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# Christian Communists, Islamic Anarchists? – part 1

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The defeat of the Marxist emancipatory project has brought an end to radical secular universalism. The result has been twofold: identity politics and their post-modern ideologies of difference have become the legitimating motifs of Western democracies, whilst radical political Islam has taken the anti-systemic baton of secular Marxism, but subverted it with a brand of universalism with no respect for such niceties as co-existence with secular democracy, or even the nation-state.<sup>i</sup> This pincer movement: of status quo, secular particularism (multicultural liberal ‘tolerance’) and radical religious universalism (‘intolerant’ Islamism, evangelical Christianity etc.), sets the context for recent Communist appropriations of Christianity as a paradoxical ‘Third Way’.

‘Communist appropriations of Christianity!’ To the uninitiated, the initial reaction can only be shock. We might ask what happened to religion as the ‘opiate of the people’ and, not only that: haven’t Marxists also long been arguing that Marxism is not just a religion by another name, but objective science free of illusions? The confusion would not be unwarranted, and relates directly to the semantic and historical umbilical cord between Marxism and Communism: a link in the process of being severed. That is to say, although most contemporary Communist theorists have roots in 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxist movements, many now aim to disassociate Marxism and Communism<sup>ii</sup>. The belief is that if Marxism can be abandoned then the

name of Communism can be saved. A forthcoming conference at Birkbeck College, *On the Idea of Communism* (March 2009), announces the terms of the shift: "In spite of their theoretical differences, the participants share the thesis that one should remain faithful to the name "Communism": this name is potent to serve as the Idea which guides our activity, as well as the instrument which enables us to expose the catastrophes of the XXth century politics, those of the Left included." Thus Communism is the name to be rescued, and as the theoretical and political chasms between speakers at the conference such as Michael Hardt and Slavoj Žižek indicates, this recast Communism, free from determinate Marxist content, can potentially subsume everything from the French Revolution to the waning anti-globalisation movement, or even, in a more controversial gesture, St. Paul's brand of renegade Christianity.

If they stopped there, however, St. Paul's story would be just one in a long line of dramatic ruptures from the status quo by a militant group of believers; a lineage that could include a multitude of religious figures from Moses to Mohammed to Thomas Muntzer. Communism, in this frame, would signify solely the violent outbreak of communal solidarity; distinguished from its reactionary forms by the fact that it carries a substantively *new* universal category that affects the split *within* an existing social formation. If this heavily subtracted Idea of Communism was all these theorists argued for then there would be a seductive parsimony with the entire programme of post-Marxism, and the awkward distinction between non-Marxist Communism and post-Marxist communism would be rendered unnecessary. Communism and the multicultural respect for the diversity of religions would both be saved and we could content ourselves at the impressively neat accommodation of the two. But here the problems begin, because many of the theorists do not stop there. It is not enough for Paul to be an example – just one in a long historical lineage –it is instead claimed that he in fact *founds* the originary categories of Communism. Alain Badiou (2003) even goes so far to claim Paul as *the* founder of universalism itself. Christianity and St. Paul become a demarcation for sorting out the right sort of Communist from the wrong sort.

All of which brings us back to where we came from: the umbilical cord between Marxism and Communism which is never cut with the intention of a final separation. As such, the place of universalism in this Paulian Communism should remind us of that nagging aporia at the heart of the Marxist 'faith': the fact that universalism never becomes identical with itself. Without the particular, the universal is meaningless; the establishment of the universal always presupposes the negation of its particularistic Other. For instance, in Marxism the bourgeoisie have an essential

role in the realisation of working class universalism, yet the position of the bourgeois class *after* the revolution has always been ambiguous. The idea that it would just gradually disappear was undermined by the emergence of the state class in Russia, purges of the 'backward' bourgeois in Mao's Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot's absolutist logic that necessitated their complete annihilation. And just as Marxism never really came to terms with what to do with the bourgeoisie Other, anarchist universalism was its rival Other. It was a doctrine that took the spirit of Marxism too far; so far in fact that it frequently needed to be suppressed, as famously demonstrated by Marx's expulsion of Bakunin from the International Working Men's Association<sup>iii</sup> and the clear and present danger that Lenin perceived in the philosophy.

Even if the atrocities by Pol Pot et al. in the name of Marxist universalism must go a long way to explaining the collapse of the Marxist-Communist revolutionary movement (Jayatileka 2007) and its practical abandonment by theorists such as Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri and, to a much more limited extent, Slavoj Žižek; the troubling question is whether this same tripartite structure of universalism repeats itself in the new Communist appropriation of Christianity? To make the parallel logic explicit: the Judaic particularism of faith (the Covenant was revealed solely to the Jews) was necessary for the universalism of St. Paul's message to have any meaning, but forevermore Judaic particularism became a justification for their persecution, which much like the bourgeoisie after Communist revolution just refused to fade away. It is not therefore not surprising, as some have already pointed to (Depoortere 2008; Kirsch 2008), that there are potentially disturbing consequences for the status of the Judaic faith in this valorisation of the violent, intolerant universalism of Christianity. In this frame, the continuance of the Jews can begin to look like a stubborn refusal to secede to the emancipatory project Christianity inaugurated, and as such resembles an insurmountable barrier and tool of emotional blackmail against *any* universalist aspirations: the state of Israel being the emblematic example that the left is always quick to invoke.

And to follow the parallel further, if anarchism was Marxism's universal rival, then is Islam not also Christianity's rival: a universal monotheistic faith declaring a rupture with the past – in Islam's case negating the multitheistic tribes of the Arabian peninsular and in Christianity's case the negation of Judaic exclusivity? To drop deeper than we might like into this rabbit hole: is there not a painful irony at the heart of non-Marxist Communism that it begins to look an awful lot like the anarchism Marxism spent over a century suppressing and that the new Communist subject (the emancipatory *Overman*) likewise begins to look a lot like an Islamist; that is, one

marching under any banner *but* Islam? As Hardt and Negri admit, in regard to the Iranian Revolution “we might think of it as the first postmodernist revolution.” but only insofar as it represented “a powerful rejection of the world market” (2000: 149) i.e. only if we subtract its recognisable Marxist dimension and ignore the Islamic content. Like Marxism’s suppression of anarchism, the recent focus on the foundational break of St. Paul depends to a large extent upon the denial of Islam to maintain Christianity’s unique place in the history of universalism. As Ash Sharma described the mood at a recent conference of dialectical materialists: “It was only Ali Alizadeh’s attempt to formulate the Iranian revolution as an Event, that began to challenge the rather comfortable presumptions of a Christian hegemony... The underlying presumption remains that Christianity, and not Islam or any other religion, provides the basis for a true, modern universality.” (2007: unpaginated) Thus, it is not just that Judaism emerges as negated for being *too far* from the universalism of Christianity, but Islam also ends up being ignored perhaps for being *too close* to the horizon of thought of the new Communism.

For now, though, even if it eventually proves vital to the argument, we stick with Christianity and Judaism and leave the discussion of Islam to Part 2 (forthcoming: *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol 3.2). Although in recent decades there has been a great deal of interest in Paul – including from theorists such as: Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou – this piece will focus on Žižek and Badiou’s interventions: as both claim the closest proximity of Christianity to the foundational tenets of Communism. Despite sharing a common political project, their tacit alliance in resuscitating Pauline love to pride of place in the Communist project looks unlikely at first glance. Žižek has always made it clear that he aims to re-establish German idealism, and particularly Hegel, at the heart of radical philosophy. On the other hand, for Badiou, Hegel represents something of an arch-rival and if there is an aim to his immense project from *Being and Event* to the *Logic of Worlds* it is to replace Hegel’s entire system with his own: grounded on the non-same-identity of ontology (Being) with the ontic (Event), even if the short-circuit of Cohen’s theorem of ‘forcing’ is meant to link the two.

However, despite this apparent incompatibility we must add two caveats to the dialectics/events dichotomy: firstly, that both systems share the concept of the universal, and secondly, that they arrive at the universal event of Christianity via two different paths. In keeping with his Hegelian loyalties, for Žižek it is the death of Christ (the moment of negativity) which is given priority; whereas, for Badiou, it is the resurrection of Christ as it effected the event of Paul’s conversion (the pure positivity of the event) which is given almost exclusive focus. And perhaps we should add a

third caveat, the fact that Žižek's Hegelianism is most unorthodox: an open formulation which is read through Freud and Lacan and visa versa. This openness, although not undermining the dialectics/event, crucifixion/resurrection dichotomy with Badiou, should in any case put rest to any overly determined historical-teleological readings. What we should expect to find in Žižek is that, rather like Badiou, the universal is not fixed, not a foundation; but rather a moment, an act of becoming; one that is not laid down in the heavy ink of history as a form of infinite determinism.

But as we have already discussed, this is what we *do not find* in these authors. Against expectations, Christianity does become *the foundation* of universalism. So rather than simply critique these authors for their Eurocentric-Christendom bias, or make wild and unlikely speculations about anti-semitism or Islamophobia, this essay instead attempts to show how the cleavage internal to any idea of a foundational universal is at the root of the problem; because the foundation of a universal is it in fact its transcription into a fixed object, holding a fixed predicate: in this case Christian universalism. In *Theoretical Writings* Badiou notes: "nothing exists as universal if it takes the form of the object" (2006: 145) Nothing, that is, except for Paul's universalism; signalling a deep inconsistency between the ontological tenets of his system and this more direct politico-theological intervention. Even adopting such wildly differing ontological systems, by positing exclusive foundations I show how Žižek and Badiou appear to fail to escape the shadow of bad old closed Hegelianism<sup>iv</sup> that has always told the same story of the role of Christianity in the unfolding of world history.

And finally, so as not to presume too much prior knowledge before we commence: to give a brief biographical sketch it should suffice to say that St. Paul was a citizen of Rome born between 2AD and 5AD. He was a Pharisaical Jew engaging in the persecution of the Christians who at roughly the age of 30 had a sudden conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus. From that point on he travelled across the known world spreading the message that Christ was resurrected and of the epochal significance of the act and the time in which they were living. He held the existing order defunct and declared an entirely new order founded solely upon subjective belief, with no need to recourse to miracle or Christ's teachings other than an unnegotiable belief in the event of the resurrection.

The appeal of this narrative to Communist theorists should be amply clear. However, it is in the method of transmission of Paul's act to the present day that the ambiguities start. This matters: because once the consequences of the appropriation of Paul become clear, how literally we should take Paul's acts as the foundation of Communist universalism, inspiring allegory, or dialectically subsumed part depends

upon whether the relation of these philosophies to history escapes Hegel's philosophy of history. Or, in other words, do these secular appropriations avoid parroting the old Hegelian logic of Christianity as the 'Absolute religion?' And thus, as will become clearer in Part 2, do they also foreclose the emancipatory possibilities of Islam?

## **A GESTURE FOR INSURRECTION**

It is an obvious point, but one worth repeating, that the theorists in question are not advocating anything like the liberation theology of the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez, who took Christ's words literally as socialism. The appeal to Paul would be much better described as an advocacy of a certain inclination; a defensive measure against the tendency in our liberal-multiculturalist orders to purge all belief in the act of the violent disruption of the status quo. The fact that Christianity is perceived today in such a different light, under the platitudinal everyday rubric of 'turning the other cheek,' 'goodwill to all mankind' etc.; or in the evangelical movement as: 'family values,' 'an old fashioned moral compass in a world that's lost its way'; or in the liberal-multiculturalist world as 'the root of all bigotry and misogyny,' 'the logic of colonial humanitarianism' (Douzinas 2007), makes the Communist defence of Paul a disruptive and intuitively appealing gesture.

Badiou and Žižek take a slightly different approach to this gesture, but one that, at this stage, we can at least say is united by a shared impulse. For Badiou, St. Paul is the archetype of the militant for us to draw inspiration from in the time of current political malaise, and for Žižek the same holds, in addition to his belief that monotheism provides an ethical imperative against the parlous influence of New Ageism and Buddhism in Western cultural trends. Where they are closely united is in regard to the act of belief. Just as Paul was not interested in persuading the philosopher Greeks of any rational basis for believing in Christ's resurrection, so too they imply, the contemporary leftist militant should not be suckered into the game of pondering the minutiae of policy choices and weighing up the economic pros and cons of their positions. In other words: believe in the act, believe that miracles do happen.

In the opening pages of *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* Badiou puts his cards openly on the table: "There is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure -even if it takes the form of denying its possibility - called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the

century, which can said to have been that of the party militant.” (2003: 2) It would not then be a stretch to say that Badiou’s act of appropriating Paul arises from this very absence of a Communist, revolutionary subject today. And this absence has to be seen into relation to the contemporary predominance of identarian movements: from feminism to gay rights etc., that do not coalesce into a higher critique of capitalism and/or the greater social order that structures all these relations in respect to one another. Paul’s story is thus a perfect case study of a universal break that arises from the particular, or as he puts it: “It is a question of knowing what identarian and communitarian categories have to do with truth procedures, with political procedures for example. We reply: these categories must be absented from the process, failing which no truth has the slightest chance of persistence and accruing its immanent infinity.” (Ibid: 11)

His reading of Paul is a polemical engagement centred on the desire for the re-birth of the subject and an exposition as to how such a subject must operate according to a universal commitment if such a commitment is to ever solidify into a truth procedure. Similarly, this commitment, which Badiou renders as ‘fidelity,’ is also at stake in his analysis of Christianity. Throughout *Being and Event* the Christ-event plays a remarkable role as one of the few consistent concrete examples to which Badiou ellipses back to, particularly when his analysis reaches an aporia. On the subject and its relation to the event Badiou foreshadows his analysis in the *Logic of Worlds* by stating: “In truth, this is the problem which remains for philosophy...” in that “It is always a matter of knowing whether one can deduce, from the eventual *conversion*, the rules of infinite fidelity.” (2006: 239) This unresolved question is exemplified in the question of Christianity and the “interminable debates over whether the Christ-event determined, and in what details, the organization of the Church.” (Ibid: 238) Paul’s significance arises from a more generic philosophical identity in Badiou’s system, that if “we suppose that there is no relation between intervention and fidelity, we will have to admit that the operator of connection in fact *emerges as a second event*.” (Ibid: 239)

To put it another way, what Badiou’s restless theoretical circling is getting at is that there is a gap in his system – at least at the time of *Being and Event* – between understanding the site of the event – the situation from which the event arises – and the structure of subjects’ fidelity. He therefore supposes that a ‘second event’ completely distinct from the first could resolve the problematic. Here we now see the significance of Paul: the only apostle from *outside* the circle of Jesus’ disciples, whose militant commitment can thus subtract more easily from the identarian and particularistic baggage of the situation (in this case: Jesus as a Jew) because, to

describe it quite literally, Paul wasn't even there. And on this issue of the close relation of separation with the universal, the parallel with Lenin also coincides; a man who never knew Marx but nevertheless bore the burden of realising the event of his theoretical discovery and putting it into practice. In the loosest sense, if a moral emerges from Badiou's analysis it is that if the subject is to re-emerge today it does not necessarily have to be in the context of an evental-site he/she is personally engaged in, but one that simply provokes an unconditional fidelity to that event and its universal consequences. To dig around for a contemporary example: an activist campaigning against Israel's late 2008/early 2009 siege of Gaza who then commits entirely to the cause of the One State Solution, but somehow universalises the consequences so that it affects a splitting across all political subjectivities. Paul's story – of not even being there and going on to found the Church – shows that no matter how dire the political situation appears, miracles can literally emerge from the void.

Although Žižek shares many sympathies with Badiou's reading, in his own writings it is not so much the subject that he is concerned with, but a more fundamental defence of the significance of Christ in philosophical-cultural terms. The status of Christianity is for Žižek a chess piece on the table of cultural warfare: one in which he perceives the all-embracing self-reflection of post-modern society as inculcating anxiety and a corresponding avoidance of the act. In this regard, we can also understand his persistent engagement with Kierkegaard, including the recurrent motifs of the 'leap of faith' and 'the sacrifice' in his work. If this at first seems out of sorts with his professed Hegelianism it is worth drawing on what he describes as "my Hegelianism: the motor of the historico-dialectical process is precisely the gap between acting and thinking." (2007: 88) I.e. the subject must be able to take unreflective acts for the 'cunning of reason' to progress the world in historical-dialectical terms. And according to Žižek: "The Religious is by no means the mediating "synthesis" of the two, but, on the contrary, the radical assertion of the parallax gap..." (2006: 105)

Depoortere (2008) has also provided us with a remarkably systematic analysis of how Žižek draws in his Lacanian analysis into the matrix of Hegel and Kierkegaard to defend the act from the temptation of withdrawal and anxious non-action. As Depoortere describes, Žižek's Lacanian interpretation of the Christ event revolves around the relation of the subject to 'the Thing.' Žižek's hypothesis is that Judaic Law, by throwing a barrier between the subject and 'the Thing,' circumvents the 'death drive' towards an endless loop of desire, which then defers the more fundamental human drive for 'the Thing' itself. This loop of desire he associates with

Judaic Law finds a common identity with late capitalism and its proliferation of ephemeral desires to consume. We do not act on our drives, and defer them to our desires, quite simply because the Law prohibits drive; whilst at the same time, that same Law is what establishes us as human in the first place. For Žižek then, when God becomes Christ and is put up on the cross, the Law is thus annulled and the original 'Thing' effectively put beyond reach forever, releasing our drives, whilst also maintaining our humanity. Christianity releases the drive to act and finds its contemporary relevance today in opposition to the concomitant climate of non-action that Žižek associates with the rise of 'Oriental wisdom' in Western culture: "The target on which we should focus, therefore, is the very ideology which is then proposed as a potential solution – for example Oriental spirituality (Buddhism), with its more "gentle," balanced, holistic, ecological approach... Western Buddhism, this pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner distance and indifference toward the frantic pace of market competition, is arguably the most efficient way for us fully to participate in market dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity." (2003: 26)

It quickly becomes clear that Žižek's contribution, like Badiou's, is an intervention and appropriation targeted at our specific time. However, that they have two slightly different events of Christianity in mind. While Badiou is happy to maintain an almost exclusive focus on Paul, Žižek defends the significance of the crucifixion in a quite literal way.

## **CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION**

The difference in their approaches shows itself clearly in the relation of the crucifixion to the resurrection, and it would not be unfair to say at least one element escapes both their analyses. Let us follow Badiou and describe the sequence in two parts: event one divided into crucifixion and resurrection and event two being Paul's militant conversion. Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanian reading primarily focuses on the crucifixion (the negative) and Paul's conversion (the positive), whereas for Badiou the original Christ-event is left almost completely undiscussed, and where it is – via Paul – it focuses mostly on the resurrection (the positive). There is a certain inevitability about this parting of ways, when we see how the status of Hegelian dialectics divides the two.

For example, Badiou identifies Paul's significance in the shattering of attempts by some in the Jewish establishment to subsume Christ's message and

resurrection under existing Law. He uses this distinction between Paul's insistence upon the fundamental rupture in all existing social relations and thought (a properly Badiouian idea of the event) and the Judeo-Christian idea of the event as the perfection of existing Law as indicative of a dialectical approach: a fine distinction that he will reiterate again and again in the text. In regard to the Jewish establishment: "Its conception of the subject is dialectical. It is not a question of denying the power of the event. It is a question of asserting that its novelty conserves and sublates the traditional site of faith, that it incorporates it by exceeding it. The Christ-event accomplishes the Law; it does not terminate it. Thus the marks inherited from tradition (circumcision for example) are still necessary." (2003: 23)

Likewise, Badiou needles the Jerusalem Conference, where Paul is pleading for acceptance from the establishment, as an unhappy synthesis, but one that is "genuinely foundational, because it endows Christianity with a twofold principle of opening and historicity.... Admittedly, the conference does not seem able to fix the content of this difficult match between eventality and immanence to a situation." (Ibid: 25) The conference nevertheless lays the basis for the truly disjunctive later event, such as the incident between Peter and Paul in Antioch. When Peter leaves the table of the ritual meal at the arrival of the non-Jews, for Paul: "The incident reveals to him that the Law, in its previous imperative, is not, is no longer, tenable, even for those who claim to follow it." (Ibid: 27) In these passages Badiou is attempting not only to make a point about the militancy and radicality of Paul in his time, but to also to limit the confusion related to his system, as it is commonly interpreted that events appear from nothing and are constitutively external to the situation of the subject. Obviously, this would be completely ontologically untenable; therefore, although Paul was external to the Christ-event itself, Badiou is trying to ground Paul's actions in a concrete situation to prevent a sliding back to dialectical thinking, which has a more brute ontological-ontic relation.

In his discussion of Marcion's *The Anti-theses* and the division Marcion erects between the God of the Old Testament and the New – that it is actually a different God – Badiou claims that: "The result is that the Christian News is, purely and simply, the true God's mediating revelation, the event of the Father, which, at the same time, denounces the deception of that creator God whom the Old Testament tells us about." (Ibid: 35) The key word in Badiou's account of Marcion is 'mediating,' signalling that in his view Marcion's account, paradoxically, on account of the extreme radicality of the event, becomes *more* dialectical, not less. Contrasting Paul and Marcion: "That Paul emphasizes rupture rather than continuity with Judaism is not in doubt. But this is a militant, and not an ontological, thesis. Divine unicity

[*unicite*] bridges the two situations separated by the Christ-event, and at no moment is it cast into doubt.” (Ibid) For Badiou, the Christ-event has no theological-ontological dimension, and this is what precisely delimits his eventual interpretation from the dialectical one.

As we have already seen, however, for Žižek it is this ontological dimension which gives Christ’s crucifixion such importance. There is however an ambiguity: for Žižek the coming to earth of God in the body of Christ, and his crucifixion, necessarily ends in the secessionist theory of Christianity that signals: “The “Holy Spirit” is the community deprived of its support in the Big Other. The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the becoming-man-of-God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach et al.); rather, it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the “big Other” that decides on the “objective meaning” of our deeds. (2003: 171) According to Žižek the significance of Christianity is not just secularism, but an even purer secularism that exceeds the imagination of Stalin and the scientific socialists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, what is ambiguous here, is that as an ontological thesis of this type can either go two ways: (1) in a fudged Hegelian teleological sense of the ‘cunning of reason’ acting through subject’s illusions that Christ really is God, which through that mediation eventually reveals the God really is nothing but *Geist*, or (2) that if Žižek wishes to avoid the teleological implications of the thoroughly Hegelian reading he has to take quite literally the assertion that God actually did die on the Cross, which is a kind of secularism, but a peculiar one: God *really did exist*, but is no longer! Either way, Paul’s militant band of believers is seen to dialectically reverse the negativity of the crucifixion into the positivity of the secular, Holy Spirit. And in this narrative the resurrection needs to be short-circuited, lest it undermine the death of God thesis and the secular appropriation of the all too human image of a man dead on the cross.

There is another implication to Žižek’s reading: that whatever ontological status we apply to the crucifixion, it takes on a determining role vis-à-vis all other religions. Clearly, if God died on the cross the continuance of Judaism begin to look like a farce: “So when the Jews are conceived as a remainder, we should be very precise in defining this with regard to what they are a remainder of: of themselves of course, *but also of humanity as such...*” (Ibid: 131), even if Žižek sometimes defends Judaism on account of his assertion that “Christianity needs Judaism to remind itself of the otherness of the Divine Thing.” (Depoortere 2008: 140) But Islam, in this reading, looks equally as out of time as in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, where it is awkwardly filed under the ‘Germanic World.’ And the polytheistic and pantheistic

religions fare even worse in the Hegelian schema Žižek enthusiastically adopts.

Hegel posited three essential movements to the development of religion: the immediate religion, the religion of substance and the religion of spiritual individuality. Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism inhabit the second movement of the unfolding of religion to the spiritual individuality inhabited by Judaism and Christianity. To take Žižek's pet hate Buddhism, the fact that being is associated with nothing implies that the worship bridging the universal (the One) with humankind (the particular) takes the form of self-annihilation: which could either end up as an avoidance of the act (why act if all reality is just a dream?) or alternatively, could end in unthinking violence and tyranny. Thus, just as for Hegel – "since here the finite mind, as being merely accidental, is wholly swallowed up in substance, is a nullity, has no reality, no right of independent existence as against substance, it is for that reason not free...for the same reason, these religions go hand in hand with despotic government in the political sphere." (Stace 1955: 494) – for Žižek too, the Dalai Lama and his strategy of non-violence in Tibet goes hand in hand with the repressive theocracy his old-regime represents.

## **THE UNIVERSAL AND VIOLENCE**

We have already pointed towards the differences between Badiou and Žižek's appropriation of Christianity: a difference that would be irreconcilable if it were not for the category of the universal they both share. For here Hegelian dialectics and Badiou's theory of the event coincide. They both posit an event as constitutively defined by its enactment of a new universal; although Badiou's event, unlike Hegel's, to be ontologically consistent should not establish a foundation. And therein lays the ambiguity of his reading of Paul in relation to his greater system.

Badiou demonstrates Paul's universalism from a line in Corinthians: 'To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those under the law, I became as one under the law' from which he extrapolates: "an instance of what Chinese communists will call the "mass line," pushed to its ultimate expression." (Ibid: 99) This is an unavoidably tenuous connection, even on its own terms. This is not to critique him stylistically, but rather to highlight the ambiguity that runs through the text. Are we to take his treatment of St. Paul as simply an allegory of the universal political subject - an example of his system in action - or is there an excess of affection for the specifically Christian religious conception? For if we were to boil down Badiou's thesis to one single point it would be this: that St. Paul's fidelity to the

resurrection of Christ signals the singular event of the birth of a truly universal monotheistic faith. This universal faith becomes forever ingrained in humanity's psyche and elides into the universalism of the 'Marxist faith.' For the sake of clarity, this is not the Marxist faith in objective historical processes which subsequently became the orthodoxy of the majority of Marxist movements. It is rather the faith in the universalism of the event of Marxism itself: the fact that Marx's work revealed something entirely new: an orientation towards the working class within a society conceived as totality, which at its core is non-reducible to scientific analysis and cuts across all identarian particularities.

But the outstanding question is of the depth and nature of this connection between the universalism of Paul and latter day universalist movements; of which first and foremost would have to be included the Marxist-Communist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we accept that this foundational break becomes carried (even if in a degraded institutionalised form) by the Catholic Church – a possibility that despite Badiou's insinuation of the Church's infidelity to Paul's message is not totally placed off the table by him – then it is not a great leap to pointing to some essential philosophical connection between the de-universalised Russian Orthodox Church and Stalin's gulags (increasingly recognised to have an ethnic component), Chinese Confucianism and Mao's fatalistic disregard for human life, and conversely the relative humanity of the Latin American communists (existing within a historic Catholic legacy) in Cuba, Nicaragua and so forth. The problem is that the consequences of Badiou's reading of Paul can result in the inscription of culturalism onto the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Communist movements – a move that Dayan Jayatilleka (2007) also pursues when he describes the success of the Cuban Revolution in terms of the moral inheritance Castro gained from his Jesuit upbringing and its significance in differentiating his guerrilla group from the 'neo-barbarism' of other groups in the global, revolutionary movement.

Badiou's position is not even as far from Hegel as he would have us believe. For Hegel too Christianity was uniquely perfect, the 'Absolute religion' in his words, precisely because it universalised the previously Judaic exclusivity of faith. Monotheism only realised itself once: "...it was freed from the particularity by which the worship of Jehovah had been hampered. Jehovah was only the God of that one people — the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob: only with the Jews had this God made a covenant; only to this people had he revealed himself." (Hegel 2001: 373) The distinction between Badiou and Hegel comes down to the difference we ascribe between the dialectical event and the event of a Badiouian truth procedure. Badiou has never delineated an empirical philosophy of history to supplement his system;

this work and *The Century* are as close as we get'. But the category of the universal, the appearance of the universal over time from human origins to the present day, marks a baseline of continuity with Hegel. As Badiou puts it: "We also share with Hegel the conviction of a universality of the True. But for us this universality is guaranteed by the singularity of truth-events, and not by the fact that the Whole is the history of its immanent reflection." (Badiou 2004: 230)

Even if Badiou's ontology of infinite multiplicity deters the possibility of closure, of reaching Hegel's 'end of history,' the ambiguity remains that Badiou does ascribe certain foundational universal events to specific historical moments. But unlike Hegel a universal does not arrive as an always-to-be unfolding, which is transcribed into Law, rather "That thought is the proper medium of the universal means that nothing exists as universal if it takes the form of the object or of objective legality." Because, for example: "the universality of a mathematical proposition can only be experienced by inventing or effectively reproducing its proof." (Ibid: 145) The universal is an experienced becoming that can be infinitely iterated. Nevertheless the contours of thought to reproduce and re-experience the universal have to be at least somewhat differential from a new universal never before thought in history: which is the universal event Badiou implies as Paul's 'foundation', or as Žižek describes it: "*the example of a Truth-Event*" (Žižek 2000: 130) The tension between the definitive and singular article gives the game away. If it is viable that there be an infinite production of new universals in history remains to be clarified. Are there in fact only a finite number of new universals that can be 'discovered' as opposed to the infinite process of experiencing a universal afresh? If so, it is not clear how finity in history can be accounted for in Badiou's system or how foundational universals escape finity's *telos*, i.e. some form of progressive, historical teleology?

Žižek, on the other hand, explicitly embraces the consequences of Badiou's investment in Paul as the foundational universaliser of monotheism and what could be inferred for the fortunes of 'Third World' Marxist revolutions.<sup>vi</sup> Drawing a parallel with what I believe is a certain implication in Badiou - that peoples with Catholic philosophical underpinnings will be the only ones to successfully realise Marxist-Communism - Žižek has this to say about Che Guevara:

What, then, is the difference between this "warrior Zen" legitimization of violence and the long Western tradition, from Christ to Che Guevara... it is not that, in contrast to Japanese military aggression, revolutionary violence "really" aims at establishing a non-violent harmony; on the contrary, authentic revolutionary liberation is much more directly identified with violence... it is all too simple to say that this militaristic version of Zen is a perversion...the truth is much more unbearable – what if, in its very kernel, Zen is ambivalent, or rather,

utterly *indifferent*. (Žižek 2003: 30-31)

It is curious that Western military violence is given Che Guevara as an archetype and Eastern military violence with the imperial regime of Emperor Hirohito. A leftist guerrilla is compared to an imperial Emperor, a cop-out in taking on any argument over religion and revolution. He should have compared Che and Mao to truly mine this comparative vein of thought, but as we know from his introduction to Mao's *Practice and Contradiction* (2008) he goes to great lengths to avoid any cultural-religious explanations and rather settles on Mao as a poor reader of Hegel. As we have seen, for Žižek the theological turn in Communist circles is justified to performatively negate the embrace of 'Oriental wisdom' in Western capitalist societies, but beyond that he never really offers a clear, positive reason for turning to Christ today. In perhaps an act of projection, he even levels this charge against Giorgio Agamben's (2005) work on Paul: "What Agamben describes as a messianic experience is the pure formal structure of such an experience without any specific determinations that would elaborate the claim that Benjamin "repeats" Paul: why is today's moment a unique moment which renders Paul's letters readable? Is it because the New World (Dis)Order is parallel to the Roman Empire (the thesis of Negri and Hardt)?" (Ibid: 108) And furthermore, without a clear cut rationale of his own, it would be tempting to read a suspicious over-investment in Christianity for its own sake in Žižek's work too.

That is not to imply Žižek the Christian dogmatist reveals himself subconsciously through his argument. I would rather argue that his Lacanian influenced open-Hegelianism inadvertently reveals its thinness of novelty. To clarify: against common misinterpretation Hegel's theory of human progress from the master and slave right up to the ideal modern state is not supposed to be a pure historical abstraction from ancient Egypt to 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany in the same way that Marx's transition from feudalism to capitalism to Communism has an undeniable temporal unfolding. Instead, Hegel's ideal state is that form which always will have existed as the ideal form in the Notion and which is founded on its internal logical movement from the master and slave dialectic up to resolution in the modern state, and is explicitly opposed to solely contingent historical justifications. Yet the ahistorical realisation of dialectical self-consciousness is at times elided into a historical dialectic. This point of elision is one of the most nagging aporias of the entire Hegelian edifice. As Adorno describes it: "The system has to acknowledge the conceptual irreducibility of the concept, which is inherently historical: in terms of logical-systematic criteria the historical, all else notwithstanding, is disturbing; it is a

blind spot.” (quoted in Widder 2002: 160) The contours of this aporia are revealing; Jean Hippolite, for one, claimed that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* “only in the chapters on spirit and religion is there a movement coinciding with actual historical development.” (Ibid: 159)

Therefore, we should take Hegel’s world-historical theory of religion in the *Philosophy of History* as a limit case for Žižek’s open-Hegelianism. As Žižek admits: “The main way to assert the actuality of Hegel—that is, to save him from the accusation that his system is totally outdated metaphysical madness—is to read his thought as an attempt to establish the normative conditions and presuppositions of our cognitive and ethical claims.” (2006: 28) This means primarily that the fundamental Hegelian insight that there is no Kantian thing-in-itself and the awareness that we ourselves posit the gap between appearance and essence coincides with the Lacanian Lack. Hegel is thus a framework for seeing how we arrive at our own philosophical, political and epistemological enigmas; it does not prescribe their closure in ideal forms. What matters is not that this epistemological-spatial openness Žižek perceives in Hegel is at best a partial reading, but rather that it circumvents through neglect the aporetic historicism of Hegel’s philosophy of world spirit and religion. It is therefore not surprising that Žižek’s philosophy of religion ends up following a remarkably similar schema.

Drawing from the *Bhagavad Gita* Žižek comes to the same conclusion as Hegel in regard to the primitive religions: “if external reality is ultimately just an ephemeral appearance, then even the most horrifying crimes do not matter... This means that Buddhist (or Hindu, for that matter) all encompassing Compassion has to be opposed to Christian intolerant, violent Love.” (2003: 32-33) Žižek is careful not to invoke the religious historical-teleological unfolding of Hegel, but as his open epistemological appropriation reaches exactly the same conclusions we have to wonder if he really leaves it behind or merely covers his old Hegelian tracks. Moreover, the fact that although according to Žižek’s emphasis on the universal, monotheistic event, Islam should fit the exact same criteria as Christianity - but that like Hegel, it is the one religion he stubbornly ignores - means that when we speak of Žižek’s open Hegelianism and the ‘real’ bad old Hegelianism we might consider them functionally identical.

## AN INCOMPLETE CONCLUSION

We have seen how Badiou and Žižek approach the Christ event from very different perspectives. For Badiou all that matters is the subjective belief of Paul and the event of his conversion to Christianity, whereas for Žižek there is a deeper, dialectical – and hence ontological – significance to Christ's crucifixion. Both are however united in defense of the universalisation of monotheism Paul affected. Unfortunately, this disagreement in fact points to an inconsistency: neither Badiou's theory of the event, nor Žižek's open-Hegelianism - to be truly open that is – should posit historic foundations, yet they seem too quickly to leap to this conclusion. The claimed historical foundation to the universalism of Communism can easily start to have implications for the fortunes of Marxist-Communist movements in non-Catholic countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither Badiou nor Žižek have actually explored this consequence directly, and indeed it would even be counter-productive to their philosophical and political aims to do so; yet it seems an almost inevitable development of their work that Christian essentialism should creep into a retrospective assessment of the global, revolutionary movement – a task that at least Dayan Jayatilleka seems to already have picked up upon.

In Part 2 (forthcoming: *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, Vol 3.2) the Hegelian assumptions underwriting the religious teleology in Badiou and Žižek will become even clear as the limit case of Islam befuddles both their systems and their privileging of Christian universalism. Since both philosophers, like Hegel, have very little to say about Islam – even considering its current predominance in key theatres of anti-systemic resistance – the analysis will move beyond these writers to examine the philosophies of two of the most influential ideologues of the Iranian Revolution: Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shari'ati. Through these philosophers, and the way they appropriate a modernist, revolutionary conception of Islam, we will see the limitations of any proposed foundation of universalism, sharpening the critique so far discussed.

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<sup>i</sup> The transformation of the forces of the left into Islamists is a phenomenon that has been evident in many cases in the Middle East: from the Iranian Revolution - in regard to the Mujahideen and Tudeh Party - to the Islamisation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, to name just a few examples. It is commonly acknowledged that many Islamic movements grew out of dissatisfaction with the 'socialist' Arab nationalist regimes; that is, the loci of militancy shifted from previously secular ideologies to Islamic ideologies, even when they are fighting the same cause of oppression e.g. the PLO's secession of militancy to Hamas.

<sup>ii</sup> Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) is a very obvious example of this shift. Alain Badiou has made this shift implicit in all his most recent work since *Being and Event* (2005); first published in French in 1986. And you could even say that Michel Foucault's enthusiasm for the Iranian Revolution arose from his belief that a new sort of communist subject was being born before his eyes: the 'Collective Will' as he put it.

<sup>iii</sup> Marx's expulsion of Bakunin is just one instance among many of the suppression of anarchism as both a formal manifesto and as a tendency within Communist organisations. See Robertson (2003) for an analysis of this specific incident.

<sup>iv</sup> It is Slavoj Žižek's unorthodox open Hegelianism that requires us to make the distinction. Where different interpretations of Hegel have had their various followers, such as Alexandre Kojève's influential reading upon the Anglo-American academy – most famously upon Francis Fukuyama - and Jean Hippolite's upon 20<sup>th</sup> century French thought, all have basically adhered to the fundamental Hegelian proposition that the Notion unfolds in history and that the Whole is a closed system, i.e. we can reach the 'end of history.' Žižek, on the other hand, has consistently propounded a variant of Hegelianism that remains open. No end can be reached and there is no resolution in the Absolute. Žižek has been criticised by many for his loose Lacanian interpretation of Hegel, for example see Widder (2002: 158), and has been defended by some based on the inadequacy of defences of the 'real Hegel', see Gunkel (2008), but there have been remarkably few attempts, to my knowledge, to deduce if Žižek's Hegelianism is an ontologically consistent rethink of the system.

<sup>v</sup> Strictly speaking for Badiou the only history that exists is the truth procedure of events. There is no history beyond the event, or in-between events, yet not conditioned, by an event. As he describes it: "If one admits that for there to be historicity evental sites are necessary, then the following observation can be made: history can be naturalized, but nature cannot be historicized." (2005: 176) The key word is 'if,' because it is not clear at all that historicity is dependent on evental sites, or at least under any more generally functional definition or explanatory framework that can deduce historical causation (or meaning) in the absence of radical ruptures from the status quo. For instance, in the case of the arbitrary decision making of sovereign powers that can and has had epochal significance.

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