Religion is a big rip-off in itself, but it can also be a great instrument of liberation.¹

My concern in this chapter is ambivalence, the political ambivalence of theology. The argument may be stated quite simply: a religion such as Christianity may be oppressive or liberating, a dreadful instrument for state-sanctioned terror or the source of inspiration for one revolutionary movement after another. Christianity is an exercise in delusion by self-serving priests, a woeful validation of the power of despots and oligarchs, says one; no, Jesus was a revolutionary and Christianity began as an anti-imperial movement, says another. Neither is entirely correct, it seems to me, for both options – as well as variations on them – are entirely possible.

The argument has three steps. I begin by drawing on one or two historical examples. The field of such examples passes well beyond the horizon, but I have chosen a few lesser-known instances that continue to intrigue and entice me. From history, I move to theoretical reflection with the help of sundry Marxists, corralling together those who have recognised in some way the political ambivalence of Christian theology. In this section, I draw upon and extend various moments in the earlier volumes of the *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, for political ambivalence became a consistent theme, especially in *Criticism of Theology*, where I traced it through the work of Max Horkheimer,

¹ Negri and Scelsi 2008, p. 205.
E.P. Thompson, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, Michael Löwy, Roland Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, and Antonio Negri. Others will turn up in the following pages. Although they all give voice to this ambivalence to some extent, some are more astute than others, so I have distinguished between the unwitting and the witting – that is, in some cases the political ambivalence of Christian thought and practice emerges inadvertently in their work, while in other cases it is explicitly foregrounded. One question is left hanging: why is Christianity so riven with contrary political directions? So I close by outlining some of the preliminary theoretical questions that will set the scene for the full, gritty detail of a historical proposal that must await the next chapter.

Scandal and folly

No better illustration of the ambivalence of Christianity may be found than in the history of the last two millennia. Immediately I am faced with a problem of oversupply, for the examples could be piled up in an interminable, multivolume work; an encyclopaedia perhaps, one section known as the Christian Black Book and the other as the Christian Red Book, each competing with entries to outdo the other. Nonetheless, I restrict myself to a few key examples. On the negative side, the usual suspects include the infamous conversion of Constantine in 312 CE, with the subsequent legalisation, sponsorship and eventual declaration – by Theodosius I in 380 CE – that Christianity was to be the sole religion of the empire, as well as the Crusades, the pursuit of heretics, the Inquisition and the wars of religion in Europe after the Reformation. Some are desperately ludicrous, such as the admission by the Roman Catholic Church that it had erred in declaring Galileo’s heliocentric positions heretical – in 1992! Others are barbaric, such as the pogroms against Jews in the Middle Ages or the rise of Islamophobia in the twenty-first century.

Papal power

Rather than express faux horror with the bloodiest examples to be found, I prefer to give a couple of lesser known but equally pertinent examples: the rise of papal power, the treatment of heretics, and the California missions of the nineteenth century.2 On papal power: over the period of half a millennium, from 1000 to 1500 CE, papal power was to rise to unheard-of heights only then to begin a long decline. We can trace a number of key features of this period. During its peak,