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The Unbearable Truth of the Image: Žižek's Re-Reading of Iconoclasm and Peter Brown's Holy Man

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A new wave of left-wing political theory is emerging today, characterized by a group of theorists devoted to re-imagining political thought and practice in a way that overcomes the dual problems associated with the absolutism of Marxist-Leninism, and the negative-relativism of much of post-modern thought.¹ Politically, it is asserted, that after the failure of the socialist project, and the inability of post-modernism to offer any genuine challenge to capitalism and liberal democracy, we are experiencing a 'scarcity of fantasies' in terms of alternatives to globalization and neo-liberal governance (Žižek 1997). The best known (perhaps, seminal) attempt to theorize our way out of this despairing situation was expressed in Hardt and Negri's 2001 text *Empire*, in which the authors endeavour to synthesize the insights of Marx, Foucault, and Gramsci for an emancipatory project. Indeed, for a period *Empire* was considered by some to be the

'bible' of the anti-globalization movement. I would argue that this vaunted position of leadership in left-wing theoretical circles is now shifting (if not already complete) to the figure of Slovenian social and political theorist Slavoj Žižek.

Žižek, however, is no single-minded theorist of radical political movements or social emancipation in the tradition of *Empire*, but instead one who borrows generously from various theoretical sources in an attempt to illuminate the nature of subjectivity, ethics, aesthetics, and politics today. Most readers of Žižek are familiar with his appropriation of pop-culture, amusing personal anecdotes, and ethnic and dirty jokes to illustrate lessons from Hegel or Lacan, but a less familiar aspect of his thought, especially prominent in his later writings, is his re-working of the position of (secularized) Christianity and Judaism in contemporary political theory. That is, Žižek – an avowed atheist – suggests that we can learn important lessons from some of the fundamental philosophical insights of these two traditions. More specifically, it is Žižek's reworking of the categories of particularity and universality – at the level of subjectivity – within a specifically *Christian* philosophical context, that contributes most to his theorizing of progressive politics.

In this context, a large part of Žižek's work is a pointed critique of what he understands to be our current predicament: an intellectual moment dominated by what he calls secularized Jewish thought in Continental political philosophy.² He argues that a certain bias – represented broadly by the term 'post-modernism' – exists against Christian themes and ideas, while simultaneously Jewish thought is fetishized. Žižek identifies the predominant impulse within the acceptable "post-secular" options in contemporary philosophy as an injunction to "stick to the uniqueness of the Jewish legacy, to its fidelity to the encounter with radical Otherness, in contrast to Christianity" (Žižek 2003: 6). Here, his issue with Jewish thought is that its fetishization of respect for otherness leads to a particular type of philosophical and political relativism that in no way challenges contemporary forms of capitalist social relations. That is to say, Jewish philosophy lacks any foundation for universally normative political principles. Furthermore, Žižek takes issue with the negative Messianic character of Jewish thought – typified by the work of Theodor Adorno – which he expresses as something like: 'deny what is untrue and refuse the falsity of existence, but be assured that the truth will come ... later.' For Žižek there is no positive-normative position here; no suggestion of how to imagine and build a political project, but only the injunction to negate the existing state

of affairs in the abstract while waiting for change to 'just happen.' In Žižek's opinion, the Jewish philosophical position is something akin to this: wander around in the desert – stateless and miserable, but have faith that redemption will come, and here he continuously invokes Benjamin's category of 'divine violence' as the political expression of negative Messianism. In contrast, he perceives Christian thought as containing the radical potential for a positive political project, particularly in the figure of St. Paul. Borrowing heavily from Alain Badiou, Žižek reads Pauline politics as: I have witnessed the Event of Truth – which is Christ – and from here we build a Community, a Revolution, a Church. In abstract philosophical terms, this position is expressed as witnessing a particular Event which is then raised to the status of a universal truth and, in turn, incorporated into a political movement, organization, or institution.

What Žižek is attempting to demonstrate with these claims is nothing less than the overturning of a basic assumption of left-wing Continental thought that, he argues, began with Adorno and culminates in the ethics and methodology of Levinas and Derrida. Whether it is non-identity or *différance*, the dominant approach to critical philosophy of the past thirty years has been one based on abstract negation and the refusal to reify the conceptual or the sign; in other words, truth (as an abstract category) must be approached negatively. For Žižek, while this philosophical moment was necessary to overcome the dogmatism of orthodox Marxism it is, in itself, defined by a mode of thought that unwittingly contributes to the perpetuation of capitalist social relations that nowadays is fuelled by the glorification of difference and otherness.

In this article, I explore Žižek's rejection of secularized Jewish Continental political thought in an attempt to illustrate how his critique lends itself to a positive construction of contemporary subjectivity in the category of the '(in)human.' I approach this issue via Žižek's dialectical reading of Jewish iconoclasm and, more specifically, its founding moment: the Biblical Second Commandment or 'Image Prohibition.' He claims that the traditional understanding of iconoclasm is that because God is characterized by a sublime formlessness, Judaism prohibited the image of God because any image would necessarily be a false depiction. Žižek challenges this reading and suggests that, on the contrary, it banned the image of God because it contains an unbearable truth that would dissolve the Judaic Symbolic Order – the truth that God is nothing more than the imperfect extension of man. Therefore, from Žižek's perspective, Christianity's transgression against the Prohibition should be understood as recognizing the fully

sublated truth of the Jewish position: that a certain 'divinity' exists in man and that it can be shown or represented in the figure of Christ. It is from this theoretical starting point that Žižek constructs his model of the revolutionary subject for contemporary times. Finally, in an attempt to think Žižek's thesis in a historical context, I turn to Peter Brown's work on the 'holy man' of 9th Century Byzantium. It is my contention that the holy man fits almost perfectly Žižek's model of subjectivity, and demonstrates in a more empirical manner some of the philosophical ramifications of his position, primarily the way in which it challenges the dominant understanding of how contemporary Continental thought values the particular and the universal in relation to truth. Instead of understanding the particular as the exclusive site of truth and positing the universal as the site of falsity, the holy man demonstrates that truth emerges only when the particular and universal exist contemporaneously in the same object.

Iconoclasm: The Jewish Position

While Žižek's project of recovering the revolutionary potential of Christian thought is, perhaps, most commonly associated with his work on St. Paul as the figure who politicizes and institutionalizes Christianity in the form of the Church, a topic that has not been written on extensively is his peculiar analysis of the Jewish Second Commandment against images and the Christian transcendence of (or transgression against) the same. Despite this omission in the literature on Žižek, there exists a relatively large body of scholarly work dealing with the Second Commandment from a distinctly *Jewish* perspective. For example, a mini-industry exists that explores Adorno's appropriation of the Second Commandment which he uses to demonstrate its negative philosophical truth-content.³ For Adorno, the image is untrue because it attempts to represent that which is unrepresentable in figural form; it reifies God as finite and without excess or, in his own vernacular, it makes God "identical" to itself. Thus, the explicit prohibition of creating the image of God and, in the Kabbalist tradition, even *naming* God is a profound truth that informs both Adorno's philosophical methodology 'negative dialectics' (in which a concept never fully captures the truth of its object), and his aesthetics in which truth appears only to the extent it disrupts the identity of the subject. Thus, for Adorno, the image is always the site of falsity and its express

prohibition is the only way to experience truth (Adorno 2004: 207). This is extended further in his treatment of particularity and universality. On Adorno's reading, the particular is always, by definition, the site of truth because it is understood as unique and valuable in itself (and therefore unexchangeable), while the universal is always the reified expression of identity. Within his and Horkheimer's construction of the dialectic of enlightenment, the Christian transgression against the Second Commandment is a concrete *regression* from the sublated truth of the Prohibition.

This reading of the Second Commandment has had profound implications for Western philosophy, and specifically for contemporary theories of subjectivity. Within Adorno's framework the subject becomes defined only by what it is not – the warped and reified subject of late capitalism which is 'identical' to itself *qua* subject or mind. This analysis sets the groundwork for the deconstructive turn in philosophy which comes to challenge all fixed meaning associated with subjectivity (Cornell 1992). In this regard, Jean-François Lyotard's work on the category of the "inhuman" is exemplary. Lyotard celebrates that which is "inhuman" in the human as a normative starting point to think contemporary subjectivity as an uncontainable paroxysmal force; that which constantly attempts to break through the socialized barrier called the "human" (Lyotard 1991). What is interesting here is that one can trace Lyotard's formulation of the inhuman back to another reading of the Second Commandment, namely Kant's. In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant famously observes that the Second Commandment is the "sublimest passage" in the Bible because it recognizes in God an object that cannot be fully captured by the imagination (Kant 1973: 127). It is through the "unpresentability" of the image of God that Lyotard, ultimately, understands his normative category "inhuman": the unsocialized excess of human subjectivity; the subject of the *novatio* sublime. It is with these philosophical developments in mind – Adorno's reading of the Second Commandment and Lyotard's construction of the inhuman – that one should situate Žižek's attempted recovery of a secularized *Christian* reading of the Biblical Image Prohibition as something that can contribute to the theorization of an overcoming of the crisis of abstract negation and undecidability that has accompanied the ascendance of secularized Jewish philosophy within left-wing Continental thought and politics.

Žižek and the Image Prohibition

In the context of the Second Commandment, Žižek's primary interest is to reconstruct the traditional understanding that the move from paganism (Greek/Roman) to Judaism is principally a process of "de-anthropomorphization." Žižek claims that it is commonly assumed amongst most Continental philosophers today that while the pagan gods of antiquity shared human qualities, both mental and physical, and engaged in human behaviour – including sexual and generally debaucherous excess – the Jewish God is without human form or attributes. With this in mind, Žižek poses the question: "...what if the true target of Jewish iconoclastic prohibition is not previous pagan religions, but rather its *own* 'anthropomorphization'/'personalization' of God? What if the Jewish religion *itself* generates the excess it has to prohibit?" (Žižek 2001a: 130). He notes that, far from being fully de-anthropomorphized the Jewish God, in fact, personifies human qualities more intensely than the various entities in the pagan pantheon. As he states: "It is only with Judaism that God is FULLY 'anthropomorphized,' that the encounter with Him is the encounter with another PERSON in the fullest sense of the term – the Jewish God experiences full wrath, revengefulness, jealousy, etc., as every human being" (Žižek 2001a: 130-1). Thus, for Žižek, the reason for prohibiting the creation of His image is not that it would necessarily be a *false* depiction, that it would never be adequate to His true unrepresentable nature, but that it would *all too faithfully* demonstrate His humanity. He claims: "... the Jewish prohibition only makes sense against the background of this fear that the image would reveal something shattering, that, in an unbearable way, it would be TRUE and ADEQUATE" (Žižek 2001a: 132).

This position that Judaism banned the image because it would reveal an unbearable *truth* only makes sense within the context of Žižek's model of Lacanian ontology of subjectivity; and he leaves it largely up to the reader to work out the details. Therefore, a brief unpacking of his position is required. On Žižek's reading of the ("late") Lacan⁴, when the subject enters into the Symbolic Order (when it becomes 'subject'), it experiences this moment as a traumatic rendering away from wholeness. Therefore, the subject experiences subjectivity as a fundamental lack. This lack manifests itself as a 'lost object' (*objet petit a*) which the subject constantly strives to regain by pursuing surrogate objects in an impossible attempt to fill the lack (the attempt is 'impossible' because this lack is the *ontological condition of subjectivity*). This lack,

paradoxically, exists as an 'excess' for the subject, because it is experienced as a 'never enough' (thus, lack = excess). The pleasure one seeks in the pursuit of this object (or to fill the lack) is called *jouissance* (the limit point of enjoyment where pleasure and pain become indistinguishable). The catch is that while all subjects seek this lost object or the satisfaction of *jouissance*, it is an impossible endeavour because it would be equivalent to experiencing the Real of pre-subjectivity. The subject *qua* subject dissolves if it experiences the Real because the ontological condition of subjectivity is its disavowal.

From this perspective, God is understood as both an object for channelling one's excessive desire for wholeness, *and* as an object that is defined by an excess. Judaism banned the image, on Žižek's reading, not because it would fail to grasp the ineffability of God, but because it would demonstrate that *God is defined by the same excess as man* (imperfect, incomplete, and impotent). Recognizing this truth would destroy the Judaic Symbolic Order in which God both ensures meaning and acts as a receptacle for man's excessive desire. Therefore, the image of God should be understood primarily not as a truth about God, but as a *truth about the subject*. The subject recognizes in the image of God 'the Real' (pre-symbolic) of subjectivity. The Real demonstrates that the core of subjectivity is a contentless void and, therefore, it must be disavowed in the subject to ensure its stability as subject.

If this position is in any way tenable, then what does it mean that Christianity allows and, in some cases, even worships the image of the divine? For Žižek, the reasons for this are clear: Christ fulfills the genuine move *toward* anthropomorphism that Judaism began, simply by recognizing it in itself. However, for Žižek it is not simply (as it was for John of Damascus⁵) that in Christ God becomes man, but that "Christ is fully a man only insofar as he takes upon himself the excess/remainder, the 'too much' on account of which a man, precisely, is never fully a man" and therefore, "it becomes clear that God is NOTHING BUT the excess of man, the 'too much' of life which cannot be contained in any life-form, which violates the shape (*morphe*) of anthropomorphism" (Žižek 2001a: 131-2). Thus, in Žižek's work the Xenophanic maxim of gods and horses is acknowledged but with a twist: God is created in man's image-perception of himself, but only to the extent that it projects that which is unrepresentable and uncontainable in the form of man. To the extent that the 'human' is understood as complete, enjoying all the immanent properties of the modern subject (Marxist, liberal, or otherwise) in the

Symbolic Order, it can only approximate wholeness or humanness by recognizing its lack – its inhuman complement – the yawning gap between the Symbolic and the Real. Žižek articulates this point most clearly in his contribution to the book *The Neighbor*, wherein he defines the human being as “the difference between the human and the inhuman excess that is inherent to being – human” (Žižek, et al. 2007: 175).

Žižek’s Lacanian reading of the Image Prohibition illustrates his general understanding of the significance of Judaism and Christianity as dialectical moments in the history of philosophy. Because Žižek argues that it is the *image* of man, and *not* its absence, that points to its truth content, the inhuman excess of being human manifests itself in its *concrete representation*. In this regard, Jewish iconoclasm can be understood as a hesitancy to recognize *the divinity in man*. For Žižek, the move from Judaism to Christianity is akin to a move from what might be called an ‘immanent dialectic,’ in which no progress or transcendence occurs, to a genuinely materialist dialectic, in which a divine object is fully sublated into the phenomenal world, because Christianity posits the direct identity of man and God.⁶ In other words, as he puts it, “Judaism and Christianity are related as In-itself and For-itself – Judaism is Christianity ‘in itself,’ still in the form of paganism, articulated in the pagan horizon. *Within* this horizon (of images, sexualized rituals, etc.), the New can only assert itself in the guise of a radical *prohibition*: no images, no sacred orgies” (Žižek 2001a: 129). Judaism, in short, represents a disavowal of its own truth-content by prohibiting its positive presentation (because its revelation would destroy the Judaic Symbolic Order).

Therefore, Žižek reads the Prohibition as a moment of dialectical sublation, but not as a *full* sublation. For Žižek, the completion of the dialectical unfolding occurs one epoch later characterized by the Christian *overcoming* of the Commandment (i.e., allowing the image of God). Žižek offers a radical interpretation of the relationship of the image to these two religious traditions because, on his reading, the normative discourse surrounding the relationship between the particular and the universal – in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions – is re-arranged. The new relationship he describes between the particular and the universal does not simply reverse them; it is not that the universal becomes the site of truth, while the particular is false because it is not fully sublated. On the contrary, what he is describing is an object in which the particular and universal are indistinguishable. If one were to describe it in Adornian terms, the particular, which is true, is firmly situated in the image of man, which is also

the site of the universal. On my reading of Žižek, because the image appears to capture both the human (as a construct in the Symbolic) *and* the inhuman excess (the lack called the Real), seeing the image is tantamount to a momentary experience of the Real because it is complete – the particular and universal appear to be momentarily reconciled. The content of this image points to the necessary dissolving of the Symbolic Order from which an Act can emerge. Philosophers like Adorno would reject this reading because it posits a non-existent redemption (or reconciliation of subject and object). The key point to remember, from a Žižekian perspective, is that the image does not signify a reconciliation that remains with the subject or redeems the world, but a reconciliation that the subject instantly (or shortly after) begins to break apart or divide in order to create a new Symbolic Order. Therefore, there is no reconciliation here in Idealist terms. There is only a dissolution of subjectivity as such that allows the possibility of a new, but by no means redeemed, way of being a subject (one remains alienated from the Real) but in a new Symbolic Order. This is slightly akin to Adorno's category of aesthetic experience, but the major difference is that, while a subject obtains a higher level of consciousness after an aesthetic experience, it still finds itself in the same alienating and totalizing world. For Žižek, while the full satisfaction of desire is an ontological impossibility, it is possible to learn to live ... better, in a new Symbolic Order of the subject's creation.

To this extent, the Real of man – the gaping and terrifying void at the core of subjectivity – becomes 'inhuman,' and the proper dialectical object of philosophical investigation. The Real must be disavowed for subjectivity to exist as such, but it is also that which must be faced for genuine progress to be rendered possible (subjectivity must be dissolved for a new form of subjectivity to emerge). For Žižek, the greatest flaw with most modern and contemporary Continental theorists of subjectivity is that they do not acknowledge the inhuman component of humanity. It is his contention that without coming to grips with this ontological fact of being human, philosophers will never fully understand historical moments of human brutality and terror, nor will they be able to adequately formulate a genuinely progressive political project.

And so, for the sake of argument, I will for the time being refer to Žižek's construction of the human, or more-than-human due to its divine excess, as the '(in)human.' With this counter-narrative of iconoclasm in mind, it proves productive to read it against the traditional Jewish reading of the Image Prohibition – specifically in

terms of the relationship between the positional value of the particular and the universal. For this, I would like to explore a historical moment in which virtually the entire constellation of contested theological and political principles constituting the debate over images arose: the iconoclast conflict of 9th century Byzantium. What is most apparent in studying this conflict is that the secularized Jewish interpretation of the Image Prohibition is severely flawed, if not completely mistaken. If the power of the image of the divine during this period is represented primarily by icons and the holy man (as a Christ-like figure), it was manifested quite clearly *against* the universalism of the Church and Empire. These figures (icons and holy men) were distinctly localized, representing the particularity of rural communities resisting attempts to be incorporated into a universal political structure. In this context, iconoclastic Christians were not destroying images in an attempt to stay true to the Old Testament Commandment, but to eradicate the power of their particularity (manifested in the form of local populations' loyalty to particular saints and holy men). What is striking about the holy man is the way in which his image and his place in society are consistent with Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition and his model of subjectivity in general. To this extent, the holy man represents the inhuman excess by which all humans are defined.

Peter Brown: Iconoclasm and the Holy Man

My intent in this section is not to provide a detailed historical account of the series of events that constitute the iconoclast crisis in 9th century, Byzantium but to highlight the way in which certain discourses of universality and particularity, represented politically by Empire and local authority respectively, were articulated through the language of theology. In effect, my argument is that what might be perceived as a debate over religious dogma was, in fact, a struggle over the political imaginary of the populace. Thus, the following account is intended only to identify discursive trends that can help shed light on philosophical appropriations of the Image Prohibition, the problematic of representation (and its relationship to the particular and universal), and a comparison of the holy man and Žižek's particular account of the (in)human (which is simply another way of describing his understanding of subjectivity).

The Byzantine Empire existed from 306 to 1453 CE and, at the height of its power, spanned from southern Spain to the Syrian Desert and northern Italy to southern Egypt. It enjoyed its 'golden age,' under the reign of Emperor Justinian I, between the years 527 and 565. During this time the Empire experienced a period of relatively undisturbed peace (in terms of its relations with neighbouring empires). The 'iconoclast crisis' itself began when the stability of this period was shaken in the late 7th century due to a series of successful incursions into Byzantine territory by the Arab Empire. These raids and forward advances profoundly demoralized the populace because up to that point Byzantine subjects had been confident that God protected their borders. Their question thus became: 'How have we transgressed against God to deserve this divine punishment?'

Searching for a scapegoat to explain the success of the Arab challenge, the Church firmly placed the blame on widespread idolatry (primarily, the worship of icons) or 'national apostasy,' which, of course, included the transgression of the Second Commandment (Brown, 1982a, p. 241). The iconoclasts suggested that images of Christ and the Saints serve to distract Christians from the worship of God in His indeterminable shape because these images constitute unconsecrated objects of veneration, and they thereby violate the scriptural prohibition on graven images. The iconophiles, by contrast, *promoted* the use of such images with the argument that they are 'useful' for illiterate Christians as reminders of God's glory and that, in fact, icons are holy relics because they are consecrated 'from below,' that is, they were deemed holy not because of official consecration by the Church, but because there was a deep psychological need among the masses for such holy objects. Regardless of the iconophile appeal, in 726 Emperor Leo III enacted the first official policy of iconoclasm within the Eastern Empire, and the Church sanctioned this position in 754 at the Council of Hieria. All images of Christ, the Virgin and, most markedly, Saints, were to be removed from places of worship and public display. This policy lasted almost uninterrupted until the last iconoclast Emperor – Theopholis – died in 842.

Peter Brown is widely recognized as the foremost social historian of this age, and therefore my analysis will rely heavily on his work. While some medievalists may find my over-reliance on Brown problematic, as a political theorist I am more interested in using his model of the holy man, and his narrative of iconoclasm, as a helpful allegory for understanding Žižek's Lacanian/Christian reading of the Second Commandment and

his theorization of the subject as the “inhuman.” In this respect, I follow the lead of Žižek himself whose work, at times, flourishes through almost anecdotal readings of philosophical ideas divorced from the scrutiny of the secondary literature that comments on them.

Brown chooses to focus on a particular place and time – the Syrian countryside in the 9th century – because the changing social dynamics of the population characteristic of this historical moment can best illustrate why icons and holy men were both revered and reviled by different demographic groups. As he suggests, studying the controversy surrounding the use of icons in 9th century Byzantium is an exercise in exploring the socio-political and psychological dimensions of Syrian life during this period (Brown 1982b: 109-23). It should be stated from the outset that, in this regard, the icon proper – the portraiture of saints – played a secondary role to that of the ‘holy man’ who came to serve as an integral social institution in the form of arbiter, philosopher, counsellor, and political advisor. In fact, the icon itself was only considered a sufficient surrogate if no holy man was available for counsel (Brown 1982a: 269). Thus, it is to the holy man that one first must turn to understand the significance of the iconoclast crisis that rocked the Byzantine Empire in the 9th century.

Brown begins with a very simple assertion: the rise of the popularity of icons and the influential position of the holy man would not have occurred if the subjects of the Byzantine Empire did not believe that human beings can directly intervene in divine affairs and, therefore, influence worldly phenomena (Brown 1982a: 269). In other words, the Christian population of late antiquity believed strongly that the course of terrestrial events is directly correlated to the sinful or wholesome behaviour of human beings. If a community was perceived to be characterized by widespread and inveterately wicked practices, that community could expect some kind of large-scale punishment from the venerable Beyond. The same belief operated on a micro-level as well. People understood that all sorts of personal afflictions originate from a divine source. However, these same people were not always resigned to their fate, as it was commonly believed that some exceptionally righteous persons have the ability to intervene in divine affairs and, effectively, change or correct their fate. Thus, the first characteristic of the holy man that must be considered is his relationship to the divine. In this regard, he must be understood as a site of power, or as Brown describes it: a “living icon,” or a “clearly-defined *locus* of the holy on earth” (Brown 1982a: 268).

There is, then, a parallel between the icon and the holy man. For Brown, the icon can be understood literally as a physical object that exists simultaneously in both the empirical and metaphysical realms: “The icon was a hole in the dyke separating the visible world from the divine and through this hole there oozed precious dribblets from the great sea of God’s mercy” (Brown 1982a: 260-1). The miracles that occurred at the site of icons – the actual emanation of matter (tears, blood, myrrh) from venerated images – were to be understood literally as holes between the dominions of the holy and profane. In a similar fashion, holy men were perceived literally as conduits of the miraculous. For example, it was widely believed that simply upon seeing a holy man, a believer could experience supernatural phenomena or deeds similar to those which icons performed, in particular, the miracle of healing. For the 9th century Byzantine subject, this power clearly demonstrated the ‘inhuman’ character of the holy man. As Brown argues: “Why the holy man over other possible mediators? The question must be asked ‘Are you Human?’ The answer for the sociologist was quite definitely, ‘no.’ In late Roman society, the holy man was deliberately not human. He was the ‘stranger’ *par excellence*” (Brown 1982b: 130). This concentration of divine power in the figure of the holy man meant that he became a site wherein the populace focussed or displaced their hopes and fears because he had the unique ability to ensure the actualization of justice on Earth. He became an approachable object for a religion characterised by an unapproachable God, and thus the holy man became the “bearer of the objectivity of society” (Brown 1982b: 134).

The second characteristic of the holy man that needs to be examined is his role as political mediator/counsellor. During the 7th and 8th centuries, the Syrian countryside was characterized by a rapid increase in both population and wealth. As is the case in all societies witnessing a growth in social complexity, mediators were required to ensure the peaceful settlement of disputes and the uninterrupted flow of social relations. The villagers of 9th century Syria found such a figure in the holy man. In this role, he replaced the ‘patron,’ a personality who existed as a liaison between town and village, and who used his contacts in each to facilitate urban/rural transactions, while amassing his own fortune. In this regard, the primary difference between the patron and the holy man is that whereas the patron was firmly entrenched in society, the holy man, as radical ascetic, was resolutely positioned outside of society. He acted, one might say, as the divine or social *particular* in relation to the town’s *universal*. This lent him a

special place in the eyes of the village populace because his clients were able to avoid the debilitating humiliation that accompanied the accrual of debt that was characteristic of relations with the patron. As a saint and Christ-like figure, it was the holy man “as patron, and not his humble client, who ha[d] already taken on himself by asceticism the full load of humiliation” (Brown 1982c: 161). In this regard, to the extent that the holy man was a site of power, the power that defined him was of a non-coercive sort because no clear material motivation for his intercessions existed (Brown 1982c: 162). In short, the holy man was a figure that transcended exchange relations. Ostensibly his interest lay not in personal profit – as was the case with the patron – but in some other realm and, therefore, he acted as the social particular in an Adornian register. Whether this motivation was a sort of righteous charity or simply the sheer exercise of power, is unclear.

So we begin to see that the holy man was an influential political authority in his community. To the extent that he can be understood as a site of power – both divine and political – this was a localized power within the greater context of Empire, which included, of course, a heavily hierarchized church (infra)structure. Thus, the holy man existed side by side an ordained priest – the official representative of the Church. His influence was not easily challenged by the clergy due to his special position as social outsider. For the Church and Empire, after losing the Eastern provinces to the Arab incursions, this sharing of power became untenable. In response, a sustained attempt to eradicate the influence of these *de facto* political authorities was pursued alongside the destruction of icons. This was played out by purging monasteries and individual holy men. But more illustrative of this process was the removal of the images of local saints to be replaced with more universal symbols of Christendom, e.g., the Cross and the Eucharist. The intent behind this was to foster a new form of imperial patriotism, one that referred back to Christianity as the core of Byzantine identity, and to discourage subjects from identifying with their local community and the saints that protected them:

Icons suffered, in part, because they were the symbols of a style of political life that was out of date. The Byzantine Empire could no longer afford the luxury of remaining a ‘commonwealth of cities’. Self-help had proved to be either treasonable or ineffective. The Emperor had to be omniscient, and to be seen to be omniscient. For the collapse of the city left a void in men’s view of the Empire. A new patriotism had to be created. The void was filled by more

concrete emphasis than ever previously on the Byzantines as a people of God, whose political imagery was borrowed from the Old Testament (Brown 1982a: 290).

Brown argues that by attacking icons the Church was indirectly challenging the political/spiritual authority of the holy men, partly by attempting to undermine the perception of their inhumanity. This was demonstrated by Constantine V who organized public spectacles designed to humiliate holy men and to prove that they were nothing more than mortal humans. For example, he would make holy men wear marriage gowns during public processions in the Hippodrome to demonstrate to the citizenry that they were tied or married to the world. And as such, “[t]he scene in the Hippodrome of Ephesus, quite as much as the destruction of the icons, [was] no less than an attempt by a group of Byzantines to challenge three centuries of unofficial leadership in the Christian community” (Brown 1982a: 301). As mentioned earlier, the holy man was a locus of the holy on Earth, however, he was also the primary agent of fostering the diffusion of icons. Thus, the iconoclast attacks were, ultimately, an attempt by the Church to centralize and consolidate its power. In Brown's words: “What was at stake ... was not the dissolution of the Byzantine monasteries. It was, rather, a singularly consequential, if spasmodic, determination to break the power of the holy man in Byzantine society, both as a principal bulwark of the power of the icon and, so one might suggest, as a force in itself” (Brown 1982a: 295). The events of the iconoclast conflict were, in other words, imperial politics as usual articulated through the idiom of religion.

For the purposes of this article, these attacks represent a conflict between the particular (holy men) and the universal (the Church), demonstrating a concrete historical example of the power of the particular – or the threat of the particular to the universal. In fact, late antiquity was a historical era almost defined by the localization of the holy – in terms of the rise of the cult of the saints, and the social importance of icons, relics, and holy men. It was a revolutionary period for both the Church and the masses. Thus, we see the role of the particular in such a process, but again, in a role consistent with Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition. Contra Adorno, in this context the image is related to the particular, the local, and resistance to Empire, while the universal and ineffable gosesteps under the orders of a highly centralized and uncompromising authority. We witness here, perhaps, a concrete and imperial manifestation of Lyotard's

melancholic sublime. However, this is not to say that Žižek's reading, as it relates to empirical-historical phenomena, is always true, but more that the relationship of the particular to the universal as it plays out in real political events will always be context-dependent (if not always bound up contemporaneously in the same objects or events). In other words, images must be interpreted in their specific political and historical positions of enunciation in order to determine whether they act in the name of the particular, the universal or, in some cases, both simultaneously.

At first glance, Brown's description of the inhuman holy man fits well with Žižek's account of the (in)human, because he was understood as a living icon. Therefore, his particularity (as a site of the divine on Earth and social outsider) was located in his own physical image, and not in its express prohibition. In an Adornian register, he was inhuman to the extent that he transcended exchange relations due to that ineffable trace of the divine that could not be captured, or because he was 'non-identical' to himself. He was, in other words, a material manifestation of the particular that challenges the power and authority of the universal or conceptual (but, again, through the power of his own image). However, left as is, the above claim of an identity between Žižek's inhuman and the holy man certainly lacks scholarly rigour, and needs to be examined more closely to confirm its validity. It will be shown that this relationship is somewhat more complex when we actually look at Žižek's (in)human in a more detailed manner.

Žižek's (In)Human

In this concluding section I would like to explore Žižek's understanding of subjectivity within the context of Brown reading of the holy man. The questions I pose here are: what does Žižek mean, exactly, by the 'inhuman excess' in man? What is he referring to when he claims that there is a certain *divinity* in man? And how does his formulation of this divinity relate to the holy man? Through a series of categorical equivocations in Žižek's texts, one can work through these issues quite efficiently. It is my assertion that the 'divinity in man' and the inhuman excess are one and the same in Žižek's reckoning. This is because 'divinity' is explicitly equated with the 'too much of life' and thus, it represents an excess *beyond* the human (or, in Freud's terms, 'beyond the pleasure

principle'). This 'too much of life' is one way to talk about *jouissance*, the point *beyond* enjoyment: the pleasure sought to fill the lack at the core of subjectivity.

As mentioned earlier, *jouissance* itself, is unattainable, but it is assumed that the Other has it (because we are never satisfied). To the extent that the cause of this search for *jouissance* is *objet petit a*, and it is the Other that has *jouissance*, then the Other can be understood as *objet petit a*. After working through the logic of this theory, one can turn to a passage tucked away in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

What we find in Christianity is something of quite another order [than Judaism]: the idea of the *saint*, which is the exact opposite of the *priest* in service of the Holy. The priest is a 'functionary of the Holy'; there is no Holy without its officials, without the bureaucratic machinery supporting its ritual, from the Aztec's official human sacrifice to the modern sacred state or army rituals. The saint, on the contrary, occupies the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object, of somebody undergoing radical subjective destitution. He enacts no ritual, he conjures nothing, he just persists in his inert presence (Žižek 1989: 116).

This quote is in reference to a common trope that Žižek employs to differentiate Judaism and Christianity. For Žižek, Judaism is the religion of *the Law*, and thus its representative is the priest. The Jewish Law prohibits the 'too much of life' (the recognition of the inhuman excess that is a part of being human) in the same way that its Second Commandment disavows it in the form of the image. Christianity (as a set of ideas and not the institution), on the other hand, is the religion of *inner belief*, belief in one's personal relationship with God, the impossible, and the miraculous: "Christianity involves the distinction between external rules and inner belief (so the question is always: do you REALLY, in the innermost of your heart, believe, or are you just following the dead letter of the law?), while in Judaism, the 'external' rules and practices DIRECTLY ARE the religious belief in its material existence" (Žižek 2001a: 116). The saint is Christianity's representative because, in his image, the impossible or miraculous is very readily visible. To the extent that the saint is *objet petit a*, and *objet petit a* is the void that is the subject, Žižek's 'subject' is revealed to be none other than the saint or the holy man. In other words, in the guise of the saint the subject sees a mirror image of its irreducible core: the Real of the subject.

But we must not forget that for Žižek, 'the subject' does not really exist in a positive manner – it emerges as an experience of the loss of an originary (pre-Symbolic) completeness. That is to say, it is not part of the Real, but only manifest as a series of

effects in the Symbolic Order. This is why he can call the saint *objet petit a*, the nonexistent cause of desire, because in the image of the holy man we witness the conflation of the Real and the Symbolic. In this way the holy man can be understood as the *(in)human* because he contains both the Symbolic and Real components of subjectivity in an avowed form. The human is the set of symbolic attributes which we acknowledge in ourselves, while the inhuman is what we disavow (but both are always present in the subject). It is unclear what specific, positive content constitutes these symbolic attributes, but in a liberal society (a Symbolic Order defined by the tenets of liberalism), one would expect it would correspond to classical liberal understandings of subjectivity: the human as a rational, ethical, and reflective actor, who is in the possession of free will. On the other hand, what we disavow is our true desire that leads us to act under the governance of the death drive, that unconscious imperative which leads us to repetitive behaviour in the impossible search for *jouissance*. In the clinical context, the task of the analyst is to help the analysand recognize this drive and learn to live with it, or re-coordinate it in a less destructive manner. For Žižek, in his phylogenetic appropriation of Lacan for political theory, the successful re-coordination of desire is equivalent to the Act ('traversing the fantasy'). An Act is precipitated by a direct, if momentary, experience of the Real, in which the subject's Symbolic universe collapses, thereby requiring that a new order be built (because the Symbolic Order always acts as the limit-point of the subject's ability to render things intelligible). A successful Act is, in effect, a re-ordering of one's core fantasy wherein a new *objet petit a* is established, and a new set of repetitive behaviour begins to circle it. It is the inhuman component of being human that is the primary source of motivation for this and, as such, the holy man stands in for such potential.

Thus, one can establish that the inhuman complement or the divinity in man corresponds to both a desire and a potential in human beings. A desire to experience the pleasure of the Other, which drives us to action, and a potential for the 'miraculous.' That is to say, in the same way that the holy man was a conduit of the miraculous, so too is Žižek's *(in)human* which, in a secularized context, simply means that it has the ability to act in a way that makes what once seemed *impossible* become *possible* precisely to the extent that it happens. In hindsight, from the perspective of a subject who has witnessed a miracle, what once seemed 'impossible' only seems this way because the former Symbolic Order determined the limit of the subject's ability to

imagine possible actions or events. Similar to Brown, who suggests that as a religious epoch Late Antiquity was distinctive because “the *locus* of the supernatural was thought of as resting on individual men” (Brown 1982b: 151), contemporary times for Žižek are defined by the banality of miracles, i.e., they happen all the time because they are simply successful re-coordinations of the Symbolic Order.

With this in mind, we can add to Žižek’s formulation of the new Christian universe as a fully sublated pagan one, if we consider his work on Paul. In a political register, for Žižek it was not Christ but Paul who was the true revolutionary Christian figure. This is because he institutionalized that which only existed in an ideal form, or as Žižek says: “*there is no Christ outside of St. Paul*”; in exactly the same way there is no ‘authentic Marx’ that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin” (Žižek 2001b: 2). It is, in other words, Paul who founded the Christian Law that we know today, and thus it is he who committed the Žižekian Act known as ‘Christianity’ (Žižek 2001a: 3). Let us, for a moment, consider the holy man in this context. If, as stated above, the holy man is the site of both the particular and the universal but also opposed to the Church’s universal, either the Church must have produced the holy man as its inhuman excess or (and perhaps it is the same thing) the holy man is a trace remainder of the original moment of Christ himself, or that which refuses identification with Christianity as an institution.

In the context of this article, the reason why the claim that the holy man can be understood as analogous to *objet petit a* is historically relevant is that, like Christ, he is an *embodied* form of this non-existent object. In other words, he reinforces the critique of the traditional Jewish reading of the Prohibition. As such, he represents the disavowed inhuman complement of being human, but directly in the form of an important political actor, which raises another interesting comparison between Žižek’s and Brown’s work. As Žižek suggests, the search for *jouissance* is an exhausting undertaking, and we actually embrace the Law because in its prohibitions it provides us an excuse to give up this imperative (even though it always returns in our enjoyment of minor transgressions and the effects of the death-drive) (Žižek 1997: 114). If we recall Brown’s claim that the holy man assumed the humiliation and financial debt of his client then, in a similar vein, the displacement of the inhuman excess by regular Byzantine subjects onto the holy man is a strategy to relieve themselves from the superego commandment to enjoy. But as Lacan was always emphatic in his insistence: one should never give up on one’s desire!

In conclusion, the new formulation of subjectivity that Žižek produces on his re-reading of the Image Prohibition contains many of the characteristics that define the saint or the holy man. This can be understood from two perspectives: 1) the holy man as the subject; and 2) the holy man as an object of desire for the subject. From the perspective of the former, the subject has the ability to perform 'miracles,' but only in a banal secularized form. In other words, even though the subject is enslaved by its inability to fulfill its desire, it can still *act*. This simply means that the subject can identify and alter its object-cause of desire so as to produce something new. As to the latter perspective, the holy man represents the desire of the Other. The subject misperceives that the Other has the ability to satisfy its desire. By recognizing the falsity of this perspective, the subject learns something crucial: all subjects are bound by the same *universal* condition that prevents full satisfaction of desire. Politically, this overcomes the confidence of Marxism, in which the satisfaction of desire is not only rendered attainable, but also assured; and further, it challenges the post-modern negation of all desire as illusory or socially constructed. In the context of left-wing politics, Žižek's challenge is to theorize a willing commitment to a universal position, the aptitude to identify it in the particular, and the courage to fail.

Notes

¹These theorists include, but are not limited to: Slavoj Žižek, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben, and Jodi Dean.

²Readers might instinctively cringe at Žižek's usage of this broad category "secularized Jewish thought," as being both sloppy and overly general (i.e., Jewish thought is not monolithic). While I share these concerns, throughout this article I attempt to unpack this term in order to illustrate the common tenets Žižek associates with specific "Jewish" thinkers like Adorno, Benjamin, Levinas, and Derrida. By doing so, I hope to justify Žižek's use of the term "secularized Jewish philosophy," if only to illustrate an important conceptual insight in Žižek's work. Apart from this goal, the term itself still remains problematic.

³See for example: Pritchard (2002); Koch (1993); Kaufmann (1996); Kaufmann (2000); Webb (2009).

⁴Based in part on the work of Jacques-Alain Miller, Žižek differentiates between the "early" and "later" work of Lacan in relation to subject formation and desire. For Žižek the earlier Lacan emphasizes the role of the fantastic relationship to the Symbolic for maintaining the coherent subject. The later Lacan, by contrast, stresses the importance of the Real in both the production of the subject, and how it is sustained through drive. In fact, as Robert Samuels suggests, Žižek takes the Real and situates it firmly in the Symbolic as the limit point of intelligible signification, manifested by the constant failure (drive) to signify (Samuels, 2008, p. 5). It is the Real, then, that determines the subject and not the Symbolic (as the "postmodern" reading of Lacan would have it). This approach to understanding Lacan is especially productive for overcoming the problems associated with some postmodern and poststructuralist political theory as it provides a foundation for political action (the Act) that is premised on the destruction of the Symbolic Order.

⁵"The flesh assumed by Him is made divine and endures after its assumption ... Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood" (John of Damascus, 1980, p.16).

⁶I need to acknowledge my colleague Dr. Amy Swiffen for bringing this idea of 'immanent dialectic' (among other Žižekian and Lacanian categories) to my attention and explaining them in patient detail.

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