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Žižek's Communist Theology: A Revolutionary Challenge to America's Capitalist God

Robert Ruehl, Syracuse University.

Introduction

At times, Christianity and capitalism have had a problematic relationship. There were moments when Christians clearly understood how capitalism opposed Christian themes, such as love and justice. Instead of seeing Christianity as compatible with a capitalist ethos and ideology, various theologians criticized capitalism's lack of concern for others and its emphasis on the acquisition of money, property, and power. Today, Slavoj Žižek offers an interpretation of Christianity that challenges the status quo and Christianity's too frequent acceptance of capitalist ideology and rhetoric.

Žižek joins the ranks of other non-capitalist Christian theologians, such as those found in the Social Gospel movement, black liberation theology, and Third World theologians. For example, Walter Rauschenbusch, a leading figure in the Social Gospel movement, labeled himself a "practical socialist." (Ottati, 2003: 469) Rauschenbusch wanted Christians to move toward a society based on cooperation, and he emphasized solidarity in his theology. This directly challenged the self-serving individuality he saw in America. In the end, he advocated a form of socialism based on Christian principles. For Rauschenbusch, America was at a turning point: Catastrophe and regeneration appeared to be the two possible paths for America. If America

remained on the capitalist path, catastrophe would come. (Evans, 2004: 180-81) Similarly, African-American liberation theology has criticized capitalism extensively. Cornel West, for example, places black liberation theology within a “progressive Marxist tradition,” which provides a critical examination of capitalism. (West, 1993: 410) In 1977, theologians, such as James H. Cone, identified capitalism as the “enemy” of African Americans. (West, 1993: 414) Likewise, “Third World theologians almost universally endorse democratic socialism and condemn monopolistic capitalism ... For what we do know is that monopolistic capitalism is evil and must be opposed.” (Cone, 1993: 394)

Žižek is offering a view that challenges capitalism too, but his theological position goes a step beyond those previously mentioned as he embraces the death of God. He began his major shift to theological topics in 1999, (Packman, 2009b: 1-11) and he often incorporates Pauline theology into his writings because of its emphasis on the crucifixion, its apocalyptic tone, and its emphasis on the community of believers. In Christianity, Žižek encounters a mythological aspect that is “disruptive.” (Hauser, 2009: 1-20) To work “against the onslaught of market capitalism,” Žižek shows how death of God theology brings about an opening for freedom. (Packman, 2009a: 1-4) This freedom emerges when we confront Jesus Christ. (Žižek, 2009c: 82) In the end, this “militant Marxist” (Davis, 2009: 4) and “militant atheist” (Davis, 2009: 7) is attempting to rethink Christianity to resist “capitalist nihilism,” (Davis, 2009: 4) and it is within this rethinking that Žižek can help to bring about the death of America’s god, Capitalism.

To disclose Žižek’s revolutionary theological challenge to America’s god, this paper will proceed in the following manner. First, by way of an adumbration, it will address the American context by focusing on the link between capitalism, property, law, and religion. Second, the paper will describe Žižek’s materialist theology and his understanding of death of God theology. The last section will identify a major challenge Žižek’s theology poses to America. His theological position calls into question America’s mythological beginnings as a divinely ordained nation and the consequences of this myth; it challenges the naïve belief in a nation blessed by “God,” a belief which helps to perpetuate violence that attempts to spread democracy and capitalism around the world in an undemocratic and brutal way.

By reading Žižek in this way, a major challenge is posed to Americans who take his philosophy and theology seriously; it is a revolutionary challenge. We must step back, carefully reflect on the subjective and objective violence that plagues our lives, and we must act in a way as to violently disrupt the American god, Capitalism. His theology, then, has an implicit call to revolution; his theology opens a space for revolutionary thoughts in an apocalyptic time. The time has come for a new death; America’s god, Capitalism, needs to breathe its final breath.

The American Context: Property, Law, Religion, and Capitalism

To grasp the American context, I will use an anecdote arising from an 1821 court ruling. In Dedham, Massachusetts a split emerged in the church, the First Church in Dedham. A conservative faction existed alongside a more liberal faction. The split between the people theologically and politically led the conservatives to withdraw from the church. The significance of this story is how the disagreement was resolved.

In nineteenth-century New England, two entities existed in the towns. One was the church and the other was the parish. (Wright, 1994: 128-31) Members of the church were those who had had a religious conversion experience; they were members in good standing with the church, and they could take part in communion. The church served the parish, or the whole town. Not all the members of the town belonged to the church as members in good standing. Because of this clear demarcation between the members of the church and those in the town who were not members, the minister had to serve two purposes. He was a preacher within the church and tried to save souls. In the larger community, however, he was a teacher of morality and concerned with keeping a level of civility within the parish. The minister's civil role was premised on the belief that religion was beneficial for an organized, healthy community. (Bell, 2006: 36-38; Cladis, 2008: 879-82)

The minister, however, was not appointed by authorities outside of the local church. The churches of New England were congregational; this means that the members of the church searched for their own minister. (Wright, 1994: 124) The traditional process was that the members in good standing with the church would find a minister they wanted; then, they would present the minister to the parish. If the parish was dissatisfied with the choice, the church would have to find a new candidate. In Dedham, however, this process broke down. The liberal members of the congregation no longer wanted to hear conservative preaching, so they sought their own public teacher of morality, Alvan Lamson. (Wright, 1994: 119) This precipitated a process that led to a definitive split. Conservative deacons withdrew from worship with the liberals and took church property and funds. They claimed that they were the rightful owners; however, the liberals claimed that the conservatives withdrew from the community and no longer had any right to the property. The disagreement, then, was over which of the two groups was the First Church of Dedham and who had a right to the property. (Wright, 1994: 113)

This led to the court case of *Baker v. Fales*, named after the liberal and conservative deacons, respectively. (Wright, 1994: 126) This case went before a liberal Christian judge who sided with the liberal church members and ordered that the property and funds be returned to the rightful owners, the liberals. Chief Justice Parker interpreted case law loosely — going against the traditional way of interpreting church, parish, and government relations. (Wright, 1994: 127-35) It is through this anecdote that it is clear that religion, law, and property are not separate. The church members could have gone their own ways because of theological differences. Instead, they argued over property and funds. The court emerges as an institution that serves to protect property and make sure the rightful owners continue to maintain control of church property.

Property is not a natural aspect of religious life; it is imposed and maintained by institutions, such as the courts and the legal system. From this story, religion, law, and property are clearly interconnected.

Furthermore, religion also takes part in the market economy of capitalism. In America, there is a demand for religion and an overwhelming supply of different religious paths, and these flourish because laws and regulations protect religious freedom. (Finke, 1997: 108-24) Religious growth and the flourishing of religious sects and denominations result from opportunities present within a capitalist structure. Because of the separation of church and state and the development of the "voluntary principle" at the heart of the American religious experience, new forms of religion constantly have new opportunities to emerge, and they seize these opportunities through marketing principles common to the larger capitalist market economy present in the American culture.

People have wrongly thought that the demand for new religious forms was the reason for the manifold variety of religious groups in America; this, however, overlooks the ability to provide a hypothetically endless supply of new religious forms. What has been clear through American religious history is that no one religious group has been able to satisfy the needs of an entire population. (Finke, 1997: 110) There has always been a wide range of people seeking different religious values and ends. When people within churches are dissatisfied with their religious context, they have the ability to break away from the mainline churches in order to form their own religious communities. (Finke, 1997: 117-20)

For example, during the First Great Awakening (1730-1760), ministers traveled around the country preaching outdoors. They were not supported by taxes required by the local government for the maintenance of the established churches. These wandering ministers also challenged the legitimacy of the local clergy; they argued that many of the local ministers had not had a religious conversion experience and were, therefore, not suitable for the job of preaching. On the other hand, during this period, religious regulations had begun to become a little more relaxed. Toleration for new forms of Christianity had already begun to emerge, and the First Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening (1800-1830), were offering new forms of religious experience. In other words, the awakenings were supplying new forms of religion for people unhappy with their current religious tradition. (Finke, 1997: 113-15)

What takes place behind this process of the deregulation of religion in America is that both the diversity and the supply of religions increase. From religious freedom emerges competition and pluralism. (Finke, 1997: 120-23) This means that the more religion flourishes and depends on the members of the religion, denomination, or sect, the more competitive religion will be. Each religious institution will depend on the members for financial support, and that means they will attempt to bring in as many members as possible. In the end, religious traditions take part in the same commercial system that corporations do. They depend on "(1) aspects of their organizational structures, (2) their sales representatives, (3) their product, and (4) their marketing

techniques”; in more religious language, they “depend upon their polity, their clergy, their religious doctrines and their evangelical techniques.” (Finke & Stark, 2000: 15) In the final analysis, according to the supply-side interpretation of religion, because of a lack of suppression and because of regulations guaranteeing the freedom of religion, religious institutions adopt a market approach to religion that places them within the capitalist marketplace. In America, then, religion is not only a spiritual aid, but it is also another commodity.

The anecdote about the Dedham case and the supply-side interpretation of religion indicate how religion, law, property, and capitalism are interdependently connected. In America, law and capital unite to form what Hardt and Negri call “the republic of property.” (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 7-8) Religion has integrated itself into this republic joyfully. Within the American capitalist system, the laws that justify the holding of property and the wealth of the few often go overlooked, but once one examines the laws and the Constitution in more depth, it becomes clear that America was based largely on capitalism and the wealth of the few. (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 9-11) America’s god is Capitalism.

The American Constitution supports private property, and legislation emerging from the Constitution protects property and wealth. Through the Constitution and arguments around what should go into the Constitution, ideas began to revolve around a notion of property and the “right to property.” (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 10) This is clear in the Constitution’s acquiescence to slavery. It helped to protect the property of slave-holders by overlooking the sentient beings who suffered under the cruel system of chattel slavery. Furthermore, the right to bear arms also has within it a natural right not only to protect the lands of the North American continent from foreign invaders, but also the inherent ability to protect one’s property from his or her neighbors with violence if necessary. Hardt and Negri conclude: “What is central for our purposes here is that the concept of property and the defense of property remain the foundation of every modern political constitution. This is the sense in which the republic, from the great bourgeois revolutions to today, is a republic of property.” (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 15)

The Constitution buttresses American capitalism; it supports the freedom of religion. From the Constitution, laws emerge to protect the property of the citizens. Churches battle over funds and property and seek redress in the judicial system. To acquire wealth and property, religious institutions use marketing strategies to attract a solid membership of contributing members. While this is only a brief description and one possible approach to the link of capitalism, property, and religion, one thing is clear: It is not possible to overlook how capitalism guides and structures the American culture, the American legal system, and American religion. Property and a capitalist spirit pervade the American culture. Capitalism is arguably America’s guiding ideology; it is arguably America’s big Other. Capitalism and its values are arguably America’s god.

Žižek's Communist Theology

In Žižek's essay in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, his section on Job is important for understanding his interpretation of death of God theology. (Žižek, 2009c: 52-57) In his recounting of this story, the reader is confronted by extreme suffering, and Job's friends try to lessen his suffering by trying to explain why he is afflicted. They try to create an overarching narrative to make sense out of that which does not make sense; they were trying to make Job's suffering coherent. In his careful examination of violence, Žižek clearly states that to put one's affliction into a coherent story raises questions; trauma is not something able to be condensed into a coherent and simple narrative: "If the victim were able to report on her painful and humiliating experience in a clear manner, with all the data arranged in a consistent order, this very quality would make us suspicious of its truth. The problem here is part of the solution: the very factual deficiencies of the traumatized subject's report on her experience bear witness to the truthfulness of her report, since they signal that the reported content 'contaminated' the manner of reporting it." (Žižek, 2008: 4) To put Job's suffering into a coherent narrative would make us suspicious of its truth. Instead of accepting Job's suffering and the randomness of his suffering, his friends attempt to impose an ideological construct on an unorganized and often chaotic world to make sense of Job's afflictions. (Žižek, 2009c: 53) The import of the story, however, is that God is being put to the test, and God fails. "God" can no longer provide an answer for why the world is as it is. What the reader ends up with is "a God who is himself overwhelmed by his own creation." (Žižek, 2009a: 244) God miserably fails to provide a plausible response for the problems within the world. The story about Job and his afflictions, therefore, indicate that "God" is no longer relevant. God is dead. God is no longer the master controller of the world. He is impotent. (Žižek, 2009c: 53) There is no master ideology on which to depend; there is no big Other. We are completely dependent on the material aspects of this world: We are completely responsible for the world in which we live; (Žižek, 2009c: 25, 55) God should no longer be an explanation or an excuse for why the world is as it is.

This story helps to refocus the reader's attention by diverting it away from the big Other, or any ideological position that metaphysically organizes the world. The big Other for the majority of Christians is "God." God is something beyond the world that is all-powerful. God gives structure to the world, but there are four words that signal the demise of God's superior position: "He was made Man." (Žižek, 2009c: 25) This was not a partial becoming, but a complete emptying of God's self into the human form of Jesus. God's existence is fully placed within the material body of Jesus. (Žižek, 2009c: 33) When the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross and when Jesus was dying on the cross and cried out that God had forsaken him, Jesus was indicating that God had died. There was no big Other to save him, and since God poured himself into Jesus and since Jesus died on the cross, God died too. At that point, God no longer existed to save humanity. All saving narratives that simplify the suffering and the chaos of the world take on a futile nature. The death of Christ is the death of the big Other. This is not something that should lead us to despair. This death is, in fact, a miraculous opening.

We should no longer base our decisions on a transcendent reality. We should not base our decision making on some divine, fictive, other-worldly being. What exists is the void and multiplicities. (Žižek, 2009c: 90-101) We live in a world of relations, a world with contingencies — a necessary contingency and a contingent necessity. (Žižek, 2009c: 75) There is no absolute certainty existing separately from this world because no big Other exists to keep the world glued together. The world is such that we are in contexts that limit our choices. We understand that the past forces us to make decisions restricted by our circumstances and our limited knowledge of what the consequences of our choices will be. Each choice then becomes the contingent necessity for another choice. (Žižek, 2009b: 149-52) Necessity, then, is never total; it is partial: “the future is causally produced by our acts in the past, while the way we act is determined by our anticipation of the future and our reaction to this anticipation at its most radical, freedom is the freedom to change one’s Destiny.” (Žižek, 2009b: 150-51) This helps to show why there is no divine origin or *telos* on which we can depend. We are thrust into a world made and remade by our decisions and actions. The hopeful move that Žižek leaves us with is this absolute responsibility for ourselves, other human beings, and the world: In other words, “God,” as a big Other, no longer should be an excuse for our failures, deficiencies, and hurtful actions. The death of God, a long-enduring big Other, opens up a space for a communal spirit that can change an unjust and oppressive world in a revolutionary way: “Waiting for someone else to do the job for us is a way of rationalizing our inactivity ... there is no big Other to rely on ... the big Other is *against* us: left to itself, the inner thrust of our historical development leads to catastrophe, to apocalypse; what alone can prevent such calamity is, then, *pure voluntarism*, in other words, our free decision to act against historical necessity.” (Žižek, 2009b: 154)

The revolutionary character of the death of God is the opening for the Holy Spirit to flourish. The Father and Son are dead, but the Holy Spirit survives. This is the part of Jesus that went beyond his mere existence as a person. (Žižek, 2009a: 287) The charismatic nature of Jesus survived and inspired others to live in a different way. It is no longer an option to live in a capitalistic, individualized way where one succeeds and flourishes at the expense of others. The result of the death of God is the fertile ground from which a communal form of life can rise up. This is not a communal orientation based on a sentimental caring for others. I will not be a charitable person because it makes me feel good and because it seems to warm my heart with joy; instead, we need a cold and calculating concern for others. (Žižek, 2009a: 299-303) We will help others because they need it. We will act in a way that is thoughtful, responsible, and subversive. “With more people like this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion.” (Žižek, 2009a: 303)

If we simply act in order to help another person, to make the other person feel good and to make ourselves feel good, we are deceiving ourselves; these kind acts often only help to perpetuate the oppressive system that makes such charitable acts appear necessary. We need to ask what type of system underlies and creates the need for this charity. Underlying this act of

charity is a system that creates those dependent on charity. To provide care for another through charity is simply a way to help the unjust system flourish. We can congratulate ourselves and act as if we are performing an upright and compassionate act, but in reality, we are supporting the system that gave rise to the need to help another charitably. To be charitable is, therefore, violent because we are not challenging the ideology and the institutions that force people into poverty and powerlessness. These kind acts are violent because they do not challenge the state of existence and the status quo in a fundamental way. To act in a fundamentally violent way is to challenge the big Other and the systems of oppression by doing nothing, thinking carefully and for oneself, and then acting in a way that will revolutionarily bring down the systems of oppression. Such disruptions are the truly violent acts we can celebrate and support.

... one is tempted to evoke Badiou's provocative thesis: "It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent." Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts the ultimate function of which is to make the system run more smoothly ... The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active," to "participate," to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something"; academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a "critical" participation, a dialogue, to silence — just to engage us in "dialogue," to make sure our ominous passivity broken ... If one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, then, crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough. Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do. (Žižek, 2008: 216-17)

The time has come not to simply react to injustice. The time has come to reflect. The time has come for us to act in ways that will truly disrupt the stability and existence of oppressive systems. For Žižek, therefore, "violence" is a highly nuanced word.

There is subjective violence and objective violence. (Žižek, 2008: 1-2, 9-11) Subjective violence is the violence we see everyday on the television. The news bombards viewers with images of this violence: police beating up detained suspects, somebody being shot, suicide bombings, or American military planes dropping bombs on a village killing people deemed "collateral damage." To concentrate on this is to take our focus away from what Žižek calls objective violence, which is composed of the economic systems and the symbolic systems that help to oppress people and lead to outbursts of subjective violence. Subjective violence, therefore, is envisioned as abnormal because it seems to occur against a backdrop of non-violence, but subjective violence actually emerges because of the economic and symbolic systems that are violent themselves.

Žižek's continuous reference to capitalism offers an example of economic violence: "The notion of objective violence needs to be thoroughly historicised: it took on a new shape with capitalism." (Žižek, 2008: 12) Greed and success at the expense of others guide capitalism. There is a necessary disregard for human welfare that organizes capitalism. Žižek's point is made clearly on this topic when he challenges John D. Caputo's position on a more benevolent form of

socialized capitalism. Žižek quotes a passage from Caputo:

I would be perfectly happy if the far left politicians in the United States were able to reform the system by providing universal health care, effectively redistributing wealth more equitably with a revised IRS code, effectively restricting campaign financing, enfranchising all voters, treating migrant workers humanely, and effecting a multilateral foreign policy that would integrate American power within the international community, etc., i.e., intervene upon capitalism by means of serious and far-reaching reforms.... If after doing all that Badiou and Žižek complained that some Monster called Capital still stalks us, I would be inclined to greet that Monster with a yawn. (Žižek, 2009b: 77-78)

In response to this, Žižek states:

The problem here is not Caputo's conclusion that if one can achieve all that within capitalism, why not remain within the system? The problem lies with the "utopian" premise that it is *possible* to achieve all that within the coordinates of global capitalism. What if the particular malfunctionings of capitalism enumerated by Caputo are not merely accidental disturbances but are rather structurally necessary? What if Caputo's dream is a dream of universality (of the universal capitalist order) without its symptoms, without any critical points in which its "repressed truth" articulates itself? (Žižek, 2009b: 78)

Global capitalism for Žižek, therefore, is not something that one can redeem. We can think analogously of a disease with endless harmful and painful symptoms. To say we can get rid of the symptoms while leaving the underlying disease untouched will not work. The disease will continue to plague the person with symptoms. To mitigate capitalism's violence through socialist processes is only allowing the violence of the economic system to exist untreated. Instead, we need an end to the economic system that is violent and the backdrop for all the subjective violence that we see as all too familiar and without a critical inquiry addressing why it exists in such a prevalent way.

Because of the capitalist economic system and the push for a global capitalist system, we are living in apocalyptic times: "Are we thus not gradually approaching a global state in which the potential scarcity of three basic resources (oil, water, and food) will become the determining factor in international politics? Is not the lack of food — which makes itself visible in (for the time being) sporadic crises here and there — one of the signs of the forthcoming apocalypse?" (Žižek, 2009b: 83, 92; Hauser, 2009) We are now living in a period with four antagonisms: a possible ecological catastrophe, the shift in private property to intellectual property, questionable technological advances, and "*new forms of apartheid*." (Žižek, 2009b: 91) We can deal with the first three through socialist programs, but this will not address the new forms of apartheid and its injustices. These new forms of apartheid demand that we turn to a new communist approach. (Žižek, 2009b: 94-104)

Žižek, contra postmodernism, advocates an identity we need to take seriously. We cannot overlook the common concerns of the oppressed. While there are clear differences among the consequences of oppression — those who are isolated and mistreated in different ways because of unjust systems — a commonality emerges from the overlapping sufferings resulting from

objective violence. What is needed is a solidarity that strengthens the struggle against injustice “here, there, and everywhere,” (Žižek, 2009b: 123) by concentrating on the abject position that affects individuals around the world. (Žižek, 2009b: 124-25) By focusing on Jesus, then, and his death on the cross, we see an abject person. He offers a vision of what it means to be oppressed and violently mistreated. His death leaves us with a spirit of revolt. We can re-envision the Holy Spirit as the communal spirit that invigorates the oppressed and dominated:

Christianity includes within itself its own overcoming, i.e., its overcoming (negation) in modern atheism is inscribed into its very core as its innermost necessity. This is why radical political movements, with their elementary process of “sublating” their dead hero in the living spirit of the community, are so much like the Christological Resurrection — the point here is not that they function like “secularized Christianity,” but on the contrary, that the Resurrection of Christ is itself their precursor, a mythic form of something which reaches its true form in the logic of an emancipatory political collective. (Žižek, 2009a: 287-88)

Their common suffering leads them to say, “No more! We will suffer no longer!” They are willing to unite because of their mutual identification through suffering. They have a radical responsibility to each other. This responsibility is placed within the immediacy of this very material world where we no longer can depend on a big Other to save us. This means that we will unite through a communal spirit. Ideally, they will stand back, think carefully, and then act in a way that disrupts the economic and symbolic systems that continuously perpetuate oppression and domination. This ultimate violent act is what can help to stop the system from functioning. This can be a violently bloody act or a violent act of interpretation. The truly violent act is one that will help to stop the violence of global capitalism. This, then, is his communist theology.

God emptied himself into Christ. Jesus died on the cross. At that point, God fully died. The transcendent God no longer existed. Because of God’s total death, the desire for a big Other who can save us is not a viable option, but this death of God leaves us in a position of revolutionary responsibility. No divine other will save us; we must save ourselves and the world in which we live. Žižek takes the end of God to its final conclusion: we must live communally. This communal conclusion points to why capitalism must end as the logical conclusion of Žižek’s theology. The death of God leads to a communal way of living in the world; capitalism, however, is not communal. It depends on a regulated political system that sustains greed and excessive accumulation of property for some while the majority serve those who are getting wealthy. Capitalism has led to apocalyptic times. New forms of apartheid mean that we need people to unite in a way that communally addresses this injustice resulting from global capitalism. In this way, Žižek offers a communist theology in which global capitalism is not an option.

What I am here calling Žižek’s communist theology is, therefore, a belief that there is no big Other that divinely orders the world. We are alone and radically responsible to each other. The conclusion is that we need to unite and help each other, and we need to act in ways that violently disrupt systems of oppression. We need to resist immediate action; we need to thoughtfully

consider the systems of oppression and our actions, then we need to act so as to undermine any big Other that creates oppression and domination. Žižek's communist theology, therefore, emphasizes community, justice, disruption, and meditative considerations of one's context. The death of God, then, radically challenges America's god, Capitalism.

A Challenge to American Identity

Thus far, this paper has addressed one aspect of the American context and Žižek's communist theology. The first was an adumbration of how religion, property, law, and capitalism are interconnected in America, and the second explored Žižek's understanding of the death of God and how it leads to a communal spirit that can bring about possible significant social changes by altering how people exist within the world. While it should be clear up front how Žižek's communist theology challenges the capitalist and individualistic ethos in America, this *prima facie* challenge deserves more attention. We need to see how his theology directly challenges one valued myth about America and American identity, namely, the myth of the Christian nation that is chosen and blessed by God.

Every community has its myths, and America is no different. A tendency exists for people to think of America as a Christian nation. There is no doubt that early explorers and settlers proclaimed the greatness of God and a disciplined belief in Jesus Christ. For example, when Cortés encountered the Aztecs around the year 1519, he tried to persuade them that their rituals and observances were idolatrous. Bernal Diaz del Castillo describes the scene: Cortés "told them that ... now they were not to have any more idols in their lofty temples," and "he wished to leave them with a great lady who was the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we believe in and worship, and that they too should hold her for Lady and intercessor ..." (Del Castillo, 2000: 27) We also are informed that, "He told them many things about our holy religion as well stated as only a priest could do it nowadays, so that it was listened to with good will." (Del Castillo, 2000: 27) There is, however, another side to Cortés that sheds light on his "holy" religion: "Cortés then began his march of death from town to town, using deception, turning Aztec against Aztec, killing with the kind of deliberateness that accompanies a strategy — to paralyze the will of the population by a sudden frightful deed." (Zinn, 2003: 11)

The irony is too obvious to overlook and yet so obvious as to deserve a brief comment. Cortés wants to discard the idols of the natives, but wants to replace them with his own idol. While his idol appears to symbolize a transcendent, divine reality above, the truth is that no transcendent reality existed. Cortés' idol symbolized conquest, acquisition, power, and murder. Cortés was a believer in an ideology that guided much of Christianity in his time, namely, the Doctrine of Discovery:

Religion was a significant aspect of the Doctrine of Discovery and of Manifest Destiny. Under Discovery, non-Christian people were not deemed to have the same rights to land,

sovereignty, and self-determination as Christians because their rights could be trumped upon their discovery by Christians ... The European and later American definition of civilization was an important part of Discovery and the idea of Euro-American superiority. Euro-Americans thought that God had directed them to bring civilized ways and education and religion to indigenous people and often to exercise paternalism and guardianship powers over them. (Miller, 2006: 4)

Cortés was not the only person duped by a big Other that helped to support violence, genocide, and the acquisition of property and wealth. The idea that helps to guide the belief in a Christian nation, a nation chosen by God, discloses itself in the Puritan religious rhetoric. In 1630 aboard the *Arbella*, John Winthrop held the belief that the world would be watching them as they founded their new community in New England, and God would be watching, too. They would need to be good Christians and be models for the rest of the world. It is in support of this belief that Winthrop proclaimed: "We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and a glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'The Lord make it likely that of *New England*.' For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." (Winthrop, 2000: 61) The problem is that for those plantations to succeed and for the Puritans to flourish, they would acquire their land, wealth, and power by murdering those already on the land they wanted. The Puritans took part in a genocidal process that helped to reduce the native population in North America at the time of Columbus from ten million to less than a million. Howard Zinn concludes: "Behind the English invasion of North America, behind their massacre of Indians, their deception, their brutality, was that special powerful drive born in civilizations based on private property." (Zinn, 2003: 16) This "Christianity" and the need for property helped to foster the belief in Manifest Destiny.

Along these lines, then, the glory given to God was a murderous glory that violently displaced and exterminated countless peoples. This was done in the name of Christianity and in order to convert and save "savage" people. To celebrate the religiosity of America as it is linked to this violent, unjust past — or to say that it is a Christian nation — is problematic because the religiosity that has pervaded American history has helped to perpetuate violence and brutality. When we think of the Jesus who was the abject other and who died challenging the brutal empire of Rome, to say that America is a Christian nation raises questions about which Christianity is being discussed. The Christianity many Americans speak of is a Christianity in support of property and conquest through murder. It is this Christianity that Žižek's communist theology challenges.

Žižek offers a Christian theology that does not emphasize property, but a communal spirit and responsibility to others. Žižek supports an interconnected community able to resist injustice because those who unite are challenging the status quo. The abject Christ is a charismatic person who helps to overcome oppression by leaving behind a memory that inspires. His inspiration and the communal bond that forms around the abject Christ creates a parallax gap between two Christianities: Žižek's Christianity and American ideas of Christianity. To continue to argue that America is a Christian nation and morally upright is to overlook Žižek's challenge that dismisses a

big Other and urges us to live responsibly in the present. With the acquisitive nature of American Christianity in mind and its support of property and capital, the underlying criticism offered by Žižek's communist theology is that Americans' use of "Christianity" to describe the country is problematic and not to be celebrated. It is a bastardized Christianity. "Christianity" provided an opportunity for violence to others. The violence of Cortés and the Puritans, then, are examples of subjective violence. The objective violence is a specific manifestation of the Christian religion and its symbolic system that is linked to the emergence of capitalism. By changing the religious background, the economic system should change. If we substitute Žižek's Christianity for that of the Christianity that supported the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny, a different approach to economics emerges. Instead of conquest and an emphasis on property, responsibility and community emerge. Žižek's communist theology, therefore, is more than a *prima facie* challenge to America's belief in its Christian origins. It is a direct challenge to the brutal drive for property and wealth buttressed by "Christian" symbols and myths. By juxtaposing Žižek's theology with that of the myth of a Christian nation, we see that American identity begins to waver. American Christianity supported violence and capitalism and allowed the subjective violence of genocide to occur. Žižek's theology forces us to see the inadequacy of America's understanding of Christianity. Behind America is not a religion called Christianity, but a greedy drive for property placed in the language and imagery of Christianity.

It is not Christianity behind America, but a drive for property that manifests itself in a capitalist economic system. Žižek, then, makes it clear that the dead God of Christianity is not the guiding force behind America, but a different god, namely, Capitalism. The death of the big Other in Christianity now urges us to hope for the death of the big Other in America. We must now pray for America's god to breathe its last breath.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore Žižek's understanding of the death of God. His understanding was placed within the American context, which is one of religion, property, law, and capitalism. Within American thought is a belief in the "Christian nation," but it obscures the violent past that went into the founding of America. Violence to Native Americans was a genocidal process accomplished within the symbolic system of Christianity. This religious language, however, obscures a more urgent drive for wealth and property, which the Constitution supports. The American god, therefore, is Capitalism. In America, as the latest economic crisis reveals, Capitalism is still the dominant ideology that took billions of dollars to save and to support. By taking Žižek's theology seriously, the Christian God is dead, and there is no big Other. The death of God created room for a communal spirit to emerge, and this provided the opportunity for a radical responsibility for others and the ability to oppose injustice. His communist theology, therefore, makes us look more seriously at the American myth and dependence upon a belief in America's privileged place in the life of God. Since God is dead, there is no God who gave

Americans a chosen land. The special place of America, then, is within a violent capitalist economic system and not within a divine plan, and a communist theology addresses the inadequacy of such a capitalist religious world-view by redirecting our attention away from greed and individuality toward responsibility for others, especially abject others. It is time to take Žižek's theological position and his description of Christianity seriously and to use it as a tool to help undermine America's god, Capitalism.

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