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## Žižek's Atheist Theology

Daniel R Boscaljon, The University of Iowa

Although Žižek is clearly interested in theology, having written a number of books and articles on the subject, understanding how his theological program<sup>1</sup> relates to others is difficult. Some, including Adam Kostko (Kostko 2008), focus on the different logics that Žižek incorporates when writing about anything—Lacan, Marx and Hegel—and traces how Žižek uses these figures when discussing religion, or God. Others—particularly Marcus Pound (Pound 2008)—read Žižek as a theologian by showing the crucial role that theology plays as an underpinning to Žižek's writings. A gap persists, however, between the system that Žižek continues to develop and the history of theology that has come before. This gap reveals that it is difficult to write about Žižek as theologian because his unique theological formulation is predicated on material philosophy instead of spiritual revelation. To demonstrate this, the first part of this paper will show the qualitative difference between Žižek's atheist theology and the negative theologies to which his writing has been compared. This will divide theology into three segments, which correspond to the three orders of the real—beginning with medieval theology (which parallels the real-imaginary, convinced of a transcendental God as the guarantor of meaning), moving to modern theology (parallel to the real-symbolic) and concluding with post-modern theology (the real-real, where God is conceived as non-All).<sup>2</sup> The second part of the paper will provide a concise statement of Žižek's theology (based on his recent book, *The Monstrosity of Christ*) in terms of its ontology, view of God, and implications for belief.

## Theological Predecessors

An atheist theology sounds like an oxymoron; however, far from a contradiction in terms, it is arguably the goal of a strain of theology that has fully embraced the limitations of human knowledge and the inadequacy of our conceptions of God. Accordingly, atheism has long been recognized as nascent within the theological tradition, in the various apophatic mystical varieties that have come and gone in the course of two thousand years of theology known also as the *via negativa*, the theological method that asserts the inaccessibility of God to human languages and concepts. The effect of this is twofold: on the one hand, it maintains the sanctity of God and refuses to allow any one given conception of God to calcify as a possible source of idolatry. On the other hand, this type of theology, as exemplified by Nicholas of Cusa or Meister Eckhart, is a type of theology that disavows God, refuses God, a theology that functions without regard to God and thus regardless of God's existence or non-existence. In disconnecting God from knowledge, the *via negativa* pointed toward an absolute theology that ultimately disavowed the need for revelation.<sup>3</sup>

Despite working to eliminate a connection between language and God, those who followed the *via negativa* could not be construed as atheists: predominantly mystics who exchanged a rational knowledge of god for a devout experience, these individuals possessed an absolute belief in a God, a God whom they refused to want to know out of respect and devotion for this God. In other words, it would be a misunderstanding to understand these as atheist theologies as such; instead, they constitute a starting point that argues God is best found in the experience of a physical, earthly reality.

The advent of modernity—most notably, perhaps, Kant's explication of the *transcendental error* as that which removed the connection between thinking and being—introduced a context in which a second type of proto-atheist theology developed. The modernist shift is encapsulated in the movement that divided the *noumenon* from *phenomenon*, appearance from the thing-in-itself (Kant 1965: 74). This type of unknowability had direct theological implications beyond Kant's explicit challenge to traditional proofs of God: if material objects could not be known, then humans had no prayer of finding God. Theologically, Paul Tillich did the most to reshape theology in a way conducive to Kantian thought. Tillich argued that God is a *symbol* for God (Tillich 1958: 46). Symbolic conceptions of a God were created by merging concrete elements from everyday life with the ultimate: for Tillich, a symbol was successful inasmuch as it adequately negated its concrete or material element to allow the believer to interact with the God-in-itself, the abstract spiritual component. The symbol of the Cross of Christ, central to Tillich's theology as the highest (most true) religious expression and equivalent with the Protestant principle (which requires all symbols to deny their materiality in order to allow access to the ultimate or spiritual truth that the material both reveals and conceals), functioned in a way able to incorporate a God beyond knowledge

(Tillich 1958: 98).

Although Tillich argues that God must die or be negated through the negation of a symbol, this, like the *via negativa*, cannot be confused with an actually atheist theology. A pastor as well as a theologian, Tillich does a superlative job of carrying Luther into the twentieth century and elaborating a conception of God fully able to withstand the critique of pure reason; at the same time, Tillich's insistence on the primacy of Being over non-being—necessary in his argument regarding the Courage to Be (Tillich 1952: 176)—reveals that his theology is a repetition of earlier theologies. God, as the power of Being itself, may be stripped of all personality or personal qualities, but remains a non-material force that enables the perpetuation of material existence in the face of destruction. The Absolute God that Tillich describes, an entity that persists through the experience of meaninglessness that negates all positive content, might approach the status of an atheist's God (especially when Tillich reformulates this as the individualizable notion of an "ultimate concern") but falls short of being able to be deemed an atheist theology in Žižek's sense.

Postmodern theologies, at a basic level, challenge traditional modernist forms of rationality by employing strategies of suspicion (including hermeneutics and genealogies), a suspicion demonstrated by focusing on the limits of human understanding, desiring to find paradox and undermining modernist assumptions of truth. Such theologies incorporate late 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of modernity (including Marx, Freud and Nietzsche) as well as insights of French philosophy generated out of the late 1960's (Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, etc.). A first kind of postmodern theology, whose practitioners self-identify as Radical Orthodox, characterizes modernist logic as secular logic, and argues that the only way to critique modernity is from a theological perspective: to this end, the Radical Orthodoxy—including John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock—articulate an alternate modernity, one that is grounded in the participation of the Christian God (Smith 2004: 106). This type of theology is in no way atheistic as it assumes that acknowledging a living, transcendental God is the first step toward being able to engage in truly critical thought.

The second kind of postmodern theology can be termed deconstructive, and is defined by a methodology and shared ideology. Deconstructive theology, championed by John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo (and building on the work of Mark C. Taylor and the later writings of Jacques Derrida), is premised on Heidegger's theory of truth, that truth is an event caused by the alteration of revealing and concealing. Following Derrida, these theologies *are* atheistic and frequently use a language of deprivation; as an example, they frequently discuss "religion without religion" or "god without god." These paradoxical statements follow in the Tillichian tradition of eliminating the particular content (of a God or religion) in order to arrive at a continually evolving and paradoxical figuration of a "god," a process that reaches its climax in Taylor's recent *After God* which conceives of God as a Complex Adaptive Network (Taylor 2008: 345-347).

The work of Thomas J.J. Altizer constitutes a distinctive break with this succession of

theological approaches: grounded in an admiration of Blake, Milton, Joyce and Nietzsche and having trained with Mircea Eliade, Altizer radicalized theology in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with his advocacy of a Death of God theology. Despite an openness to a world without god more daring than Tillich's, Altizer is most accurately regarded as a *prophet* of an atheist theology, laying the groundwork for how theology can advance in the absence of god (Altizer 1966). Altizer's innovation was to shift to a Hegelian instead of a Kantian framework for thinking, which enabled him to reinterpret the Christian passion in terms of a Godhead who dies, absolutely, pouring himself out kenotically and resurrected in and as the material universe. This Godhead thus leaves behind the element of Nothing (which had been part of the Godhead previously). Altizer's theology allows for a transition away from a traditional, transcendental framework where God might be said to participate in reality to an immanent framework where God is continually reborn in the anonymous things of the world. The powerful declaration of the death of the transcendental God is unique as it eliminates the divine work of serving as an external guarantor of meaning; combined with a theologically grounded respect for a divinization of the world in which things mean only themselves (having nothing now to point toward), Altizer can be seen as preparing a new way to think of all objects as potential hierophanies. In this, Altizer surpasses his former mentor, Eliade, in opening the urban world—and not only the natural world—as capable of being God. Overall, given his emphasis on Hegel and materiality, Altizer's death of God theology serves as the most obvious theological predecessor to Žižek's work, a fact that Žižek recognizes in his *Monstrosity of Christ*.<sup>4</sup>

The atheistic quality in Žižek's theology has been described by Marcus Pound as predicated on the concept of *abandonment* (Pound 2008: 23), an abandonment that echoes Heidegger's notion of the default of the gods and one that underscores the godless nature of experience of a reality saturated with strip malls and suburban sub-developments. The Biblical text Žižek is most fond of citing is Christ's death on the cross, one Žižek formulates as "Father, why have you forsaken me?" In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, one can clearly see the connection between this notion of abandonment and Altizer's conception of the Death of God. Žižek writes that instead of:

the transcendent God guaranteeing the making of the universe, God as the hidden Master pulling the strings...we get a God who abandons this transcendent position and throws himself into his own creation, fully engaging himself in it up to dying, so that we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself (Žižek 2009: 25).

In other words, Žižek interprets the human reaction to God's movement from the transcendent to the divine as one of anguish: we feel abandoned although we ourselves are empowered with Providential freedoms and responsibilities. It is at this point, however, that Žižek is able to become more atheist than Altizer: while Altizer understood God's death as kenotically endowing the material universe as Godhead, leaving Nothing outside of material reality, Žižek is content to

accept the Death of God without any spiritual consequence: the dead God is fully and actually dead, which allows us to simply accept and dwell within a disenchanted world.

Thus, where Žižek differs from this latter group of postmodern theologians is also where he differs from the history of theology overall: instead of wanting to find a moment where the material reality negates itself in order to give rise to a transcendent or spiritual element, Žižek is keen on producing a theology that is not only atheist, but also material. Before it will be possible to explain how he conceives of an atheist theology, however, it will first be necessary to understand Žižek's materialist ontology.

## **An Open Ontology**

One of Žižek's major theological innovations rests upon his ontological presuppositions: he defines and outlines a materialist ontology that is characterized by incompleteness, allowing what he calls an "open" ontology. Žižek's advocacy of this ontology is one that elicits paradox and seeming-contradiction that seems intended to alter and expand one's sense of the possibilities of materialism beyond a reductionist affirmation of "inert material density in its humid heaviness" (Žižek 2009: 92). This feat is accomplished by ignoring the variety of mutually exclusive materialisms that have popped up and by focusing instead on a materialism that strains out what is not (a transcendent reality) to focus on what is (matter) and what that presupposes (a void). In this way, Žižek refuses to adhere to a reductionist materialism that blindly holds up a thing as important in its solidity; instead, Žižek's materialism is one that assumes that what we are prone to overlook as an irrelevant distraction actually has more dignity than the harmony we seek to purchase in exchange for it. Because he avoids a slavish reductionism, Žižek can argue that a true materialist is able to "joyously assume the 'disappearance of matter,' the fact there is only void" (Žižek 2009: 93) because this void is also already a part of the materialist framework that is presupposed.

Put another way, Žižek voices his support of a materialism defined in the Lacanian frame: "material reality is non-all," (Žižek 2009: 95). This statement avoids the direct appeal to a transcendent reality which supports it and also allows for the existence of a voice that underlies being. As occurs frequently in Žižek's writing, the lesson is to alter one's perception by changing the initial point of focus. The illustration of stains accomplishes this task: rather than seeing a stain as an empirical problem that obscures the deeper, or more "true" reality that supports a picture, Žižek advocates moving from an assumption of a harmonious whole (as a broad starting perspective) and narrowing down to the concrete or material level of the stain that embodies an actual reality. These stains exist relative to a lack of stain, an absence that—again—may be more readily translated to a notion of void than transcendent harmony. The dual affirmation of material/void is one that allows us to return to the awesomeness of things: each thing that is not void cannot be taken for granted but exists as a potent exception to the rule of void itself.

Even these things, both large and small, ought not to be seen as simple “solid matter” or through a Sartrean lens that sees them as examples of “being-in-itself” over a blank nothingness; instead, Žižek advocates understanding all things as gathering or incorporating void into matter, an understanding that he phrases in terms of a desire for an “open” ontology, one that does not see matter as “closed” or “complete” in any way. Žižek justifies this perspective in his refusal to oppose matter to void: openness is allowed by his understanding that the void is a supplement to matter, which allows things to gain the quality of being fuzzy and incomplete. By way of analogy, Žižek introduces the notion of lazy programming—computer games that have only the vague outlines or borders of an inside with the assumption that a player would not look there. Rejecting the thought that God constructed reality in this way so as to let the devout find the “secret” of a supporting supplement to an incomplete reality, Žižek embraces (in spite of what would appear to be common sense) the incompleteness of reality itself (Žižek 2009: 90).

The materialist ontology of incompleteness is supported by Žižek’s interpretation of quantum physics. He offers two examples from Einstein that further demonstrate the nature of what he is describing. The first is the fact that the quantum particles that make up the atoms that comprise the “solid” reality of the objects around us are, in themselves, fuzzy and undetermined—they spring into definite focus only when they are being observed. To this extent, the most basic components of the material world seem instructive on the question of the openness or incompleteness of material reality. A second lesson from Einstein’s physics concerns the relation between matter and the curvature of space: matter is the curvature of space (instead of causing space to curve) (Žižek 2009: 99). Žižek employs the paradox to explain that, what we would typically regard as a necessary kind of difference (e.g. between Being and Event) are instead two ways of viewing the same thing, a simultaneity that erases the gap between cause and effect in the “ontological nonclosure of the order of Being” (Žižek 2009: 99). The importance of this understanding is that it allows the possibility of two true realities separated by the parallax gap, one found by a neutral observer and the other by a displaced or believing observer.

This ontology interacts (supports and presupposes) with Žižek’s theology in three ways. First, Žižek re-reads the notion of a creation *ex nihilo* to argue that the “nothingness” out of which creation sprang was a nothingness that also already had to be a part of God, rather than other than God: this coincidence of being and nothing that pre-existed creation can serve as yet another example of how Žižek argues we should see all reality, and also the way that he wishes to perform a theological reading of a materialist ontology by emphasizing the need for this type of “openness” (Žižek 2009: 42). Second, as Pound points out, Žižek’s reading of the crucifixion is similarly invested in an understanding that values material incompleteness (of Christ’s broken body on the cross) over the eternal, Platonic-Gnostic privileging of the ideal (Pound 2008:33). This shows a space within Christianity able to set aside a “complete” world controlled and supported by the overarching deity in favor of a world that exists in its incompleteness, an incompleteness that

began before creation. Third, it is this sense of an internal incompleteness and the fuzzy overlap of being and nothingness that enables God to separate from Godself, and thus allows for God to serve as an example of an atheist.

This ontological outlook makes Žižek unique and difficult to assimilate into other postmodern theological perspectives. Pound, reflecting Milbank's Radical Orthodox prioritization of a transcendent and participating sense of God or Beauty, argues with Žižek's ontology at two points (in fact, it seems that Žižek's ontology is one of the few components of Žižek's writing that Pound is reluctant to affirm). First, Pound states that Žižek's interpretation of Christ is one that allows a reconciliation with the void but at the expense of a positive ontological goal (Pound 2008: 102). Second, and more directly, Pound writes:

It is not that Žižek is wrong, but that unless he endorses Catholic optimism in the transcendent and participating God, he risks paradoxically undermining his ability to think a properly materialist theology, i.e., a theology predicated upon the body (See chapter 2). In short, Žižek needs theology to prevent him from lapsing back into linguistic idealism (Pound 2008: 122).

Both of these complaints are versions of the same overall criticism that the Radical Orthodoxy applies to all who do not share its presuppositions. Žižek clearly rises to this challenge in *The Monstrosity of Christ* in the form of a counter-critique, arguing that only an open, incomplete ontology can find matter as having value on its own terms, instead of terms that are brought over from an outside realm: in other words, the only way to have a theology predicated on materiality, or the body, is to start with materiality on its own terms. The supplement that starts by assuming an overarching harmony will find it at the expense of the materiality that it wants to erase.<sup>5</sup> In short, although Žižek might agree with Pound that theology is necessary to avoid lapsing into linguistic idealism, he would be unable to agree that the Radical Orthodox view of theology is the only one. Beyond this, Žižek criticizes a viewpoint that would need to presuppose a positive or optimistic goal as one that is unable to reconcile the event of the crucifixion with the Christianity that it enables.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the fact a Radical Orthodox perspective can critique this ontology only from the grounds of its own ontological presuppositions suggests that Žižek's understanding of a materialist ontology is a robust and complete one that offers the foundation for an opposing perspective.

## **An Atheist Theology**

Unlike popular atheisms, sprouted by Richard Dawkins (2006) or Sam Harris (2005), Žižek's atheism is one that takes the time to identify the historical tradition of Christian theology in which his atheism makes sense. Consistently and clearly, and against the Catholic nature of the Radical Orthodoxy, Žižek finds himself identifying his atheism as a Protestant atheism, one that Žižek finds more conducive to his Hegelian background because it creates a whole through contradiction,

tension and conflict—the Catholic whole of a divine harmony operates according to the transcendental coincidence of the oppositions (Žižek 2009: 252).

This internal tension expresses itself in Christianity with the self-negation of God, and, consistent with his atheism, Žižek shows how each element of the Trinity can be associated with material. First and most importantly, Žižek argues (following Hegel, and after Altizer) that the God that dies is the God of onto-theology or philosophy; although this is a relatively common interpretation in postmodernity, Žižek adds to this the notion that it also implies the death of the “big Other,” or the overarching system of meaning (relative to the super-Ego and appealing to the order of the signifier). This death brings about the revelation of God's secret: it is not that God hid the answer to the question of why suffering was meaningful, but that he hid the fact that there was no answer (Pound 2008: 55). There never was a big Other: this is the implication of Žižek's advocacy of Caputo and Vattimo's notion of a “weak God” who is helpless to stop human suffering but can do no more than watch compassionately. Although this compassion does not provide a meaning to suffering, the notion of a God that suffers, from Žižek's perspective, constitutes the decisive advance that Christianity makes over paganism. The death of this God also puts Žižek irrevocably at odds with the theology of the Radical Orthodoxy, which presupposes the well-being of this type of big Other to allow the optimistic wholeness that they seek.

The death of this God, this big Other, is the foundation for Žižek's “theology of abandonment”; however, one ought not to read this abandonment as a negative judgment. Instead, Žižek's understanding of God allows the kenotic act to be seen as the only gift that God was able to give. Žižek writes:

God doesn't give what he has, he gives what he is, his very being. That is to say: it is wrong to imagine the divine dispensation as the activity of a wealthy subject, so abundantly rich that he can afford to cede to others a part of his possessions. From a proper theological perspective, God is the poorest of them all: he “has” only his being to give away. His whole wealth is already out there, in creation (Žižek 2009: 59).

The kenotic act of God's self-emptying into reality thus becomes the only act of love of which God was capable. Consistent with his advocacy of the incomplete, the death of this God is that which completes the sense of the incomplete: in vacating a transcendental domain and indwelling within reality, God gave up God's self and endowed the world with an ontological structure that mirrored God's own fuzzy, incomplete and self-negating ontology.

The Christ figure is also important for Žižek as it allows Žižek to both summarize previous statements on the importance of God and also to move into slightly new theological territory. Conforming to Žižek's overall project, the importance of Christ is his materiality—the body of Christ, resurrected as a physical community of believers. Christ is important, first, in a formal or a structural way as he occupies/creates the space of an overlap of two different kenoses, holding in

tension both the human alienation from God and God's own internal alienation from God's self. Before the death of Christ, the Incarnation is thus able to usher both humans and God to the point of self-awareness (Žižek 2009: 75). This also is a point at which Christianity is unique for Žižek: unlike other gods who “appear to humans in human form,” the Christian God appears as human *to himself*.” (Žižek 2009: 81) The death of this aspect of God on the Cross effectively unties this reality: even if the big Other would not have died, the absence of the Christ-knot which tied the two together would have effected an absolute separation of the divine from the human.<sup>7</sup>

The second function of the death of Christ is to negate the excessive quality of the divine by bringing both spirit and language into the flesh. Žižek accounts for the excessive in Christ both in terms of the ordinances which he pronounced (Žižek 2009: 285), and, even more importantly, in terms of the excess of the divine event of Incarnation beyond the capacity of language to describe or state it which causes the chasm between divine and human to collapse. Žižek writes, “The excess of the signified (spirit) over the signifier (letter) has to be registered/contracted in an empty letter. And *this* is the function of Christ's Incarnation: the contraction of the void” (Žižek 2009: 258). Even with this example, however, one should note that Žižek causes the more amorphous qualities of the Incarnation to be centered on the material presence of the body of Christ: the emptiness of spirit and language are contracted due to being established in Christ's flesh.

The third major function of Christ's death is to mark the transition between God as big Other and the Holy Spirit: Žižek emphasizes the importance of the flesh as the material residue of the resurrection miracle. Arguing that “[a] materialist does not deny miracles, he just reminds us that they live behind disturbing material leftovers” (Žižek 2009: 287) Žižek finds that the matter of the dead body is that which marks the transition between two subjects effected in the miraculous exchange: God as the big Other, and the Holy Spirit. The reality of the body is what prevents the exchange from becoming a game, a simple quasi-digital flow of qualities from one account into another. The reality of the dead body in its passive victimization, in other words, is our guarantee that the *kenosis* of God ought to be taken literally (Žižek 2009: 268). The preservation of a material witness to the passage, the persistence of the intermediary, can be seen as that which ensures that god remained wholly invested throughout the process.

From his materialist perspective, Žižek claims that the dead body of Christ is key to a trauma that permits authentic belief and then argues that this is precisely what is erased in other postmodern theologies. The erasure occurs with the choice in other theological systems to skip over the brutal truth of the death of God revealed in the material body of Christ: without this focus, individuals are not made to face the zero-point of law and are thus denied the possibility of an authentic faith. The two major postmodern theologies do this differently: The Radical Orthodoxy erases the possibility of a traumatic, personal encounter with the zero point of law through its assertion of a divine harmony and appeal to God as a transcendental (Žižek 2009: 253), while a deconstructionist theology skips over the coincidence of God and human and thus masks the fact

that when Christ dies, God does as well (Žižek 2009: 257-258). An atheist theology, which forces attention on the importance of the death of God as it plays out after the death of God and refuses the consolation afforded by masking this death, thus serves as a necessary corrective to rival postmodern theological alternatives.

The Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity, and, having been transformed through the death of Christ, is a type of God that Žižek is content to allow as present in the world. Far from the notion of a spirit or comforter, however, Žižek emphasizes the *material* nature of this spirit. The common belief of the collective is the belief in the possibility of belief, a belief in the belief of the other: there is no intentional object (Pound 2008: 132). Relating to the impersonal pronoun of the unconscious, Žižek argues that the spirit is capable of spontaneous self-organization (Žižek 2009: 289); however, Žižek takes care to ensure that there is no remainder to this group. In other words, the Holy Spirit is absolutely co-extensive with the group that has organized, and the bodies of the believers become the immanent, material reality of the resurrected Godhead.

Žižek's account of the community's origin thus makes the transition between a God-as-spirit (or big other) and the wholly material body of believers. By arguing for the identity of Crucifixion and Resurrection, articulating the difference between events as based wholly in perception, Žižek keeps the resurrected God within the confines of the material world. He writes, "when the believers gather, mourning Christ's death, their shared spirit is the resurrected Christ."<sup>8</sup> Also, important to the atheism of his theology, Žižek does not imply that a spirit-formed or spirit-led group is unique to Christianity, hence Žižek presents the example of the power of Joe Hill's death to organize Union workers (Žižek 2009: 288-289); the "spirit" which organizes a group becomes quickly secularized. In this way, although the Spirit persists beyond the death of god, it is an existence that is unable to be separated from the material existence of believers and unable to be differentiated from any given collective. God becomes those believers organized by the idea of God.

A second consequence of the resurrection as Holy Spirit is a move that transports god from the private to the public. Žižek argues for a correspondence connecting a religious organization that subtracts believers from a public space with the notion of public (instead of what would seem the more intuitive "private"), a connection articulated through the universal access that individuals qua individuals (without the mediation of an external authority) have to God. Interpreting the crucifixion through this lens, Žižek argues that part of what dies on the Cross is also a notion of the public God: the public space is an atheist space. In this way, Žižek claims that "the 'Holy Spirit' is thus a 'public' God, what remains of God in the public universal space: the radically desubstantialized virtual space of the collective of believers" (Žižek 2009: 295). This materialization of God—an obverse of a Feuerbachian apotheosis—can be seen as the full unveiling of a Lacanian atheism which demands the elimination of a big Other. A self-constituting community is one that does not require a big Other in which to find or make meaning; instead, it

always already is the meaning that it would otherwise would have had to search for. In embodying its belief materially, the formed community obviates the need to find a big Other able to believe for it and thus becomes enabled, in atheism, to truly believe.<sup>9</sup>

The nature of this collective differs essentially from a church, as the church is an institution that performs the role of the big Other given the individuals: one cannot get from a community of the Holy Spirit to the Church (which always transcends its adherents) just as one cannot get from the Church to a community. Pound presents Paul Griffiths' criticism of Žižek regarding the abandonment the Church, but it should be clear that an atheist materialist community whose claim to authenticity requires a distance from the big Other cannot accept mediation in the form of the form of religion (Pound 2008: 92-93). In a historical context, Žižek finds the Church problematic as it is reified, betraying the spirit of Christianity by denying the urgency of a permanent revolution and replacing it with "an ideological apparatus legitimizing the normal run of things" (Žižek 2009: 283). An authentic atheism, one that acts according to the assumption that there is no big Other, would necessarily avoid an institution that performs the role of the big Other—recall, for example, Dostoevsky's fable in which the Church succumbs to the three temptations that Christ could cruelly reject (Dostoevsky 1996: 273-293). In other words, those places in which God appears to be most active in an institutional context are the places with the poorest form of belief: only when God is assumed to be dead can we truly believe.

Although Žižek carefully shows the way God functions in his atheist theology, working to ensure that God is consistently killed and reduced to materiality, he is just as careful to suspend the remaining question of the God that pre-existed this Death. Žižek's method here is to make his use of the term "God" wholly indeterminable: concerning his use of "God," he writes that its meaning is not intended "'literally' (we are materialists, there is no God), but it is also not 'metaphorically' ('God' is not just a metaphor, a mystifying expression of human passions, desires, ideals, etc.)" (Žižek 2009: 240). What Žižek does instead is to reverse the metaphorical process, calling the signified back into the material (instead of negating the material in order to access the conceptual): "What such a 'metaphorical' reading misses is the dimension of the inhuman as internal ("extimate") to being-human: 'God' (the divine) is a name for that which in man is not human, for the inhuman core that sustains being-human" (Žižek: 2009: 240). Like "God," this inhuman, extimate core cannot be reduced to either a literal (there is no pineal gland) nor metaphoric (it does not mean "something else") level. In crafting this intentionally ambiguous formulation of God, however, Žižek suspends the ontological status of God in a way that invites others to witness the traumatic core of religion. Consistent with his definition of belief, this atheistic view of God allows "a vision whose status is very fragile, virtual, so that its direct actualization would somehow betray the sublime character of the belief" (Žižek 2009: 297).

Finally, as required by consistency, Žižek's materialist atheism also translates the practice of belief into material terms. The relation between materiality and faith has two different modes:

authentic and inauthentic. The inauthentic version of this occurs as the materiality (in the form of an objectivized ritual) which helps to disguise the real of belief, allows the believer to achieve a distance from the belief, to become dispossessed of it. This is what Žižek formulates in writing “I believe in order not to believe.”<sup>10</sup> To engage in authentic belief requires a traumatic encounter with the “zero-point of law” that one recognizes is brutally imposed without the ability to be justified with an appeal to a transcendental such as “the Good” or “Truth” (Pound 2008: 62). This is why it remains necessary not to attempt to re-enchant the world in a way that would re-instate the big Other; i.e. screen over the traumatic kernel of the origin of Law and eliminate actual, non-mediated belief. Because a public atheism (such as that suggested by Dawkins) is a covert attempt to re-enchant the world through the use of the other side of the big Other, Žižek limits true belief to those who both intentionally accept and act on the absence of a big Other (Žižek 2009: 299).

Authentic material belief is one that maintains a singleminded devotion toward *this* world. Žižek here appeals to Schiller's distinction of morality and ethics; whereas morality is sentimental as one attempts to see oneself as good through another's eyes, ethics is naïve, “I do what I have to do because it needs to be done, not because of my goodness. This naivety does not exclude reflexivity—it even enables it: a cold, cruel distance toward what one is doing” (Žižek 2009: 301). There is no belief in an Other here, no appeal to a moral law, no capacity to attempt to reify oneself as “good.” Ethics is performed in actual and material interactions between others, in meeting the needs of others in ways that do not seek justification. Only by not allowing any norms to interfere with how one helps another can one both recognize and act upon the absence of the big Other: such actions seek to maintain a proximity or nearness (which also includes distance) from God.

It is this last point—the discussion of a material belief beyond ethics, or even the question of the practice of a material belief—that remains least developed in Žižek's text. Although he does an excellent job of critiquing the way that faith and belief are able to be compromised by ideology, his conception of both remains unhelpfully opaque. Overall, however, the depiction of a materialist atheism in *The Monstrosity of Christ* provides a necessary alternative to standard idealist versions of theology, including the other postmodern theologies promulgated by Caputo and Milbank.

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- 1 Although Žižek has written about theology in several other books and articles, *The Monstrosity of Christ* does an excellent job of summarizing his previous theological statements (most notably in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2000) and *The Fragile Absolute* (2003)) and expanding on them in a more sustained and developed direction. It is for this reason—and considerations of space—that my analysis of Žižek will be sustained entirely by the new work.
- 2 I appreciate Marcus Pound bringing this parallel to my attention.
- 3 The trope in Eckhart's writing most commonly cited by post-modern theologians—that humans must forsake God—implies that one must move away from traditional modes of revelation. As an alternative, Eckhart argues that the nearness of God can be seen in all of creation, a stance that can be interpreted as emphasizing material instead of spiritual revelation. Although this does not sever the connection between theology and divine revelation, it should be seen as a step in that direction.
- 4 Žižek 2009: 260. Žižek writes, "The only way to redeem the subversive core of Christianity is therefore to return to death-of-God theology, especially Thomas Altizer: to *repeat* its gesture today."
- 5 Pound 2008: 14. Here, Pound discusses Lacan's diagnosis of the dangers of "drowning life in meaning" that arises as the result of a closed chain of signification: this closure seems to be intentionally and importantly blocked by Žižek's insistence on an open ontology.
- 6 Žižek 2009: 248: "In Hegelese, Milbank's vision remains that of a substantial immediate harmony of Being; there is no place in it for the outburst of radical negativity, for the full impact of the shattering news that "God is dead."
- 7 Žižek 2009: 80. Žižek writes that with Christ, "it was as if the navel of the world, the knot which holds the texture of reality together (what Lacan in his late work called the *sinthom*), was walking around. All that remains of reality without Christ is the Void of the meaningless multiplicity of the Real."
- 8 Žižek 2009: 291. Žižek writes, "the supreme example of the dialectical reversal is that of Crucifixion and Resurrection, which should be perceived not as two consecutive events, but as *a purely formal parallax shift on one and the same event*: Crucifixion is Resurrection--to see this, one has only to include oneself in the picture. When the believers gather, mourning Christ's death, their shared spirit is the resurrected Christ."
- 9 Žižek 2009: 101. "...only atheists can truly believe; the only true belief is belief without any support in the authority of some presupposed figure of the "big Other."
- 10 Pound 2008: 62-63. Pound here quotes Žižek, who writes "You find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believed, and *you will get rid of your belief*--you will no longer have to believe yourself, your belief will already exist objectified in your act of praying. That is to say, what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, on the opposite, to *get rid* of one's belief, of its over-proximity, to acquire a breathing space of a minimal distance towards it? To believe--to believe directly, without the externalising mediation of ritual--is a heavy, oppressive, traumatic burden."