

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Thirteen, Number Three

Agape as Death Drive: Christian Soteriology and Sacrament as Vectors of the Traumatic

Alwyn Lau, SEGi University, Malaysia

Abstract

Psychoanalysis and Christianity hold forth the promise of genuinely radical change, transforming a person so substantially such that 'nothing remains the same'; even if the objective conditions of one's existence stay fixed, the very lens with which the 'born again' subject (and faith-community) views the world would have undergone so traumatic an upheaval that values, priorities and everything previously deemed essential (or not) would have been reimagined. It is, quite truly, a new beginning. This paper aims to insinuate a close proximity between Žižekian concepts of the traumatically emergent and new vis-à-vis Biblical ideas of salvation, vocation and agape love. I also wish to demonstrate how even the Christian sacraments of baptism and the eucharist point to death and dying as their constitutive elements, with the result that sacrifice for the world becomes the main political role the Church must play.

Key words: Christianity, trauma, salvation, psychoanalysis, sacraments

Slavoj Žižek notes that, “The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never ‘just life’: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life to excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and details the originary run of things” (Žižek 2012: 499). The human subject, in other words, is a creature obsessed with life beyond the fold, yearning and pushing towards something ‘more’ in life. There is simply this non-functional, non-instrumentative libidinal thrust within the human subject which embodies the fundamental autonomy an individual can possess over against his environment or nature (Daly and Žižek 2004: 135). Life involves an excess which defies explanation and cannot be accounted for, which pushes the subject on in utter indifference to the love of life itself, a sort of primordial madness inherent within all attempts at reason (ibid 61-62). The name of this excess is the death-drive. This is a movement or force which transcends biological life. Often misunderstood merely as an inclination towards a state of inorganicity (or physical death),¹ the death drive is instead the name of the ‘undead’ eternal life itself, for the fate of being caught up in an endless cycle of repetition (Žižek 2009: 395).

A useful analogy of the death drive is to compare it with a standard declaration of love. The latter would say something akin, “I *cannot live* without you,” whereas the power of the drive would declare that, “I would *rather die* than live without you.” (Žižek 1999: 351-352). Conventional romance remains on the level of natural existence, whereas the death drive prefers non-existence over non-consummation.

I read the intensity of the death drive as an appropriate (albeit obverse) mirror of the power of *agape* love as admonished in the New Testament. Christians are called to forgive in an infinite manner (Matthew 18:21-22), to consider even persecution an occasion for pure joy because of its character-building qualities (James 1: 2-4), to consider the losing of one’s life for the sake of Jesus as a gain (Matthew 10:39, 16:25); Paul the apostle demonstrates that his love for the Gospel transcends persecution, beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks and a myriad of other kinds of dangers (2 Corinthians 4:8-10, 11:23-28); not least, Jesus (which the Bible

¹ A commonly held misconception, even by writers as astute as Terry Eagleton and Eric Santner (Eagleton 2008: 139; Santner 2011: 136).

terms the 'author and perfecter of the faith' itself, Hebrews 12:2) endured opposition, shame, suffering and even death for eternal joy (Philippians 2: 5-11), giving his life freely for the godless and unrighteous as a demonstration of divine love (Romans 5:6-8).

The presence in such passage of a force which defies the concerns and constraints of normal existence is undeniable; it is surely no exaggeration to insist that the New Testament calls the community to a praxis in which biological life is subordinated to self-giving and spiritual growth. Echoing Žižek's description of the death-drive, one may characterize the love-drive as strange, unconditional, excessive force to show compassion and kindness over and beyond reasonable bounds.²

As the love of Christ *compelled* the apostles to minister to the church and the world in a manner which some saw as being 'out of their minds' (2 Corinthians 5:13-14), so the Christian community must consist of members who are no longer living 'for themselves' (2 Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 2:20) but rather for and in the power of a new *other* kind of world than this one (Philippians 3:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 15:19). There is a sturdy yoke between the two contrasting worlds (or creations) that the New Testament speaks of and the Lacanian opposition between 'normal' and 'undead' life, with the latter clearly exemplified by the death drive (Žižek 1997: 112-113). In both cases, the normal world (or symbolic order) represents the space of corruption from which a true subject must seek to either escape or redeem from within.

For a human being to be 'dead while alive' is to be colonized by the 'dead' symbolic order; to be 'alive while dead' is to give body to the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization...Life is the horrible palpitation of the 'lamella'³, of the non-subjective 'undead' drive which

² Ironically, Žižek, following Lacan, characterizes *the Holy Spirit itself* as the death drive qua Symbolic Order, claiming that when subjects locate themselves within the Holy Spirit, they are thereby trans-substantiated and thus 'enter another life beyond biological life' given that the Spirit cancels out the entire domain of lived experience, desires and so on (Žižek 2012: 86). The grossly misleading view of Christian phenomenology aside, such a line of thought, like many in Žižek's repertoire, is however unnecessarily confusing as there are many other ways to elaborate the ironic effect of belief in a Big Other which, in this context, is that symbolic domain of the world which is in excess of mere physicality. A double irony is that whilst Žižek is horrendously wrong (yes, and begs the question of how pivotal his thoughts are in this thesis in framing a transformative political theology) in the meaning he adopts, the sense which he uses (i.e. the Holy Spirit as trans-substantiation) may be revealingly accurate, in that the new life in the Spirit can be described as a 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17)

³ The concept of the 'lamella' denotes an excess of being and libidinal intensity which resists the symbolisation of any ruling order. Socio-politically, one could view as a catchword for a mode of being which, by its sheer repetition and refusal of colonisation, transcends interpellation and spurs protest and change.

persists beyond ordinary death; death is the symbolic order itself, the structure which, as a parasite, colonizes the living entity. (Žižek 1997: 112).

Passages like these can be compared with New Testament verses which juxtapose both decay and dynamism. For example, the apostle Paul declares that, “To live is Christ, to die is gain” (Philippians 1: 21); that he faces death and its severity on a daily basis (1 Corinthians 15:31; 2 Corinthians 1:9) and that he even feels that death is at work in him (2 Corinthians 4:12) and yet he *also* stresses that the power of Christ works energetically inside him (Colossians 1:29) enabling him to demolish institutional strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4), that the power of the Spirit accompanies his preaching (1 Corinthians 2:4), that, in fact, the power of God *requires* him to be weak (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

There are, however, crucial differences between the psychoanalytical formulation of the drive and Christian redemptive ends. The Freudian death drive has no object and no target to aim towards; it is a pure repetitive enactment of loss itself (Žižek 2006: 62), discovering its aim in its repeated failure to reach its goal (Žižek 2012: 547). It proffers a teleology which is precisely anti-teleological in that the very point of the drive is to *miss* the point. The same certainly cannot be said of the New Testament which admonishes believers to ‘finish the race’ of the Gospel (2 Timothy 4:7) whereby God’s work in the faithful will be completed (Philippians 1:6). Also, the death drive is often viewed as an endless cycle of guilt and pain (Žižek 2006: 62); the word *jouissance* (which, among other things, describes the ‘enjoyment’ of the drive) itself connotes pain-in-pleasure or pleasure amidst pain. We can never entirely obtain *jouissance* yet it is always stuck to us somehow (Žižek 2011: 304). Eternal life as described in the Bible, on the other hand, is about a personal relationship with a God who offers hope, joy and peace in the present (John 17:3, Romans 15:13) whilst promising an end to pain, sorrow and death in the future (Revelations 21:1-4, 1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

For both Žižekian *jouissance* and Christian eternal life, the “value” or “correctness” of their acts cannot be decided via reference to external norms. More often than not, fidelity to either entails the violation of cultural standards (Ruti 2012: 68) possibly spurring mockery and negative labelling of the subject by others (1 Corinthians 1:23). And, just like salvation in the New Testament sense is defined as

being 'born again' (John 3:3-8), the ultimate psychoanalytic act of a subject being identified with her *sinthome* (or that fundamental symptom which animates her) could be described as an annihilation and subsequent rebirth (Žižek 2001: 44).

The Sacramental Re-Symbolizing of Trauma

In the early church, baptism and Eucharist (or the Lord's Supper), also known as sacraments, were central in the Pauline-Christian communities' symbolic-praxis which served as vital elements in marking their identity and self-understanding (Wright 2013: 542). Sociologically speaking, they symbolized new entry into the community (baptism) and affirmed and strengthened membership in this same community (Eucharist). Liturgically speaking, the sacraments are visible earthly ritualistic means of communicating and embodying God's grace to His people.

For example, baptism is first and foremost about drowning. Christians are baptised into the *death* of Christ (Romans 6:3); Christians are shipwrecked into identity and consolidation with Jesus. Michael Jenkins graphically restates the traumatic nature of this initiation rite:

We are soaked to the skin in the death of Christ. Our union with Christ drips from us. We never 'get over' this immersion; this drowning in Christ's death marks us daily; it marks us out (and) 'names' us to the world...we are shipwrecked, run aground on the death of Christ. (Jenkins 1999: 23).

Notwithstanding the formality, innocence and celebratory protocols of the sacrament in many churches today, the sacrament of baptism is borne of a traumatic context and purpose. The water denotes sinking and dying with Christ in order to kill off our old selves so a new one may emerge. This is truly a burial, a post-symbolic demise which ties Christians to the salvation wrought by Christ on the cross as the precondition for being identified with his resurrection and victory" "We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Baptism is a stark reenactment and reminder of captivity and death (Lewis, 2006: 396) yet one which spurs the church to embody a 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17) for the sake of a world still held captive and dying.

Jenkins likewise juxtaposes the attractiveness of the church to a full-blooded awareness of her vocation, an awareness which comes more intensely in the face of

the church's death yet paradoxically when she is largely unconcerned about her demise; baptismally drenched in the death of Christ, the church is most responsible and faithful when she apprehends the irreplaceability of death (Jenkins 1999: 28-32). Death is a catalyst for the church to renew once again (and over and over again) its participation in the political power of resurrection (ibid 27-28).

Likewise, Marcus Pound, in a study of theology and trauma, asserts that the Eucharist confronts the subject with "the traumatic presence of the eternal in time" (Pound 2007: 163). Pound argues that the sacrament of the Eucharist bears witness to the encounter of the real as bread. When Christians participate in the Lord's supper, they invert the common-sense view of God as a force which evades and yet is 'behind' everyday events and instead embrace the divine through and in the very ordinariness of something like bread and wine (ibid 160-166).

I would add, in fact, that it is this ordinariness which is also constituted as traumatic not least given its connection and proximity with our daily lives. The Eucharist tells us that God is not aloof, safe and hidden away in some transcendent dimension beyond our senses and minds. This sacrament confirms that the divine is as close to us as a banal loaf of bread and a cup of wine, and *this* unexpected presencing of God is what shocks us.

The bodies of Christian subjects participate in the displaced body of Christ and, through the Eucharist, recognize that the very brokenness of God is a brokenness they are called to live and disseminate into the world (Ward 2000: 106; Lewis 2006: 396). The Eucharist marks the suffering community of Christ, the effectiveness of the sign being inexorably tied to the formation of the church itself (O'Donovan 1996: 180). To be gathered into Christ is also to die with him.

If death marks a breaking, then the splitting of the self takes on new significance when the immersed-in-the-Eucharist subject realizes that it never had any ordinary unity to begin with and that wholeness is found in another; by participating in the eternal Trinitarian life, itself inseparable from an infinite fissure, subjects find co-creativity and completeness (Pound 2007: 107-108). This complements the point already made about the church's authentic actualisation in that it is something which emerges as a result of daily self-giving. In addition, though, the church's identity is a co-constructed one, found only by partaking in the death and new life of Jesus.

In tandem with objectives set within a psychoanalytical clinical setting (and recalling my earlier discussion on the atonement involving transference), Pound even equates the Eucharist with an *intervention* by the analyst into the normality of the analysand, eliciting reevaluation, insight and newness. The words spoken before the sacrament, “This is my body, *broken* for you” is a call for the church to identify herself as participants and perpetrators of the God-Man whose very vocation was to suffer and die (Pound, 2007: xiii).

Alan Lewis vividly draws out the traumatic significance of the Eucharist, in which he calls us to witness, “God’s subjection to the tearing of the flesh, the breaking of the bones, the spilling of blood, and the snuffing out of life, which so frequently and tragically mark our own society’s descent into violent division and ancestral rivalry” (Lewis 2006: 396). This is a description which remarkably recalls the world’s sacrificial system briefly described in the previous chapter. The Eucharist, according to Lewis, is a divine counter-response to the terror of a malevolent world, enacted in symbol and community. Each time the church partakes of the sacrament, she reminds herself of the ‘tearing of flesh, breaking of bones and spilling of blood’ which not only denotes what Christ suffered to rescue her, but also what she is called to do as a vocational response.

Sacraments, Self-Giving and the Political

We must not merely restate the juxtaposition of death and trauma with baptism and Eucharist, but must also insist on the consequences this juxtaposition makes for the political praxis of the church. Christians are a people defined by the death and resurrection of the Messiah therefore necessitating a particular way of life (Wright 2013: 577), one characterized by a radical kind of suffering and forgiving love, not least towards those who persecute the church. Baptism and Eucharist do not chiefly concern theo-philosophical speculation on such abstract issues like transubstantiation or the ‘local’ character of Christ’s body (Davies 2007: 23-29) but rather how the elements inaugurate and continue the church’s self-giving to her community. The waters which drown also open up a way to life and freedom, akin to the manner in which God entered the deadly and hellish waters of estrangement in order to triumph *all the more creatively* above the diabolical powers of negativity and hostility (Lewis 2006: 396).

Thus through baptism the Church, too, resists the powers that be, seeking to replace these powers with God's peace and reconciliation. Likewise, the Eucharist must not be reduced to a privatization and spiritualisation of meaning which suppresses its address to the despotic conditions of alienation in our world (Lewis 2006: 397; O'Donovan 1996: 180). This ensures the full political import of the sacraments; the body and blood of Christ is no merely private matter.

Writing in the context of the oppression perpetuated by General Pinochet's regime in Chile, William Cavanaugh takes the significance of brokenness even further by seeing the Eucharist's role as competing against that of torture to establish social imaginaries (Cavanaugh 1998: 34-57). In contrast to state-sponsored torture and assassinations which embed fear into the desiring life-worlds of the people, Cavanaugh asserts that the Eucharist serves as the sacramental vehicle of imagination of the church, acting as a counter-discipline to state terror (ibid 253-281). The trauma of Jesus' suffering and death is wielded as a redemptive weapon against the sufferings and deaths inflicted by the world. If torture is used to isolate bodies from each other, the feast of Christ can be mobilized to overcome isolation by opening up temporal horizons and connecting them with the present (ibid 278-281). The critical principle here is how local churches may wield their sacraments as a reminder cum call to embody the aggressive compassion Jesus had for the world by suffering for it, and in so doing personify Christ's self-giving to their local communities. If the world's powers inflict pain on the powerless, the church will endure pain on the latter's behalf.

Whilst certainly not denying that the baptism and the Eucharist signify many *other* important facets of the Christian life (Grün 2003: 3-86) for my purpose I wish to reaffirm that these sacraments remember, reenact and represent the work of God in the world through the Church. The sacraments are the means both by which God graces his people and by which the church reminds herself of her vocation. Through baptism, the Christian remembers and internalizes the suffering and death of Jesus Christ as the obverse of his resurrection and victory over the forces of evil; she commits herself towards embodying in her life the joyful task of soaking up the trauma of the world via prayer, forgiveness, suffering and service. Through participating in the Lord's Supper, the Christian takes the broken body of Christ as a remembrance of the divine brokenness embraced and offered for the sake of the

world, agreeing to be united an earthly body of God whose work is to heal its community's divisions and fragmentation.

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