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## LIVE FROM GOLGOTHA: GORE VIDAL'S SECOND "FIFTH GOSPEL"

In 1989, after the publication of *Hollywood*, his twenty-first novel, Gore Vidal talked of his projected next novel, a semi-autobiographical account of the United States between the years 1945 and 1950 (Delaney). This novel, to be entitled *The Golden Age*, would have been, and may yet appear as, the seventh in Vidal's sequence of novels about American political history — the sequence which began with *Burr* in 1974.<sup>1</sup> However, when his twenty-second novel appeared in 1992, it was not *The Golden Age* but *Live From Golgotha*, subtitled *The Gospel According to Gore Vidal*.

*Live From Golgotha* appeared almost simultaneously with Harold Bloom's *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. Through an examination of various sects and cults in the United States from the early nineteenth century to the present, Bloom argues in *The American Religion* for the existence of a tacit national religion which is essentially based upon the valorising of the individual over the congregation or community. This hypothetical American religion is only putatively Christian, being more accurately identifiable with Gnosticism; it takes the form of an internalised quest for identity and some form of immortality. "There are tens of millions of Americans," he says, "whose obsessive idea of spiritual freedom violates the normative basis of historical Christianity, though they are incapable of realising how little they share of what once was considered Christian doctrine" (263).

Bloom's notorious theory of the anxiety of influence — of the agonistic, albeit mainly unacknowledged, competition in which the writer engages with his or her precursors — has affinities with his friend Gore Vidal's many and various representations of quasi-Oedipal and fraternal conflicts in his fiction. Notwithstanding the limitations of Bloom's inductive approach — his evasions of certain issues of American social and racial heterogeneity — his reflections in *The American Religion* on the continual multiplication of offshoots of the original Christian church, and the inevitable mutation of a religious message with the passing of time, are attractive to me insofar as they resonate with Vidal's concerns manifested in his novels about religion.<sup>2</sup> Vidal is manifestly hostile to Christianity as institution, as distinct from the man Jesus as represented in the Christian Gospels, or the individual seeker for spiritual truth. His preoccupation with Christianity is consistent with the predominant subject of his work, namely the ways in which knowledge and belief are acquired,

recorded and passed down. In 1965, discussing his reasons for writing the novel *Julian*, Vidal remarked that

if we do not understand Christianity, then we cannot make much sense of the world we live in, because our society, morally and intellectually, for good and ill, is the result of that great force. (99)

In *Live From Golgotha*, he offers a dubious aid to our further understanding of Christianity in a fictional narrative of Saint Timothy, the first bishop of Ephesus, purportedly written in the year 96 A.D.

The biblical Timothy first appears in *Acts* 16 as a disciple of good repute whom Paul had wanted as his travelling companion. To appease the Jewish converts to the new religion, Paul had him circumcised. Vidal's novel begins with Timothy's recurring nightmare about the surgery.

In the beginning was the nightmare, and the knife was with Saint Paul, and the circumcision was a Jewish notion and definitely not mine. I am Timothy, son of Eunice the Jewess and George the Greek. I am fifteen. I am in the kitchen of my family's home in Lystra. I am lying stark naked on a wooden table. I have golden hyacinthine curls and cornflower-blue, forget-me-not eyes and the largest dick in our part of Asia Minor.

This pretty much sets the tone for the whole novel. The abundance of gratuitous sexual romping, much of it centred around Saint Paul, who is portrayed as a giggling, tap-dancing homosexual paedophile whose sexual predations Timothy accepts as part of the price he has to pay to see the world, is just one aspect of what has been seen by several reviewers as a sophomoric regression on Vidal's part. It is still unclear to me exactly why he has chosen to return through fiction to the early years of the Christian Church, when he had already satirised Christianity so formidably in the novels *Messiah* and *Julian*.

*Live From Golgotha* is the fifth of what can be termed Vidal's religious novels, the others being *Messiah* (1954), *Julian* (1964), *Kalki* (1978), and *Creation* (1981). All of these are properly apocalyptic fictions, concluding as they all do with parodic teleological revelations. In *Messiah*, Vidal depicted the rise of an American-based world-wide death-cult as an allegorical critique of the processes by which religions become institutionalised, in a context of Cold War paranoia. *Julian* is a fictional biography of the fourth century Roman emperor labelled "the apostate" by posterity, because of his failed attempt to keep alive the pagan religions in defiance of the inexorable progression of Christianity. In *Kalki*, Vidal brings about the end of the world, through a megalomaniac Vietnam veteran who has proclaimed himself to be the tenth incarnation of the

Hindu god Vishnu. *Creation* is set in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., and has as its protagonist a Persian who meets Confucius and the Buddha, among many other historical figures, during the course of his quest to discover how the universe was created.

In different ways, *Messiah*, *Julian* and *Kalki* each relates the story of the defeat of a powerful religion by a new and ruinous cult. In *Julian*, it is argued that none of the pagan cults either exhibited a strong missionary drive or attempted to exclude other cults, their capacity for tolerance accounting in part for their expunction by the absolutist religion of Christianity. In *Messiah* Christianity in turn has become democratised and weakened by its long reign and is thus vulnerable to the authoritarian cult of the mortician's assistant turned Messiah John Cave. This novel, *Messiah*, was Vidal's first "fifth gospel."

The term "fifth gospel" was coined by Theodore Ziolkowski for a sub-genre of fictions which he describes as "fictional transfigurations of Jesus" in the ground-breaking book of that name. According to Ziolkowski, in "fictional transfigurations of Jesus"

the characters and the action, irrespective of meaning or theme, are prefigured to a noticeable extent by figures and events popularly associated with the life of Jesus as it is known from the Gospels. (6)

Under the heading "fifth Gospel," Ziolkowski analyses Lars Gorling's *491*, Gunter Grass's *Cat and Mouse*, John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* together with Vidal's *Messiah*. Ziolkowski argues that these texts approach the material of the New Testament with the detachment of non-belief. In all Vidal's religious novels, the crux of his demythologising intent is the distinction he urges between the known facts of the life of the person upon whom a religion is founded, and the kerygmatic metamorphoses of those facts. The theological term "kerygma," meaning "proclamation," connotes the religious significance attached to the historical facts concerning a person or event, particularly those facts recorded in the Christian Gospels. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann neatly sums up the issue of Christian kerygma as follows:

As the synoptic tradition shows, the earliest Church resumed the message of Jesus and through its teaching passed it on. So far as it did only that, Jesus was to it a teacher and prophet. But Jesus was more than that to the Church: He was also the Messiah; hence that Church also proclaimed him, himself — and that is the essential thing to see. He who formerly had been the bearer of the message was drawn into it and became its essential content. The proclaimer became the proclaimed — but the central question is: In what sense? (33)

Vidal would answer that the veneration of the messenger necessarily results in the accretion of dogma which ultimately disfigures the message. As he perceives it, the chief enemy of the man Jesus and his message is Paul of Tarsus.

In *Messiah*, the brash and unscrupulous publicity manager of John Cave is named Paul Himmel, and is a patent parody of the apostle Paul as arch-distorter of the word, although his role in the novel is conflated with that of Judas. Although someone else fires the gun which kills John Cave, it is effectively Paul who murders him, with the ambition of establishing once and for all the Cavite kingdom, just as the execution of Jesus ensured the perpetuation of the legend of the Christ. Cave's simple message of comfort, that death is not something to be feared, is transformed by his apostles into a fascination with death, and eventually the adherents of Cavite Incorporated are morally bound to end their lives by taking Cavesway, the Cavite term for suicide.

*Messiah*, a revisionist gospel of *Cavesword*, is narrated by one of Cave's original followers, Eugene Luther, whose objections to the distortion of Cave's message after his murder had resulted in exile on pain of death. At the end of his life, Luther discovers that he has been written out of history, his contribution to the new religion attributed to someone else. Only at this time does he realise that Cave was meant to be the Fore-runner, a John the Baptist, and that he himself had been born to be the Messiah. Whether this auto-epiphanic revelation represents apotheosis or madness is left unclear.<sup>3</sup>

The fifth gospel which Timothy is purportedly writing in *Live From Golgotha* primarily concerns Saint Paul rather than Jesus, which itself emphasises Vidal's point — that Christianity as we know it is more the bequest of Paul's vision than that of Jesus, Paul having indirectly given Christians their very name. By the end of the novel Timothy is openly working to save Pauline Christianity against the efforts of the resurrected Jesus to wrest his own message from its expropriators.

During the nightmare which opens the novel, Timothy receives a vision of Saint Paul, who tells him that the Gospels are systematically being erased by a virus "which has attacked the memory banks of every computer on earth as well as in Heaven and limbo" (8). In the universe of *Live From Golgotha*, all human history has a continuing metaphysical existence in the form of transcendent tapes, which are analogous to ordinary videotapes. A mysterious computer genius known only as "The Hacker" has discovered how to break into these incorporeal tapes and rewrite history. Everything written about Jesus prior to the year 96 A.D. has been erased. Paul tells Timothy that, as his tape has thus far been immune, it is his divinely ordained task to write the fifth gospel, a

task he must complete before his death at the hands of resentful pagans during one of their festivals the following year.

The deeply confused Timothy is shortly afterwards visited by mysterious men with a Sony television set. After several days absorbing from the television as much information as he can about the late twentieth century, Timothy is visited by a man who introduces himself as Chester Claypoole, the vice president in charge of Creative Programming at NBC. Claypoole explains that the tape of Timothy's life has so far been rendered immune to The Hacker by a Doctor Cutler of General Electric, who has also invented the means by which someone living in 1992 can channel to a past time in the form of a hologram. Because his visitors will be travelling within Timothy's tape, Timothy will experience no linguistic barrier to comprehension.

As soon as it is sufficiently developed, NBC is planning to utilise this technology to send a camera crew back to the crucifixion of Jesus and broadcast it live on television. Clearly in league with Saint Paul, Claypoole has come to ask Timothy to agree to be channelled back to Jesus's crucifixion to anchor the broadcast. Claypoole also instructs Timothy to conceal the completed Gospel According to Saint Timothy in his cathedral in Thessalonika, where it can be discovered by archeologists shortly before the second millennium.

Because he was born after the crucifixion, for Timothy the Good News is structured upon Paul's mission, and is inaugurated by Paul's epiphany on the road to Damascus. In *Acts* Chapter 9, Saul is said to have been surrounded by a light from heaven and to have heard the voice of Jesus reproaching him for his persecution of Jesus' followers. The Paul of *Live From Golgotha*, however, experienced a vision of Jesus waddling towards him. According to Timothy, "Jesus was enormously fat, with this serious hormonal problem — the so-called parable about the loaves and fishes was just the fantasy of someone who could never get enough to eat" (29).

For the physical characteristics of his Saint Paul, Vidal has adopted the description in the apocryphal second century work *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a description which makes parody redundant. The Paul in that work is a man of small stature, bald, bow-legged, with a large nose and eyebrows meeting above it (Grant 3). With regard to the itinerary of Paul, Timothy and Silas, Vidal remains fairly faithful to the New Testament. His Timothy begins his gospel proper with the companions' arrival at Philippi in approximately 50 A.D.

It was during their first night in Philippi, Timothy now recalls, that he first experienced a visitation from the future. A small strange woman in black had approached Paul and demanded his opinion on her belief that all illness is

simply a manifestation of a weakening of the mind. This woman, a version of Mary Baker Eddy, returns at various moments through the narrative. Unable to avail herself of twentieth century technology, she is nevertheless able to channel back to the time of the early church through willed hallucination. Throughout the novel, Timothy will be visited by numerous people from the future, each trying to persuade him to endorse his or her own version of Christianity. In this novel as elsewhere, Vidal represents the Christian Church from its very beginning as the battleground for agonistic proprietorial dispute.

Timothy writes that when Paul first joined the followers of Jesus, there was a demarcation agreement between himself and James, the brother of Jesus.

Saint would look after the foreskin set while James, with some help from Peter the Rock-thick, would sell the good news about Judgment Day to the Jews ... Unfortunately, Saint could never mind his own business, which was converting the Gentiles to Christianity. (25)

When Paul and Timothy later rendezvous with James in Jerusalem, open hostility breaks out. "You are magnifying my brother Jesus into something he wasn't," James tells Paul. "You are telling the goyim that he was the Son of God, which is blasphemy" (123). Recent works of theology, which allude to James's role in the early days of the church, mention only two possible grounds for disharmony between James and Paul: James's greater emphasis on adherence to Old Testament Law being incumbent upon followers of Jesus, and his assertion (in the letter attributed to him in the New Testament) that faith and good works together are necessary for salvation, which differed from Paul's emphasis on faith alone.<sup>4</sup>

In his monograph on Paul, Michael Grant comments on how James persuaded Paul to take measures to demonstrate his orthodoxy to satisfy the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem. As Grant says, Paul's arrest during his final visit to Jerusalem "could not be blamed on James, but it did leave him and his Jewish Christian Church (for a short time) supreme: for it meant the abrupt termination and eclipse of Paul's Gentile mission which so many members of the church had disliked" (167). Vidal's representation of James as conceiving of the new religion as one meant solely for Jews, and his depiction of Paul and James as enemies, would seem to stem purely from his desire to satirise the apostles as an internecine group of primarily self-interested men.

Timothy's recollection of his early days in Paul's entourage encompasses their time in Corinth, where they enjoyed the hospitality of the Christian converts Priscilla and Aquila. These characters are first encountered in Acts 18, in which Luke relates that Paul

met a Jew called Aquila whose family came from Pontus. He and his wife Priscilla had recently left Italy because an edict of Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome. Paul went to visit them, and when he found they were tentmakers, of the same trade as himself, he lodged with them, and they worked together.<sup>5</sup>

When Paul journeyed to Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila went with him, and remained after he had left, continuing the work of the church there.

Vidal's Priscilla is a middle-aged nymphomaniac who takes the adolescent Timothy as one of her many lovers, Aquila being either complaisant or naively unsuspecting. In Ephesus, Priscilla becomes a popular entertainer, performing erotic dances while an actor reads from her intimate diaries which, as Timothy notes, are at his time of writing enjoying a posthumous vogue in the unexpurgated edition. Timothy's account of one of Priscilla's recitals confirms that Vidal is once again caricaturing his old enemy Anais Nin, whose compliant husband Hugh Guiler provided the resources which Nin used to explore her desires, the fulfilling of which were recorded in detail in her journals.

"Oh, Diary!" she moaned, "*Quel jour!* I knew when I wrapped the cerise scarf around my neck that I had never looked more adorable and vulnerable. Are the two one? So, have I let slip some clue to my nature unknown even to me, complete in my womanhood as I am? Aquila does not want to be mentioned in this journal." (*Live from Golgotha*, 88)

Timothy is told by one of his visitors from the future that Priscilla's secret erotic diary has been discovered in the twentieth century by Edmund Wilson. This constitutes an in-joke for the illuminati. Edmund Wilson was one of the sexual partners of Anais Nin, as well as one of Vidal's most admired precursors as an essayist.

Vidal met Anais Nin in 1945, when she was forty-five and he was twenty. They had an affair and, as Nin's journals from 1944-1947 indicate, she saw herself as something of a healer or exorcist for him (Nin 155-56). In two early novels, *In a Yellow Wood* (1947) and *The City and the Pillar* (1948), Vidal flatteringly modelled his dark exotic wise heroines on Nin. However, in the novel *Two Sisters*, written in 1968, presumably in response to the first publication of parts of her diaries in 1966, Vidal cruelly parodied Nin in the figure of Marietta Donegal, an embarrassing old exhibitionist, a ruthless publicity seeker devoid of talent.

In *Live From Golgotha*, after Paul and Timothy travel to Rome, they encounter Priscilla again. She announces her bigamous marriage to Glaucon, a successful writer of satyr plays. Glaucon's dancer wife, with whom Priscilla has also been

intimate, has run off with one of Timothy's other former sexual partners, Stephanie, a priestess of Diana. Vidal is here burlesquing Anais Nin's relationship with Henry Miller and June Mansfield, as detailed in the selection from her journals published as *Henry and June*. Amusing though all this is, one has to wonder why Vidal felt moved to renew his attack on an enemy who is already obviously ridiculous, and is now defunct.

Vidal takes on new enemies as well. In Ephesus, the young Timothy had become infatuated with Stephanie, the priestess of Diana. During his first visit to her apartment, the apparition of a woman in a leotard gazes at Timothy and Stephanie with a face that is exactly like Stephanie's. This is meant to represent Shirley MacLaine, channelling back to one of her past lives. In the fourth of her autobiographies, *Dancing in the Light*, the current incarnation of Shirley MacLaine details her conversion to belief in reincarnation. As Timothy learns in *Live From Golgotha*, when Jesus explains the necessity of his own role as the monitor of tapes and channels, "Ever since Shirley MacLaine popularised channelling, all sorts of idiots have been going back to their earlier lives" (95).

In the pertinent chapter in *The American Religion* Harold Bloom too holds Shirley MacLaine partially responsible for the momentum of the New Age movement. Discussing the tangential relations between New Age enthusiasm and conventional Christianity, Bloom suggests that:

A God immanent both in outward nature and in consciousness evades the intervening space of incarnation. Christianity therefore is mostly irrelevant to the New Age, except insofar as Christianity already has been modified into the American Religion, of which the New Age is sometimes a charming parody. (184-85)

Further on however, Bloom states that:

It is hardly a limitation of the New Age that so much of its appeal is founded on thanatology. Christianity, after all, stakes everything upon the Resurrection; if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, in defiance of nature, then all of Christianity is simply an imposture. (187-88)

What must be most offensive to earnest Christians about *Live From Golgotha* is Vidal's portrayal of a Jesus who not only was not resurrected — at least in the sense that Christians understand — but who in the first instance escaped being crucified through trickery, and had eventually to be duped into submitting to crucifixion for the sake of the religion which had been established upon that event.

After Saint Paul and Chester Claypoole set Timothy to work on the Gospel of Pauline Christianity, Timothy is visited by Marvin Wasserstein, a pious Jew in

his thirties and a computer programming genius. Marvin tells Timothy that what James, the brother of Jesus, has to say is the key to the gospel, and must not be ignored despite Timothy's inevitable bias in favour of Paul (103). Shaking Marvin's hand, Timothy realises that Marvin, unlike his other visitors from the future, is not a hologram, but flesh and blood. When he sees the video of the scene of the arrest at Gethsemane, produced by NBC in a trial run of its Cutler Effect technology, Timothy understands why. Jesus at Gethsemane is the man known to Timothy as Marvin Wasserstein, while the fat man envisioned by Paul on the road to Damascus is actually Judas. When Judas leads the Roman soldiers to Jesus, Jesus forestalls him by kissing Judas and paying homage to him. Judas is led away to be crucified, while Jesus, having submitted to his last temptation, the one offered by the NBC, is transported to the late twentieth century to live as Marvin Wasserstein. James and his crowd in Jerusalem are connivers in this coup.

There ensues a pivotal scene in Timothy's cathedral, where Chester Claypoole, the ally of Saint Paul, and Marvin, his true identity revealed, converge, along with a woman claiming to be Mary Magdalene reincarnated and two versions of Dr Cutler. The younger Dr Cutler is on the side of Pauline Christianity, while his older self has had a change of heart and is abetting Jesus in his attempt to subvert this religion by reducing it to its basis in Judaism, and stripping it of its patristic appropriations from Mithraism and elsewhere. When Timothy manages to speak privately with Jesus, Jesus affirms that he is indeed the mysterious Hacker, the individual responsible for the erasure of the Gospels.

Timothy travels back to the Last Supper with the older Cutler. When he hears Jesus denouncing Saint Paul as the Devil, Timothy realises that Jesus himself is truly Lucifer incarnate (214). In a last visionary appearance, Paul explains the necessity of putting Jesus back on the cross where he belongs, to give the television audience the "slender bearded ladylike" Jesus it has been expecting. Timothy asks:

"But what difference does it make? Everyone who knew it wasn't Jesus pretended that it was, and then you came along later and invented Christianity, with its logo the cross, so who was actually up there on the cross makes no difference now."

As Paul replies:

"No one ever thought the world would get a chance to see the whole thing and hear the whole thing. Judas won't do at all ..." (204)

Understanding his duty, Timothy betrays Jesus, by identifying him for a centurion sent by Pilate. The destiny of Paul's Jesus is fulfilled, and his death is accomplished in two sentences.

Just before this replayed crucifixion, when Timothy is chatting with Pontius Pilate, he notices the resemblance between Pilate and David Bowie, who played Pilate in Martin Scorsese's film of Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Timothy doesn't mention the film by name, but merely refers to it as:

a recent film in which we were all unusually portrayed. This film, curiously enough, seems to have been deeply influenced by the Hacker. In a vision, Jesus — not Judas — leaves the cross and goes off and gets married, and then decides to return to the cross for no urgent reason. (208–209)

This casual allusion belies the strength of the affinities, whether elected or otherwise, between *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in either the novel or the filmed version, and *Live From Golgotha*.

Kazantzakis wrote from an explicitly Christian perspective, his stated purpose being to move others to love Christ (10). Thus his approach to the problem of the relation between fact and kerygma is necessarily different from Vidal's. As Ziolkowski puts it, Kazantzakis aimed to portray "a human savior whose image has been shorn of the inauthentic attributes bestowed upon it by conventional Christianity"; he was motivated by a desire "to understand what it is that causes a man to identify himself with Jesus" (126). Until the moment of his death, Kazantzakis's Jesus is tormented by uncertainty as to whether his intimations that he is the Messiah originate from God or the Devil. The raising of Lazarus, for instance, is not the blessing it appears to be in the Gospels. Jesus is unable to reverse the process of post-mortem decay, and so Lazarus is brought back to a state between life and death, a sentient existence of imprisonment within corporeal putrescence.

Timothy says that the Jesus of Kazantzakis returns to the cross "for no urgent reason," but in the Kazantzakis and the Scorsese Jesus is visited by Paul of Tarsus in his old age, when he is living bigamously with Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Paul expatiates at length on the importance to the Christian church of an invented Jesus. Kazantzakis' Jesus identifies Paul as a son of Lucifer, and Paul retorts as follows.

"If the world is to be saved, it is necessary — do you hear — absolutely necessary for you to be crucified, and I shall crucify you, like it or not; it is necessary for you to be resurrected, and I shall resurrect you, like it or not" (488).

Although there is an intervening scene in which Jesus is berated by the original apostles for betraying them by choosing not to undergo the crucifixion, it appears that Paul's taunts about Jesus's redundancy compel him to take his ordained place back upon the cross, and thus to become the Messiah.

Scorsese's depiction of a sexual and sexually active Jesus greatly upset fundamentalist Christians across the United States when his film was released. Far more interestingly subversive, I would suggest, is the possibility between the lines of Kazantzakis's novel that the last satanic temptation of Jesus was in fact the idea that he was the Messiah — in other words, the temptation was to believe in his own uniqueness and necessity. Kazantzakis's novel can be read without perversity as indicating that Jesus's submission to crucifixion resulted from human egotism rather than a divine plan. Moreover, the novel comes very close to implying that Judas, rather than Jesus, is the real hero of Christianity, as Kazantzakis has Judas betray Jesus only at Jesus's behest, going against his own nature for the greater good and accepting that he will be forever demonised in consequence.

Vidal's heresy is of a different order, insofar as the temptation to which his Jesus succumbs is that of remaining a mere prophet, and eschewing his own transformation into a savior. Both Vidal and Kazantzakis, albeit from very different perspectives, deconstruct the Christian doctrine of the necessity of the crucifixion of the historical Jesus for the salvation of humankind.

At the moment of Jesus's death in *Live From Golgotha*, above his cross appears the image of a blazing sun, in the centre of which is seated the goddess Amaterasu — the Sun Goddess from whom Japan's holy emperors descend. The new post-broadcast logo for Christianity is a cross within the circle of the sun. At the end of the novel, Timothy optimistically hopes that his gospel will bring about the de-Nipponising of Christianity, which has evidently been appropriated by Japanese investors in Hollywood. His optimism, however, seems ill-founded. After the narrative *per se* ends, the novel concludes with a scrambled page from the Gospel of Mark and then one and a half pages of the Gospel of Timothy, in Japanese. This turns out to be a straightforward translation of the beginning of *Live From Golgotha*.<sup>6</sup>

The ending of the novel represents in parodic fiction ideas that Vidal had expressed in 1986 in an essay entitled "The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas." In this essay, Vidal announced:

On September 16, 1985, when the Commerce Department announced that the United States had become a debtor nation ... the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo, and that was the end of our empire. Now the long-feared Asiatic colossus takes its turn as world leader, and we — the white race — have become the yellow man's burden. Let us hope that he will treat us more kindly than we treated him.

The perspective of Vidal's whole *oeuvre* is predominantly valetudinarian. His novels and essays nostalgically evoke real or hypothetical golden ages, when

there were better writers, honourable and intelligent politicians, less regulation of personal matters, and greater toleration of difference. One of Vidal's great skills as a novelist is his ability to combine in the one work sardonic satirical humour with *gravitas* and often genuine pathos. *Messiah*, published when Vidal was twenty-nine, has this quality, which makes it a poignant as well as an intellectually provocative reading experience.

This is precisely what is missing from *Live From Golgotha*. The novel is a light-hearted spoof which I have chosen to take seriously. The problem, as I see it, is Vidal's choice of the fictional Saint Timothy as narrator. Several of Vidal's narrators are participants in the action but are in some way marginal to, skeptical of, or antagonistic to what they are reporting. Vidal, who regards himself as something of an American Coriolanus, scorned as a traitor because he will not show his wounds (Stanton 42), is at his best when depicting events from the perspective of the intelligent outsider. Himself a writer apparently not subject to the religious impulse, he has created a Saint Timothy whose personality is diffuse and inconsistent, and whose motivations are unclear.

At the risk of criticising Vidal's *Live From Golgotha* for not being something it was never pretending to be, I will conclude with the following observation. At one point in the novel, Vidal takes Timothy to a party in Rome at the home of Petronius, the author of the *Satyricon*, a figure to whom Vidal has often declared his literary indebtedness. Had Vidal chosen to write one of his didactic satires, with Petronius as commentator on the rise of the new religion, he might have undertaken a more substantial revisitation of some of the issues explored in the earlier religious novels. Ventriloquising Petronius could, I suggest, have enabled him also to produce a sharper commentary on the United States as it approaches the second millennium.

A man of letters in the best sense of the phrase, Vidal has produced a large body of work in several genres — novels, stage-plays, screenplays and essays. Now aged seventy, he is achieving success in yet another career, having been featured in the recently released films *Bob Roberts* and *With Honors*. What I would like to see as his next move is something he is unlikely to undertake, namely a serious scholarly work of theology. It would be delightful to see Gore Vidal put his considerable skills as a theologian to full use, and so conclude his unfinished business with his great *bête noir*, Pauline Christianity.

#### Notes

1. In chronological order of subject matter, not in the order of publication, the sequence at present stands as: *Burr*, *Lincoln*, *1876*, *Empire*, *Hollywood* and *Washington, D.C.*
2. For the parameters of this essay, I take as Bloom does William James's definition of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James describes "religion" as — "the

feelings, acts and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." (Cited in Bloom, 25.)

3. See Heather Neilson, "The Fiction of History in Gore Vidal's *Messiah*" in *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia U.P. 1992), 106–119, for a fuller discussion of this novel.
4. See, for example, John Reumann, *Variety and Unity in New Testament Thought*, Oxford Bible Series, ed. P.R. Ackroyd and G.N. Stanton (Oxford: OUP, 1991).

*James* 2:18–20 sets up a [...] diatribe where our writer takes on those who separate faith and [...] works and believe simply in the oneness of God, a prime tenet of Judaism (*Deut.* 6:4). It has often been maintained that Paul was the target here, but his distinctive phrase "works of the law" is missing, and the Pauline belief system centred on salvation through Christ and not just on the tenet that "God is one." Most recent interpretation, therefore, sees no reference here to Paul but, at best, to later followers, who had terribly narrowed the concept of faith and sundered it from all response to those in need. (200)
5. This and other biblical references are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*, Popular edition, ed. Alexander Jones (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974).
6. My thanks to Monica Skidzun, a student of Japanese at the University of Western Australia for her translation.

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