rūpintojėlis* and, seeing how skinny he is, shares his food with Christ. The boy is immediately promised a reward of heavenly food. He dies the same night and is taken to the heavenly banquet.[31] The story therefore implies that Christ as *Rūpintojėlis* takes care of his people primarily by safeguarding their eschatological reward in the afterlife, and therefore the story reinforces focus on eschatological hope and underplays God's capacity to intervene in the present.

29. Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*, intro. J. G. Gaarlandt, trans. Arno Pomerans (New York: Pantheon, 1983) 151.
30. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) 11.
31. Surdokaitė, "Rūpintojėlis lietuvių tautosakoje ir liaudies skulptūroje: pagrindiniai sampratos aspektai" 151–52.

Challenges Posed by the Ambiguity of the Rūpintojėlis Image

Hence, the ambiguity of the *Rūpintojėlis* image discussed above closely relates to the challenge that post-Gulag Christology faces, namely, that of remodeling its approach to salvation and eschatology. While we already dealt with the challenge of reclaiming the notion of salvation that opens up the route to healing of memories and reconciliation, the challenge that post-Gulag Christology faces in relation to eschatology needs further exploration. Post-Gulag Christology insists that God can indeed save, and that there is still meaning and order in the world despite the suffering that threatens to subvert sufferers' confidence in God. But the power of post-Gulag Christology to engender hope comes from adhering to an eschatology that is almost exclusively focused on the afterlife, which in turn brings us to the first of two major tasks that post-Gulag Christology still faces.

Further Work to Be Done on Post-Gulag Christology

Two principal tasks facing multiple post-Gulag Christologies in Eastern Europe, I suggest, consist in moving (1) from an eschatology focused almost exclusively on the afterlife to a realized eschatology that includes attention to the reign of God as an already present reality, and (2), in Bernard Lonergan's terms, from a classicist to a historical worldview.

As explored above, in the Lithuanian context, the first task closely correlates with the ambiguity that the *Rūpintojėlis* image brings to the Gulag experience. The second task stems primarily from the experience of the fragmented world of the Gulags and the turmoil of the early post-Gulag period, because a common reaction to the threat of fragmentation is a retrenchment to universals. Let me lay out these tasks.

Moving toward a Realized Eschatology

The first task is to move toward a more realized eschatology. This has to be undertaken in the context of the significance assigned to eschatology in the Gulag and early post-Gulag period, when it was complicated by Marxist ideology. I will first illustrate the prominence and particularities of the eschatological theme in the Lithuanian texts of the period, and then discuss this theme in relation to the Communist "utopia."

As noted above, Communist persecution of Christians resulted in a focus on eschatological fulfillment to give meaning to the suffering and strengthen the persecuted to endure it. Even the experience of suffering was conceived of as an occasion for joy, as if echoing the last of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:11; Lk 6:22–23). A letter written by a Roman Catholic priest, Juozas Zdebskis, before his assassination by the Communist forces in 1986 illustrates the paradox:

> In great suffering alone can we experience the greatest joy of which the world does not even have a clue. . . . It is wonderful, it is like the pain of giving birth: it is the pain that gives life to others. . . . We need to offer freely that which death will take away from us by force. Just make the simple mathematical calculation—subtract the values that will be taken away by

> death from all the values in life. You'll see that what remains is that which is really worth living for.[32]

In the Gulag and early post-Gulag period, emphasis on eschatology as promising ultimate reward portrayed the cross as Jesus' decisive invitation to the heavenly banquet.

This emphasis nurtured hope and trust that God is willing to transform present suffering into ecstatic joy and to vindicate the sufferer through the paschal mystery. For a theology of suffering, highlighting the eschatological meaning of the Christ event opened up the possibility of speaking of the mediation of grace through suffering, chosen not for its own sake, but because of fidelity to the ultimate, to "that which is really worth living for."

Focus on eschatology was pertinent not only to the writings that reflect spiritual aspirations of the time, but this focus is also evident in theological texts written in Lithuanian during the Gulag era and published both in countries of emigration and in Lithuania shortly after the political change. Relevant examples would be a 1976 collection of essays by Lithuanian priest and biblical scholar Antanas Rubšys (1923–2002); and another collection of the essays by a Gulag prisoner Česlovas Kavaliauskas (1923–1997) based on his lectures to seminarians in the 1960s and 1970s.[33] The latter book by Kavaliauskas[34] can serve as an example of both special focus on eschatology and initial move toward more realized eschatology.

In his essays, Kavaliauskas was ahead of his time and place, anticipating Christology's post-Gulag direction. Though he was interested primarily in eschatology as a doctrine about the "last times," he also warns against completely separating the present from the glorious future: "a fatal dualism" would result.[35] On the other hand, he cautions that "theology has to reject every attempt to identify God's reign with an earthly reign, in whatever form the latter would be manifested."[36]

Both of Kavaliauskas's warnings—against fatal dualism and against reducing God's reign to any political system—illustrate the complexity of the challenge that

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32. *Pažinsite iš vaisių: kunigo Juozo Zdebskio korespondencija—adresačių atsiminimai*, ed. Loreta T. Paulavičiūtė (Vilnius: Lumen, 1997) 62–64, quoted in Ligita Ryliškytė, "Spiritual Freedom as Liberation within: Lessons from the Gulag Era," *Way* 50 (2011) 37–49, at 40.
33. Antanas Rubšys "Vilties teologija: Eschatologinė Dievo karalystė," *Aidai: mėnesinis kultūros žurnalas* 7 (1976) 297–300; Česlovas Kavaliauskas, *Eschatologija žmogui ir pasauliui* (Vilnius: Edukologija, 2011).
34. Kavaliauskas's life and theology deserve special attention. In 1946 he was secretly ordained a Roman Catholic priest; four years later he was sentenced to ten years in prison in the Gulags. There, for his pastoral activities and participation in the joint uprising of Lithuanian and Ukrainian Gulag prisoners, he was sentenced to death, but due to political changes after Stalin's death, the sentence was not carried out. In the Gulags Kavaliauskas witnessed and was subjected to extreme cruelty by guards and criminal prisoners. See Sigitas Geda, "Kunigo Česlovo Kavaliausko atminimui," *Šiaurės Atėnai* 10 (1997) 2.
35. Kavaliauskas, *Eschatologija žmogui ir pasauliui* 48.
36. Ibid. 46.

post-Gulag Christology faces. Placing strong emphasis on the eschaton as the source of hope against Soviet repressions increased the risk of drawing a sharp line between the present and the parousia, thus encouraging a dualistic conception of history and salvation. Moreover, the ideological context reinforced overemphasizing "not yet" at the expense of "already." Under Communism, iconic and sacramental functions of culture proposed by Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov were severely undermined. For Evdokimov, eschatology, culture, and icon are intimately interconnected: "culture becomes the icon of the kingdom of God, the icon itself being the symbol and the anticipatory embodiment of such eschatological fulfillment."[37] However, the experience of Communism taught us that present reality as experienced in the culture of Communism is not a reliable locus for God's reign: visions can easily turn into ideologies, and icons into idols. Consequently, in Richard Niebuhr's terms, "Christ against culture"[38] or, more precisely, "Christ against dominant culture" was favored as a christological framework.

The realization of a Communist "utopia" (which, in fact, was anti-utopian) also threatened to disempower and trivialize the Christian "utopia" and to subvert the meaning of God's reign as an already present but still anticipated reality. Noble observes that the realized Communist "utopia," which etymologically is derived from the Greek *ou topos* ("no place"), and *eu topos* ("a good place"), became a dystopia, a distorted place full of violence and destruction:

> The totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century could teach us about the death of utopia by means of its final "realization." . . . Communism exploited the image of a socially just world, where liberty, equality and fraternity governed. Enforcing so-called scientific Marxism-Communism as a worldview, it also declared the death of utopia.[39]

In response to the "death of utopia," post-Gulag Christology has to recover the meaning of the reign of God as a reality that is effected by God and comes to fulfillment at the end of time, but is present already in the now. Recovering this meaning includes recognizing, acknowledging, living out, and celebrating God's irrevocable act of "looking upon the humble state of his people"—to paraphrase the Magnificat (Lk 1:48). It also takes imagination: it calls us to envision how God's loving look is visible and effects what it intends in the post-Gulag situation. Receiving God's reign then leads to transformation and participation in it.

Hence, the experience of radical suffering in the East Bloc prompted a turn toward the eschatological dimension of the Christ event as a source of ultimate meaning and hope. This turn has the potential to enrich the theologies of suffering. It also poses a challenge to reinterpret the meaning of the "already" of the reign of God and to develop a corresponding eschatological imagination. One hopes that the move toward realized eschatology will contribute to the development of a pastoral theology that is more

37. Peter C. Phan, *Culture and Eschatology: The Iconographical Vision of Paul Evdokimov* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985) 3.
38. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001).
39. Noble, *Theological Interpretation* 69.

sensitive to the present issues of social justice, peace, and poverty in the Eastern European context.

Moving from a Classicist to a Historical Worldview

Finding a safe haven in something stable and universal is a common reaction to the experience of suffering in a fractured and fragmented world such as that in which post-Gulag Christology was born. Hence, post-Gulag Christology is naturally designated by the classicist outlook that, according to Bernard Lonergan, approaches the world from the abstract and universal. Consequently, such a Christology faces the challenge of moving from the classicist approach to historical mindedness, which, conversely, begins with particularity. Below I review the pitfalls of an attachment to the classicist worldview, the related challenges, and the promising beginnings of the transition that post-Gulag Christology is already making.

If post-Gulag Christology remains attached to abstract and universal truths, it risks resisting the change that makes Christology relevant for our times, for, as Lonergan points out, "all change occurs in the concrete."[40] When the methodological framework of the historical approach, which Lonergan describes as "from particular to universal," is discouraged, the rigorous application of Vincent of Lerins's threefold rule of orthodoxy, *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*, is uncritically upheld by equating innovation with error. Hence, the classicist outlook stipulates a theology that is entrenched in "universals" and, in Lonergan's terms, favors "flight from understanding,"[41] which blocks "the insights that concrete situations demand."[42] Therefore, to maintain a living dynamism, post-Gulag Christology has to begin from the particularity of its own context rather than from abstract truths.

When abstractions, which do not change, are preferred to the concreteness of human reality that does change, the notion of incarnation is also endangered, for an abstract Christ does not exist. Hence, responding to the challenge to move toward historical mindedness also emphasizes the incarnational nature of God's continuous, symbolically mediated self-communication. Thus, the interplay between the human and the divine in the natures of Christ, in the Gospels, and in the church has to be discovered anew. The reason is this: Since the emphasis on the "divine" at the expense of the "human" correlates with the pattern "universal over particular" described above, post-Gulag Christology needs to resolve a seeming contradiction of simultaneous coexistence of mutually exclusive predicates of the divine and human nature in the one person of Jesus. Though radically asymmetrical, the same dyad, "fully divine–fully human," has to be rediscovered in the realities inseparable from the person of Christ: the Gospels and the church.

40. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness," in *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 1–9, at 5.
41. Ibid. 7.
42. Ibid.

The works of the Eastern European theologians mentioned earlier demonstrate that the transition to the historical worldview is already under way. For example, the recent initiative to develop a theological approach to the sufferings and hopes of women in the Eastern European context testifies that post-Gulag Christology takes seriously the challenge of such a transition.[43] Relevant examples of this transition anticipated or already undertaken are present in the writings of Kavaliauskas and Noble.

Kavaliauskas, for instance, suggests a notion of a "nonlinear Christ" (derived from the term "nonlinear physics"), which helps hold together the interplay between the divinity and humanity of Jesus, especially his knowing and not-knowing. Kavaliauskas describes this tension between Christ's intimate filial knowledge of the Father and "the limited horizon" of his human knowledge:

> Jesus . . . voluntarily accepted being restricted in time and space, and squeezing himself into the categories and concepts of knowing and choosing a discrete and fragmented comprehension of the world, he became like any other human being. His human will was encompassed in the sphere of unknowing and fluctuation. Historical and cultural dimensions deeply affected him: he thought and spoke in the ways proper to his time and place.[44]

By inventing his concept of a "nonlinear Christ," Kavaliauskas develops a way to speak of the paradoxical coexistence and unity of seemingly exclusive properties (finite and infinite) in Christ as analogous to the paradoxical coexistence of properties such as particle/wave duality that, prior to the dawn of the quantum physics, were thought to be mutually exclusive. In suggesting this analogical way of speaking of Christ, Kavaliauskas paves the way for a historically minded post-Gulag Christology. He highlights the significance of the historical and cultural dimension and offers an example of creative appropriation of the modern concepts.

Another pertinent case of post-Gulag Christology that answers the challenge to move from a classicist worldview to historical mindedness is Noble's aforementioned *Theological Interpretation of Culture in Post-Communist Context: Central and East European Search for Roots*. Her book reflects on the theological meaning and implications of art born in the Communist dissident culture, thereby placing her work in the realm of contextual theology and historical mindedness. Noble also directly affirms that "redemption is not an escape from history,"[45] thus underscoring God's redeeming presence in the world and the need to do theology that starts with a particular experience of it.

The foregoing analysis has shown, therefore, that as post-Gulag Christology is attempting a transition from a classicist to a historical worldview, it needs to uphold contextuality as a theological imperative and to heed the incarnational dimension of the divine reality. Powerful cultural or popular religious images, such as *Rūpintojėlis* presented above, can facilitate this undertaking.

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43. See Anić et al. (eds.), *God Will Wipe Away All Tears*.
44. Česlovas Kavaliauskas, *Teologija šiandien I* (Kaišiadorys: Kaišiadorių vyskupijos kurija, 1995) 26.
45. Noble, *Theological Interpretation* 119.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

In a nutshell, implicit and explicit post-Gulag Christology emerging in an Eastern European context speaks of God stepping into the very midst of suffering in order to effect, enact, and foreshadow the transformation of the law of death into the way of life. As the *Rūpintojėlis* image suggests, the latter transformation happens as Christ takes humanity's history into his "nonlinear" story. There, the separation between the human and divine is transcended, and one is invited and empowered to live "as if" the reign of Christ already has the final say.

This new Eastern European voice emerging in the global conversation about Jesus Christ is subject to ongoing development. Remarkably, this development is a two-way road: it not only affects how religious symbols are interpreted theologically, but it also impacts the development of the religious symbols themselves. For instance, the emerging examples of *Rūpintojėlis* represented as the risen Christ—indicated in some woodcarvings by the marks of the wounds—speak of the recent shift to assert the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Such symbolic transformation of the image illustrates how popular Christology becomes more transparent to the radiance of ultimate transformation, the world's already and still-to-be-realized fulfillment of its truest destiny.

Though the perspective presented in this article offers only a cross-section of a much larger phenomenon, it brings to the forefront a provocative test case for contextual theology by inquiring into how the recollection of past experiences, a growing awareness of present challenges, and further expectations for the future may be brought into a theological conversation that serves to inform our present understandings of Christ. The perspective also asks how a battered nation can draw on its own experience and develop christological insights that are useful for the wider church. Having lost so much over the decades of occupation, can the church afford to move to a historical worldview without losing something essential? How can the church integrate the best of what is available in the theological traditions of the Eastern European and the Western world? My hope is that questions and insights from this test case can offer enriching possibilities for multiple Christologies emerging from various Eastern European perspectives.

Author biography

Ligita Ryliškytė, S.J.E., received her PhD in medicine and MA in religious studies from Vilnius University, and her CAES in religious education from Boston College. She is currently Senior Researcher in the Medical Faculty of Vilnius University. Her area of special competence is the Eastern European context. She has recently published "Spiritual Freedom as Liberation within: Lessons from the Gulag Era," *The Way* 50.2 (2011); "Dialogue with the Radically Other: Models of Discernment in the Old Testament," *Review for Religious* 71.1 (2012); and "The Women of the Gulags and Nelson's Paradigms of Evil: Becoming a Sign of Hope against All Hope," in *And God Will Wipe Away All Tears from Their Eyes: A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women*, ed. Jadranka Rebeka Anić et al. (2013). As to future work, she has been admitted into the doctoral program in theology at Boston College, where she plans to specialize in Christology.