

When Žižek met the Church Fathers: A contextual consideration

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Abstract

This article considers the functionality, method and import of the critical theorist Slavoj Žižek's engagement with theology against the wider intellectual backdrop of the relationship between an idea and its cultural context. I propose that his engagement can be better understood and interpreted with reference to how Christian theology has historically come to understand its own cultural context. When Žižek's appropriation of theology is read alongside theology's appropriation of classical philosophy in the patristic period, a distinctly speculative understanding of theology as an idea developing through a dialectical process of determinate negation in its various contexts.

Keywords: Žižek, theology, Church Fathers, Hegel, idea, cultural context, speculative

Contextualising Žižek's Theological Engagement

The religious idea of Christianity emerges, is rooted and continues to develop in its cultural context. Theology, here understood as an intellectual reflection on the act, content and implication of the Christian faith, then performs the essential task of reflecting critically on this relationship between an idea and its cultural context. It is this perspective and task of theology that has attracted the attention of critical theorists across academic disciplines. Some of these are more surprising than others, such as the many non-religious, Marxist-inspired political thinkers who explore theological resources as a conceptual pool facilitating and grounding critique. Critical theorists, such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, recognize theology's critical potential as an important element of the political, whether for organization, maintenance or enhancement of social living. One of these is the Slovenian post-Marxist critical theorist Slavoj Žižek, a dialectical materialist and avowed atheist. Nonetheless, Žižek is convinced of the absolute necessity of Christian theology for both the development of his political thought and the outcome thereof: a radical universalism grounded in materialism that is distinctly theological in experience and form. Indeed, for Žižek, theology forms one of the most complex ways of speaking about radical political change. Are there any lessons to be learned from Žižek's critical theoretical appropriation of theology? What does it highlight about theology as such? Is theology itself affected or changed by this appropriation? This article will propose that Žižek's appropriation of theology highlights theology's constant coming into being in its contexts.

Rather than discussing the problems of Žižek's utilization of theology and its political results, this article will discuss Žižek's appropriation of theology in the service of critical theory against the backdrop of the historical relationship between an idea and its cultural context as observed in the study of church history. Therefore, it will turn to evaluation of Žižek's engagement with theology and its resulting thought only in passing, not to detract from its main goal of highlighting the engagement's wider

intellectual context and its import for theology. In his analysis of Renaissance literature, the leading new historicist Stephen Greenblatt (1982) emphasizes that the text is caught up in the power struggles of its time. In a similar vein, but on a larger scale, I attempt to show that Žižek's appropriation of theology is part of a broader historical struggle, and thus carries lessons for the understanding of theology as it considers this relationship between Christianity and its cultural context.

Church history demonstrates a perennial struggle to clarify the relationship between Christianity and culture—the materialization of meaning.¹ Sometimes this struggle has focused on special issues (such as Christianity's relation to the cultural legacy of the Classical world); at other times, it has been focused on broader questions of the church's responsibility for social order. At all times, however, it reveals that the relationship is dialectical, one of constant movement, tension and appropriation between the two. I argue that Žižek's engagement with theology and its import can be better understood and interpreted when compared to or read alongside how theology has come to understand Christianity's own cultural context. I will demonstrate this by reading his appropriation of theology in parallel with the Christian appropriation of classical philosophy in the patristic period: from the liberal or open appropriation of classical philosophy by Justin Martyr, to the refusal to appropriate it at all by Tertullian, to its critical appropriation by Augustine.

This article thus highlights anew the highly complex, tense and creative relationship between an idea and its cultural context and considers its implications for the method or approach of theology. Understanding Žižek's theological engagement as a dialectical repetition of the patristic example reveals the true challenge of this engagement. Rather than merely repeating the imperative for theology to engage its cultural context, the article will propose that theology is to be understood as speculative—an idea developing through a dialectical process of determinate negation in its various contexts.

Žižek and the Open Appropriation of Justin Martyr

In the second century, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr explored the parallels between Christian theology and Platonism. I would like to draw attention to three excerpts from his *First* (Justin Martyr, 1867a: 7-70) and *Second Apology* (Justin Martyr, 1867b: 71-84), written c. 147-161 AD, which highlight aspects of the convergence between theology and philosophy.

Firstly, this excerpt from the *First Apology*:

We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and *those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists*; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them. (Justin Martyr, 1867a: 46; emphasis added)

Later in the same paragraph, Justin mentions Socrates as an example of someone who should be regarded as a Christian on the grounds that he lives reasonably. This gesture, however one evaluates it, is mirrored by Žižek's appropriation of Christian thinkers according to the materialistic potential of their writing. One can observe this in two examples: Søren Kierkegaard and Gilbert Keith Chesterton. Regarding the first, Žižek (2006: 75) argues that through his articulation of the logic of meaningless sacrifice, Kierkegaard is separated from dialectical materialism by only a thin, almost imperceptible line: "there is no theory, just a fundamental practico-ethical decision about what kind of life one wants to commit oneself to." His reading of Chesterton (Žižek, 2003: 34-57) follows the trajectory of his theological thought from Idealism to dialectical materialism or, in other words, from transcendence to immanence (Karlsen, 2010). Žižek explores implications of this regarding ontology in the essay "Toward a Materialist Theology" (2007), morality in "From Job to Christ: A Paulinian

reading of Chesterton” (Žižek, 2009: 39-59), and politics in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (234-306).

Alongside Justin’s stretched consideration of Socrates as a Christian, Žižek’s problematic appropriation of Christian thinkers according to their materialist potential reveals the dynamics of appropriation—the interrelated challenge to and development of ideas. Like Justin, Žižek is selective and he reads the chosen sources through a materialist lens, resulting in a heterodox interpretation.² Justin’s appropriation of philosophical resources or Žižek’s appropriation of theological sources challenges the earlier perception or idea—both of the appropriated but also of the appropriator. I will demonstrate how this heterodox challenge represents the dialectical development of an idea and its various interpretations or appropriations represent moments within it. Indeed, the core of an idea, be it theology or philosophy, is not a matter of normativity or orthodoxy, but rather the very challenge to its understanding. Thus Augustine’s theology or Žižek’s materialist philosophy are changed by their appropriation of philosophy or theology, respectively.

Besides appropriating Christian thinkers according to their materialist potential, Žižek articulates his materialism in theological language in a manner that recalls Justin’s own appropriation of concepts from Platonist philosophy, exemplified by the pivotal concept of λόγος [the Word], which played a key role in both Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. Thus, in *The Parallax View*, Žižek (2006: 68-123) not only carries forward the major conclusions concerning Christianity reached in his earlier works, but expresses new developments of ideological critique in theological terms. It is through explicit discussions of theological topics, especially the death and resurrection of Christ, that he introduces notions such as the reality of human freedom and universality (see also Kotsko, 2008: 118-123). Žižek then grounds such notions, which possess a symbolic authority, in the material, the physical. Ultimately, this is also the function of Žižek’s (34-35) appropriation of the apostle Paul, who provides and fleshes out the principle of “unplugged” universality in his epistle to the Galatians 3:28.

For Žižek (2003: 6), Christ’s cry of dereliction on the Cross marks the emergence of materialism and explains his insistence at the start of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that “in order to become a dialectical materialist one should go through the Christian

experience.”. Dereliction not only reveals the nonexistence of the big Other, but opens up the space for thinking about its implications (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 287), namely the inconsistency and contingency of reality itself (Žižek, 2006: 79). In other words, only theological heritage carries the potential for thorough materialism. It is this experience of material reality as inconsistent and incomplete, Žižek argues, that enables ideological critique, which therefore is itself inherently theological.

In *On Belief*, Žižek (2001: 148) fully spells out the import of Christianity for real socio-political change:

Here enters the ‘good news’ of Christianity: the miracle of faith is that it IS possible to traverse the fantasy, to undo this founding decision, to start one’s life all over again, from the zero point—in short, to change Eternity itself (what we ‘always–already are’). Ultimately, the ‘rebirth’ of which Christianity speaks (when one joins the community of believers, one is born again) is the name for such a new Beginning.

For Žižek, it seems, theology forms one of the most complex ways of speaking about radical political change.³ Moreover, as Roland Boer (2009: 376) points out, his militant politic “is an inescapably radical and revolutionary *theological* doctrine.”. Theology is political and the political is theological, therefore political theology is not only possible, but necessary (Žižek, 2010b: 118-119). The attempt to think politically, without religious categories, was a failure that resulted in a domination of ethical policies and laws that uphold them, Žižek argues. He contends that theology can help recast politics where subjects meet directly, without reliance upon the legal and ethical order. Žižek (119) concludes: “Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, one can say that what we need today is a *theologico-political* suspension of the ethico-legal.”. Žižek’s appropriation of theology further develops, even transforms his materialism.

Given that the ultimate concern of Žižek is political, that might seem utopian or at best an idealistic hope for the political future. However, Žižek argues that such a non-ideological social bond, though contingent and inherently fragile, has been experienced. His examples include the Ancient Greek democracy, Lenin’s Bolshevik revolution,

Eastern Europe's undermining of Communism in the 1980s, or indeed the recent Occupy movement against capitalism. Žižek (2009: 288) considers Christ as the precursor of these and future instances—a sort of Nietzschean mythic form that “reaches its true form in the logic of the emancipatory political collective.”. Despite Žižek's logically strong theoretical reasoning in support of such a social bond,⁴ the question remains whether such a community can be anything other than an event? Rather than merely pointing out its fragility, is it not more important to ask whether such a community can exist and persist without the ideological support of the big Other? Even in the absence of the big Other, its existence is essential in the first place. In Žižek's case, the death of God event is necessary and cannot be excluded since otherwise we would remain trapped in the system of debt. Without God, there is no death of God. Did the listed examples not result in a resurrection of the big Other—be it God or “History” or “development” or something else? The question then is: However arbitrary and changing, do we need ideological support to “be”? Alas, it seems Žižek does not aim to present us with a sustainable and resilient alternative, but rather a possibility of a break or radical change, which we have to continually repeat as a series of unpluggings. What he proposes is not so much a thought of revolution, but “revolutions”— as in the final installment of the Matrix trilogy. Radical orthodox John Milbank's (2005: 411) criticism that Žižek's atheistic universality of struggle or tension functions only as an ontology of revolution, rather than sociality, seems pertinent: “if universalism springs from an event, then to lose mythos and history is to lose the event, and so to lose the universal.” Žižek's political theology is not without its problems, be they political or, as will be observed later, theological.

In the *Second Apology* Justin (1867b: 79) writes:

For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since *they did not know the whole of the Word*, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. (emphasis added)

Žižek (2013) proposes something similar with regard to the apostles or Christian theologians of the past, who also “did not know the whole of the Word.” Citing *Philosophical Fragments*, in which Søren Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus (1985, 103-107), asserts that the disciple only provides information and God is the one who brings about the condition of faith, Žižek suggests the apostles or Christian theologians were merely functioning as postmen, carrying a message whose potential had not yet been realized. Hence, they often contradicted themselves or even the message that they were carrying. Whatever one makes of Žižek’s eccentric understanding of Kierkegaard,⁵ the analysis proposed by both Justin and Žižek is that of misunderstanding or misappropriation of the thought, not because of its essence, but because of its being (in that it is not fully realized). This reveals the idea’s ontology as a process of development: rather than possessing a “true” form or moment, it constantly comes into being.

From that analysis, Justin goes on to conclude that:

Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are *the property of us Christians*. For next to God, we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, that, becoming a partaker of our sufferings, He might also bring us healing. For all the writers were able to *see realities darkly* through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them. For the seed and imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself, of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from Him (Justin Martyr, 1867b: 83; emphasis added).

We can easily draw parallels between Justin’s claim that any valid teaching of the philosophers belongs to Christians and Žižek’s conclusion in *Paul’s New Moment*: “This is why I—precisely as a radical leftist—think that Christianity is far too precious a thing to leave to conservative fundamentalists. We should fight for it. Our message should not be, ‘You can have it,’ but ‘No, it’s ours. You are kidnapping it’” (Žižek, 2010a:

181). Justin's and Žižek's remarks about the unknown potential of ideas and contestation of their ownership demonstrate the very nature of ideas as free and avoiding position, challenging and subverting stable, coherent and systematized narratives. Far from settling ownership of an idea, Žižek and Justin are demonstrating the inability to claim it.⁶ An idea comes into being by being challenged in each new context, but at the same time negates that context. What remains is the idea as the process of development. Theology, then, while lending itself to various contexts and preserving them, at the same time cancels them. I will further elaborate this with the help of Hegelian dialectics in the coming sections.

I wish to conclude this section by stating that this is where the similarities between Justin and Žižek end, since Justin does not articulate adequate grounds for distinguishing Christianity and Classical culture, whereas Žižek does in relation to dialectical materialism and Christian theology. In other words, whereas Justin Martyr advocates a liberal appropriation of classical philosophy, or a liberal appropriation of the cultural context of an idea, Žižek advocates a critical appropriation of theology as the cultural context for his materialism.

Žižek and the Refusal of Tertullian

The lack of differentiation on Justin's part was also the reason why his arguments were not received warmly, for they appeared to present Christian theology and Platonism as perspectives of divine truth. The most severe criticism of the approach proposed by Justin is found in the writings of Tertullian, who, convinced that philosophy was "pagan" in its outlook, rejected it entirely and thus placed Christianity as a countercultural movement. In *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (1870: 1-54), he sets up a contrast between Athens (the home of the Platonist Academy) and Jerusalem, symbolizing the incompatibility of philosophy and Christian theology.

In the chapter "Pagan Philosophy the Parent of Heresies," Tertullian (1870: 9-10) writes:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? ... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of

Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! *We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel!* (emphasis added)

This attitude of Christian theology, distancing itself from a moral or mental environment within which it took root in order to create a theological normative, is mirrored in modernity's construction of the categorical dualism of religion and politics in order to create the normative of "secular." Its belief about the necessity to separate the two domains was rooted in the global struggles of the eighteenth century. This conviction was also marked by a denial or distancing from the environment in which it took root: the dualism of Christian truth and pagan falsehood (see Fitzgerald in Singh and Kim, 2017: 169-183).

The perversion of this completely arbitrary demarcation of religion and politics was demonstrated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2005: xviii) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2005), where they proposed two theses: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology." While the first thesis upholds the contribution of religion to the enlightenment process, the second thesis understands enlightenment itself as mythical due to its foundation of fear. Adorno and Horkheimer rightly challenged the dualism of myth and enlightenment, or religion and reason, by understanding the relationship between them as truly dialectical. Akin to modernity's secular mythology, Tertullian's equally arbitrary drawing of strict borders between Christian theology and its philosophical cultural context was an attempt to create the normative category of theology, apart from the multifarious cultural context of its own roots.

What is observed in the refusal to engage with the cultural context of an idea or particular thought is an attempt to construct a genealogically "pure" and therefore normative category or definition. This troubling undertaking, observed also with radical orthodoxy's call to a Thomistic *analogia entis* in preference to modernity (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, 1999), is marked by an invocation of a past true and unspoiled form of thought. However, as Stephen Frosh (2016: 6) notes, "there is no pure lost object kept in wraps for when it will be needed, everything happens in the now, and what we draw on from the past is always refracted through what has happened since."

With regards to radical orthodoxy, the longed-for past Thomistic theology takes its shape and content from the present experience of modernity and is therefore but an attempt to produce a genealogically correct normative category of theology. Yet, there is no idea or form of thought apart from its cultural context, nor can it be abstracted. Rather than its normativity, there is only its changing context within which it develops. Clinging to a particular form or contextual moment of an idea is to restrict an idea's essence of development. Theology is not an idea of normativity.

Even though Žižek's theological engagement bears no similarities with Tertullian's negative attitude towards the cultural legacy of the Classical world and secularism's rejection of its religious roots, this consideration of the negative attitude was necessary, for it illustrates the dialectical nature of the relationship between an idea and its cultural context—either between theology and classical philosophy or critical theory and theology. It demonstrates what Hegel (2010: 125) called “moments ... of every concept or everything true in general.”

Dialectics was for Hegel much more than a method of seeking knowledge, for it represents presuppositionless thought freely and necessarily determining itself. The best account of dialectics is in paragraphs 79-82 of his *Encyclopaedia Logic* (Hegel, 2010: 125-133). The first moment of understanding or the abstract is marked by a seeming stability of thought. This understanding and stability is then challenged in the second moment of the negative that reveals its partiality and passes into its opposite. Finally, the third moment of the speculative sublates the opposition into a more complex thought. Building on Hegel, I propose that what is observed in the open appropriation is the first stage of a dialectical movement between an idea and its cultural context—the abstract—whereas the extreme opposite negative attitude of rejection represents the second stage of dialectical movement—the negative. In the next section I will propose that Žižek's critical appropriation of theology is best understood alongside that of Augustine of Hippo's as an example of the next dialectical stage that recognizes the unrestricted and tense relationship between an idea and its cultural context—the speculative.

Žižek and the Critical Appropriation of Augustine of Hippo

Just as Justin's appropriation was rejected for its lack of a critical stance, so too was Tertullian's approach criticized for its wholesale rejection. A shift thus occurred away from Tertullian to a more positive but critical appropriation of classical philosophy. This shift is best exemplified by Augustine of Hippo, whose critical appropriation of classical philosophy can be observed in the following extract from his *De Doctrina Christiana* (c. 397):

Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be *true and consistent with our faith* should not cause alarm, but be *claimed for our own use*, as it were *from owners who have no right to them*. Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and shunned but also vessels and ornaments of *silver and gold*, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to *make better use of them*, surreptitiously claimed for themselves (they did this not on their own authority but at God's command, and the Egyptians in their ignorance actually gave them the things of which they had made poor use). Similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burden—some studies that involve unnecessary effort . . . , but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction, as well as the various truths about monotheism to be found in their writers. These treasures—like the silver and gold, which *they did not create but dug*, as it were, from the mines of providence, which is everywhere—which were used *wickedly and harmfully in the service of demons* must be removed by Christians, as they separate themselves in spirit from the wretched company of pagans, and applied to their true function, that of preaching the gospel. (Augustine, 1996: 125; emphasis added)

The fundamental theme here is that of taking a way of thinking that had hitherto been put to one use and liberating it for the service of another. Classical philosophy, Augustine argues, declares things that are both true and false, and thus cannot be completely dismissed, neither can it be uncritically accepted. Augustine underpins his argument with the observation that when the Israelites fled from captivity in Egypt, they claimed the gold and silver, while abandoning Egypt's idols. Augustine's inference is that, Platonist philosophy could likewise be claimed by Christians, where and when needed, and in this way serve the cause of the Christian faith. Specifically, theology ought to utilize philosophical resources in the manner of Israel's critical appropriation, exploiting that which is useful and discarding that which is not.⁷

In *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 126-131), the radical orthodox John Milbank calls upon Slavoj Žižek to abandon his modern nihilistic ontology (built on Protestant metanarrative, following Hegel) and instead adopt a Christian Neoplatonist metanarrative, which was achieved by Augustine and further developed by Thomas Aquinas. Certainly, Žižek's selectivity with regard to theological sources according to their materialistic potential excludes Augustine who does not inform the content of his thought (at least not in a positive manner). However, I wish to propose that if we compare Žižek's and Augustine's function in the context of the relationship between an idea and its cultural context, then we find similarities between them, perhaps not in the content of their thought, but definitely in their function and method of critical appropriation.

We can easily draw parallels between Augustine's claim in the passage above to Christian ownership of whatever is valuable in Platonism and Žižek's (2010a: 181) conclusion in *Paul's New Moment* with regards to Justin Martyr. Furthermore, Augustine reminds us of Žižek's attempt to critically appropriate Christianity and in this way redeem it to serve the cause of his dialectic materialism, enabling universalism and emancipation. Augustine's assertion that the treasures that the Israelites took with them were not invented by the Egyptians, but were mined instead, could be read alongside Žižek's claim that the materialistic principles in Christianity are essential and neutral, not ideologically invented. The only difficulty is the use to which they were put, or to quote Augustine (1996: 125), the fact that they have been put "wickedly and harmfully in the

service of demons.” The materialistic principles, Žižek (2003: 110) argues, served the ideological superstructure, enabling it, rather than disassembling it—by transforming Christ’s sacrifice into an insurmountable debt and thus binding the subject. As the big Other was “resurrected” and Christianity became a new kind of law, its universal love was perverted. Could this statement of irony, that the principle intended to destroy the ideological superstructure actually upholds it, not be read alongside Augustine’s observation, that the treasures intended to worship God actually worship the demons?

The only solution in both cases, according to Žižek (2003: 171), is thus to liberate these truths from their previous attachments:

In what is perhaps the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, it is possible today to redeem this core of Christianity only in the gesture of abandoning the shell of its institutional organization (and even more so of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge.

It is clear that Žižek does not hold religious beliefs, but turns to theology in order to challenge any notion of the big Other (Žižek and DeHart, 2008). Žižek’s drive for the proper use of Christianity’s materialistic core in the service of the proclamation of materialist freedom can be compared to Augustine’s appeal for appropriation of philosophical truths in the service of the Gospel.

It is Žižek’s appropriation of theology, rather than his proposition of Christianity’s socio-political potential, that has in recent years attracted attention and critique from the theological perspective. Theologians, such as John Milbank, Frederik Depoortere (2008), Marcus Pound (2008), as well as the Marxist theorist Roland Boer (2009: 175-390), have all challenged Žižek’s selective and heterodox theological approach. Indeed, Žižek’s materialistic interpretation of theology appears odd to the classical theological reader, insofar as it lacks a serious consideration of the traditional or current biblical and theological scholarship.⁸ In fact, his ignorance of contemporary theology is

revealed in his classification of the Norwegian metaphysician Peter Wessel Zapffe as a theologian (Žižek, 2014: 271).⁹ Instead, Žižek crafts his understanding of the New Testament by reading it in the context of Hegel, Lacan, Marx and contemporary radical philosophy. Certainly, Žižek at times engages thinkers, such as Chesterton or Kierkegaard, but at other times he chooses simply not to. The oft-challenged decisive criterion in Žižek's appropriation is the materialistic potential of theological thinkers and texts.

Žižek's reason for this serious lack of consideration of the traditional theological scholarship lies in the conviction that such an activity would be not only be unproductive but also obsolete, since that scholarship represents a restrictive and perpetual ideological wandering, failing to see its materialistic ground. His response would perhaps be along the lines of his conclusion to *The Parallax View* (Žižek, 2006b: 381-385), in which he argues that sometimes the best way to fight against ideology is to do nothing, radically refusing the very devices that would provide an explanation and enable differentiation. This, he argues, like God's self-abandonment on the Cross, is another example of a dialectical negation of negation—a change in perspective that transforms an apparent defeat into victory.

To enlighten Žižek's politics of refusal further, one could consider Walter Benjamin's (1920-1921: 179-204) essay "Zur Kritik der Gewalt." In it Benjamin argues that challenges to, or violations of, the law always threaten to turn full circle and become a law-making violence of their own. This is a cycle bound to endless repetition, like that of the mythical punishment of Prometheus (196-197). In the light of this problem Benjamin proposes that the only *revolutionary* form of violence that does not re-instate the violence of the law is a proletarian strike. Rather than extorting concessions from the bosses, the general strike makes no demands other than the complete transformation of social relations and of work itself. This type of strike is a pure means and therefore not violent because its ends are radically senseless, unreasonable and extravagant according to capitalist logic. In a similar way, Žižek's non-participation in the traditional theological discussion is intentional; it is a refusal of mythical imperatives that obfuscate theology's materialistic potential.

Žižek is not a theologian and his engagement with theological sources is from the perspective of critical theory, operating in a magpie fashion of selectivity for his own personalized approach. Therefore, any expectation of him to reflect on his materialist theology strictly *ab intra theologiae* [from within theology] falls upon deaf ears. Instead, the transformative selectivity in Žižek's and Augustine's appropriation is a manifestation of the ontological contradiction of an idea and its context.

In the second extract from *De Doctrina Christiana* below, Augustine goes on to provide examples of those Christians who have already appropriated the treasures of Classical culture and philosophy in the service of the gospel:

This is exactly what many good and faithful Christians have done. We can see, can we not, the amount of gold, silver, and clothing with which Cyprian, that most attractive writer and most blessed martyr, was laden when he left Egypt; is not the same true of Lactantius, and Victorinus, of Optatus, and Hilary, to say nothing of people still alive, and countless Greek scholars? This is what had been done earlier by Moses himself, that most faithful servant of God, of whom it is written that he was trained in 'all the wisdom of the Egyptians.' (Augustine, 1996: 127)

Similarly, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek attempts to provide a rough sketch of this new form of thought, which, in contrast to its earlier postmodern, deconstructionist and poststructuralist form, does away with respect for Otherness. He lists as its main figures Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and at the threshold of transition from the previous form, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan. "The main feature of this field is its theologico-political turn: a decidedly materialistic focus on a theological topic" (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 255). Žižek considers a materialism that is theological and cannot be conceived apart from theology. The examples given by both Žižek and Augustine situate their critical appropriation of an idea's cultural context in the service of that idea, critical theory and theology respectively. In both cases, the appropriated context allows for a manifestation of the idea's ontological tension and enables its development. Grasping the unity of the abstract and the negative moment, the speculative sublates (preserves and negates) them into a higher concept of theological materialism or philosophical theology.

Žižek's materialistic engagement with theology can therefore be described as a dialectical stage of the speculative in the relationship between an idea and its cultural context and bears the appearance of a mirror image of Augustine's appropriation of Classical culture.

A dialectical relationship considered

It is my argument that in the dialectical conception of this tension between an idea and its cultural context, be it theology and classical philosophy or critical theory and theology, the approach of critical appropriation embodies the Hegelian dialectical stage of the speculative for it recognizes the emergence and development of an idea in its cultural context. Augustine does not merely reconcile the abstract of Justin Martyr and the Negative of Tertullian through a simple gesture of appreciation but engages Platonist philosophy fully and radicalizes the negativity of the negative to such a degree that it no longer appears as a negation. In other words, albeit simplified: classical philosophy (in Augustine's theological context) should be appropriated exactly because of its "bad" elements, which enable us to know the "good" elements—that is the essence of critical appropriation. Similarly, Žižek's own critical appropriation (in his materialist context) stands as the speculative, which sublates the vulgarity of strict secularism into a materialism that cannot be conceived apart from theology.

Furthermore, Augustine and Žižek's critical appropriation affirms that there has always been discrepancy between an idea and its cultural context. According to Hegel's (2010: 150-152) third law of dialectics, negation of the negation, in the speculative, the contradiction is inherent and internal to the relationship between the context of an idea and the idea itself; indeed, this discrepancy is necessary for it forms the idea. This understanding of the dialectical process is affirmed by Žižek (1989: 7) when he asserts that the result "is not absolute knowledge conceived as full and transparent, but a realization that absolute knowledge itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss." In other words, there is no normativity; any imposition thereof but abstracts the idea and prevents further development. The tension between an idea, be it theology or critical theory, and culture, be it classical philosophy or theology, is never fully resolved. Thus the relationship as a dialectical movement in history does not

arrive at the totality of this process, or eradicate the tension through a hegemony of one over the other, but is instead propelled by it.

What this means is that the idea is developing in its cultural context. Augustine's approach of critical appropriation set the course for theological engagement and appropriation of its cultural context in church history. At the same time, however, this engagement is not a one-sided relationship of appropriation but one of mutual challenge and transformation—theological engagement with Platonist philosophy impacted theology. In a similar way, Žižek's appropriation of theology changes the nature of his critical theory: it is paradoxical, in that it is not a simple return to the longed-for materialism, nor is it mere sociological revisionism, but consists of a rejection of the normative categories of materialism and theology, thereby sublating them. Thus the engagement of an idea with the myriad of its past, present and future cultural contexts drives and shapes it through constant transformation, disturbing any notion of its normativity.

It is also important to note that not only does this engagement cause the idea to change but the idea also impacts its cultural context. Just as Platonist philosophy shaped theology, so too the appropriation of its resources shaped Platonism. Thus the Platonism engaged by Justin Martyr and Augustine was already of Philo's syncretic form. Likewise, critical theory's engagement shapes theology itself so that the theology encountered after this appropriation is *ex post facto* [from a thing done afterwards]. Of course, the effect is not normative but embodies the dialectical movement of historical thought towards "uncoupling" (Žižek, 2001: 106). This is how Žižek's engagement not only develops materialist philosophy but affects theology itself, refracting its traditional perception despite protestation of misappropriation. Indeed, as observed with radical orthodoxy and Tertullian, any attempt to preserve or defend an understanding changes it. Žižek's appropriation reiterates the culturally shaped perception of theology, just as observed in the example of Augustine. Revealing that there is no idea or form of thought apart from its cultural context, the dialectical moment of the speculative is far from stable and therefore upsets any notion of identity, normativity and definition, be it that of an idea or its context.

An example of how Žižek's (2013: 361-380) appropriation shapes theology itself is observed in "Slavoj Žižek, The Death of God, and Zombies: A Theological Account" where Ola Sigurdson presents a discourse between Žižek's materialistic theology and Augustine's anthropology. Žižek's psychoanalytically inspired notion of the undead or death drive is compared to Augustine's (1991) notion of human subjectivity in *Confessions*. After proposing Augustine's understanding as a corrective of hope, Sigurdson (2013: 379) then gives an example of what Žižek has to offer theology: "an account of human subjectivity that does not shy away from its profound alienation." To Sigurdson, some of Žižek's psychoanalytic discussions make theological sense and are perhaps better perceived as such, albeit in a different context.¹⁰

Therefore we arrive at the question of what is the task of theology in this engagement? It is not to openly appropriate its context and thus surrender its distinctive perspective, erasing the developmentally necessary tension between an idea and its cultural context, as was observed in the example of Justin Martyr. It is also not to abstain in order to preserve its 'true' identity or to insist on the continuity of that identity for that would be a Procrustean imposition of normativity. Furthermore, if theology, following the example of Tertullian, refused to engage with critical theory, the latter nonetheless shapes it in its engagement and gives it its content. Theology cannot be abstracted from its cultural context.

I have argued that theology ought to engage with its cultural context by following Augustine's appropriation, which is distinctly critical and recognizes theology's embeddedness in its cultural context. Specifically, it ought to do so in a way that reflects its speculative character. Rather than theology's normativity, there is only its ontological development and the changing context giving it shape and content, allowing for its constant development. This speculative understanding of theology, which challenges any notion of identity, normativity or intent, even its own, represents the dialectical tension of colliding ideas in order to shape the continual development of thought. Walter Benjamin (2002: 868) would describe it as theology's "mimetic capacity" in each new context—the capacity to challenge/transform the presuppositions of its contextual partners but also its own. It is theology's speculative moment that is both its power and its challenge in the engagement with its cultural context.

Concluding Implication

What begins to emerge through this article is a speculative understanding of theology as an idea developing in its cultural context. The context allows for a manifestation of theology's ontological tension and enables its development. Rather than its normativity, there is only its changing context within which it develops. Yet, while theology comes into being in each new context, it at the same time sublates it. Therefore, clinging to a particular form or contextual moment of theology is to restrict its dialectical essence. Indeed, theology is not a matter of normativity or orthodoxy. A speculative understanding of theology represents freedom to abstract from everything and observe theology's self-constructing path (Hegel, 2010: 10).

Does that mean that the only advantage of such an understanding of theology as a process of development is negative, continually challenging a position and not providing one? I would argue that this negativity is not a simple negativity as absence of a position, but rather a negativity that sublates itself as an undefined position. In turn, the presence of a position implies preference for the context at the expense of the idea. A speculative understanding of theology then is no doubt characteristically negative—a critique rather than a doctrine—but is for that reason functionally positive.

Notes

¹ The definition of culture as the materialization of meaning, in the sense that culture is the primary manifestation of the meaningful, belongs to Emil Brunner (1889-1966). See Brunner, 1948: 69.

² Thus, Milbank analyses Žižek's interpretation of Catholic thinkers, such as Eckhart, Kierkegaard, Chesterton and De Lubac and finds it 'strange' (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 125). In turn, Milbank's consideration of the Lutheran theologian Søren Kierkegaard as a Catholic also challenges the traditional perception. He argues that Kierkegaard's linking of faith with reason restored a basically Catholic perspective and further mentions Kierkegaard's Catholic critique of Luther for exalting faith at the expense of works.

³ Rather than being a mere illustration of Žižek's political thought, theology plays an important part in his development as a distinct political thinker. In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*,

Judith Butler (2000:28-29) criticises Žižek on the grounds that while his psychoanalysis provides an important contribution to how ideology works at an individual level, it does not provide a solution or a way out. It rather insists on the notion of constitutive exception, which simultaneously enables and hobbles every effort at emancipation, thereby subverting it. Since Žižek's psychoanalytic thought cannot enact change and is therefore impotent, Butler argues it cannot provide the basis for a viable politics. By engaging further with Christian theology, Žižek escapes from the closed-circuit of Lacan's psychoanalysis and emerges as a distinct political thinker. It is thus interesting to observe the change of language that occurs away from Lacanian terminology in the quoted passage of *On Belief*. Instead, it leans heavily on theological terminology, which enables a political act. The Christ-event provides the paradigm for stepping outside or transcending the particular context and thus changes its very coordinates. Thus Lenin is but a repetition of Christ (Žižek, 200: 114), and Roland Boer (2009: 112) is certainly right when he extrapolates that Žižek's deliberation of Lenin's actual vs. formal freedom is a Leninist formulation of law and grace in Paul's theology. This understanding of the necessity of theology was again confirmed at *The Actuality of the Theologico-Political Conference* at the Birkbeck Institute in 2014, hosted by Žižek himself, who, to Eric Santner's question of why the persistent turning to Christianity, replied that without the theological, critique of ideology fails.

⁴ Žižek's theoretical reasoning or argumentation itself is logically stronger than it might first appear. First, this kind of community is not maintained by the big Other. Therefore it does not parallel the contemporary fundamentalist perversions. Those are a mere mirror image and reaction against the current condition that has made them what they are, but still remain caught in the mirror. Second, following Žižek's insistence upon the contingency of materialist grace described above, he is clear that this new sociality is therefore capable of, but not guaranteed, a truly ethical or political act, outside of its ethico-legal entanglement. It represents only a possibility of something new; it is not ensured. Third, this form of sociality is also not united by the lack or absence of the big Other, since that is the only thing that holds the community together. The dismantling of the big Other only marks the catalyst for a community which then develops, or is able to develop – a community of deference. In that sense it is not a negative community. Fourth, Žižek is quick to admit and deliver a warning that this form of a social collective is inherently fragile. In the case of Lenin's revolution, it led to the perverse ideology of Stalinism. Likewise, the communality of the Arab Spring was taken over by religious fundamentalists and Christianity also declined into perversion, when it transformed Christ's sacrifice into an insurmountable debt and thus bound the subject, rather than setting him/her free (Žižek, 2003: 110).

⁵ Kierkegaard does not relegate the role of disciples in conversion to that of ignorant postmen. On the contrary, the term disciple denotes a changed condition of someone who has experienced the Truth or, in Žižek's words, realized the potential of the message. What Kierkegaard wished to assert is that one does not become a disciple because of another disciple but through the act of faith, which comes from God. The condition of discipleship, according to Kierkegaard, is received from God.

⁶ Any attempt to claim ownership of an idea is, to use Hegelian terminology, but an example of the master-slave dialectic which does not acknowledge its indeterminacy (Hegel, 1997: 110).

⁷ In his work *Christ and Culture*, in which Richard Niebuhr presents five theological paradigms to understand Christian theology's historical relationship to culture, he includes Augustine among the *conversionists* who, while "hold(ing) fast to the radical distinction between God's work in Christ and man's work in culture, do not take the road of exclusive Christianity into isolation from civilization, or reject its institutions" (Niebuhr, 1975: 190).

⁸ For example, in Žižek's (2003: 102-103) presentation of the weakness of the legalistic reading of the atonement, he simply ignores the response to that in the form of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* (1898) in the eleventh century. He also rarely refers to any contemporary New Testament

scholars or contemporary theologians in general. There are few exceptions, such as when in his description of God as perverted he refers to the English edition of Rudolf Bultmann's *New Testament Theology* (Žižek, 2003: 118), or when using John Howard Yoder's rejection of the "Constantinian shift" as an illustration of a non-reconciled political standpoint (Žižek, 2010b: 129-130).

⁹ Perhaps Žižek might respond that he is merely extrapolating the theological import of Zapffe's anti-natalist philosophical position.

¹⁰ There are other examples from the current cultural context that shape theology besides that of Žižek and critical theory. One such example is the shaping of theology in its neoliberal context under the umbrella of the concept postsecularity. For a critical discussion of this matter, see the special edition of *Critical Research on Religion* (April 2015) "Is the postcolonial postsecular?" 3(1): 3-123).

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