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## The “Christian Experience” Continues: On Žižek’s Work Since *The Parallax View*

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When I completed my book *Žižek and Theology* in October 2007 (Kotsko 2008b), I knew that there was a fair chance that it could eventually become obsolete. I was not only writing about a living author, but an extremely prolific one — by the time I submitted my manuscript, another major work of Žižek’s, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, was already available for pre-order on Amazon.com (Žižek 2008a). Beyond that, my entire argument was structured around a narrative of Žižek’s intellectual development, and although Žižek had claimed that *The Parallax View* was his “magnum opus,” (Žižek 2006) there was no reason to believe that it would not some day be superseded. Accordingly, I made up my mind that I would periodically “check in” to see how the conclusions of my book were holding up in Žižek’s more recent work.

Though I had initially intended to wait longer than two years, I believe that the gracious invitation Marcus Pound extended to me to participate in this Special Issue could not have come at a better time, because in my view, Žižek’s engagement with theology has entered a new phase. This new phase does not entail a change of position — the Hegelian or “death of God” reading of Christianity that he laboriously hashed out over the course of *The Fragile Absolute*

(2000), *On Belief* (2001), and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) remains firmly in place.<sup>i</sup> What has changed is that Žižek has taken a step that has tended to be extremely rare among the wide range of European philosophers with an interest in Christianity: he has inserted himself into the academic theological debate, decisively taking sides.

This new level of engagement was manifested most dramatically in the publication of *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Žižek and Milbank 2010),<sup>ii</sup> which consists of a dialogue between Žižek and the Anglican theologian John Milbank, founder of the Radical Orthodoxy school of theology. In his opening piece, “The Fear of Four Words,” Žižek puts forward what he calls “a modest plea for the Hegelian reading of Christianity,” a reading in which God the Father empties himself irreversibly into the Son, whose death on the cross opens up the way for a new social bond called the Holy Spirit. As I have argued, this reading of Christianity is ultimately a way out of a deadlock in Žižek’s theory of ideology critique, which at a certain point in his career had seemed to advocate the overthrow of an ideological order — the deposing of a master signifier, in Lacanian terms — solely for its own sake, even though another master signifier would inevitably arise to take its place. The Holy Spirit that follows from the death of the (self-doubting!) master signifier provides a potential way out of this vicious circle, opening up the possibility of a non-ideological social bond.

“The Fear of Four Words” does more than simply restate his position to begin the dialogue with Milbank, however. It deepens his position on two fronts. First, it advances a critique of trinitarian orthodoxy, characterizing it as an attempt to avoid the radical consequences of the death of God by preserving “God-Father” as the one who “continues to pull the strings [and] is not really caught in the process” of divine kenosis (29). Žižek’s historical narrative here, apparently based almost exclusively on the work of Vladimir Lossky,<sup>iii</sup> leaves much to be desired and will likely be the object of considerable criticism in theological responses to this volume. Yet I believe that the basic point he is trying to make is sound — the development of the doctrine of the Trinity was clearly motivated by an attempt to preserve some kind of transcendent, impassible God while simultaneously respecting the core conviction of the Christian faith, which requires the savior to be both fully divine and fully human in order to truly effect our salvation.

I believe that this engagement with the tradition, unsatisfactory as it may be on some levels, also serves to clarify his pervasive references to Chesterton in his work on Christianity. While many take him to be somehow advocating Chesterton’s position, it seems clear to me that he is finally a critic of Chesterton, whom he uses as a stand-in for Christian orthodoxy in general. What he takes away from Chesterton is the basic kernel of a Hegelian, “death of God”

theology that occasionally shines through — above all, Chesterton's claim that on the cross, God himself became an atheist — but this is a kernel that Chesterton, like the Christian orthodoxy he represents, ultimately tries to suppress. The specific form that suppression takes is an attempt to return to the harmonious vision of paganism, a vision that Milbank shares and that Žižek will later explicitly characterize as “soft-Fascist,” due to its emphasis on social hierarchy and traditional sexual mores (250).

The second way that Žižek's first contribution to *The Monstrosity of Christ* advances his position is by continuing the work, begun in *The Parallax View*, of clarifying the ontological consequences of his view. Rejecting the Roman Catholic attempt to harmonize faith and reason by putting forth God as the “constitutive exception” or master-signifier that allows us to perceive a harmoniously ordered universe, Žižek contends that modern science at its most radical presents us with a universe without a master signifier guaranteeing its order. This radical materialism “has thus nothing to do with the assertion of ‘fully existing external reality’—on the contrary, its starting premise is the ‘non-all’ of reality, its ontological incompleteness” (97). The “death of God,” then, does more than allow us to conceive of a non-ideological social order — it allows us to face the universe as the internally inconsistent and incomplete thing it is.

Žižek's response to Milbank's essay — which essentially consists of a recapitulation of the Radical Orthodox ontology of participation, this time structured around the concept of “paradox” as a replacement for the more usual invocation of “analogy”—is overwhelmingly negative, rejecting his “soft-Fascist” vision on all but the most trivial points and accusing Milbank of mis-characterizing Žižek's position. To my mind, this clear rejection serves a valuable function, as many theologians sympathetic with the Radical Orthodoxy project have tended to view Žižek as a potential ally, resulting in readings of Žižek's works that in my view are highly selective and misleading. Hopefully, this volume will render such future misappropriations impossible — or at least force the theologians wishing to claim isolated aspects of Žižek's thought to be more honest about what they're doing.

Paired with Žižek's rejection of orthodoxy, radical or otherwise, is an affirmation of the “death of God” theology, which he claims “marks the moment when the only way to keep [Christianity's] truth alive was through a materialist heresy split from its main corpse” (97). Naturally, I find this affirmation to be personally gratifying, as I concluded my book by claiming that Žižek's work on Christianity had great affinity with Thomas Altizer's theology of the death of God. And indeed, Žižek quotes Altizer's work at considerable length throughout the essay.<sup>iv</sup> More recently, Žižek has appeared on a panel with Altizer at the November 2009 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Montreal, where he claimed that he first learned of Altizer

after reading critics who dismissed Žižek's work on Christianity as a repetition of Altizer's theology. Žižek dismissed such critics in turn, saying that he was honored to be a repetition of Altizer and that the truest novelty comes from repetition.

There is, of course, a hint of a dialectical "overcoming" of Altizer in that claim, and I have already indicated some ways that Žižek goes beyond Altizer — above all in more clearly bringing out the political consequences of the death of God (Kotsko 2008b: 152). In my book, I had claimed that Žižek's narrative of the rise of Christianity served as a kind of workshop for developing his political position, placing particular emphasis on Žižek's interpretation of the Jewish relationship to the law. Whereas the mainstream of the Christian tradition has viewed the Jewish law as a negative thing to be escaped, Žižek claims that the unique Jewish stance toward the law provides a space that is "unplugged" from the ideological order, and Paul's gesture is that of inducting pagans into this "unplugged" stance.<sup>v</sup>

In one of the interludes of *The Parallax View*, he develops a contemporary parallel to his narrative of the rise of Christianity by first arguing that we should reverse the logic of anti-semitism: rather than trying to get rid of some obstacle that impedes the completion of the European project (which has traditionally been the role of the Jews, though Muslims are increasingly taking up that unfortunate position in contemporary discourse), we should all "become Jews," in the sense of being a diasporic people who don't "belong" anywhere (2006: 257). He later turns to a discussion of slum dwellers, who are those "with regard to whom the Power renounces its right to exert full control and discipline, finding it more appropriate to let [them] dwell in the twilight zone of slums" (269). Though he admits that the reality of slums is not entirely promising, he does believe that "we should be looking for... signs of the new forms of social awareness that will emerge from the slum collectives: they will be the seeds of the future" (269).

Drawing a parallel between the slum-dwellers and the "unplugged" subjective stance Žižek sees in Judaism, I ventured a prediction about the direction Žižek's project would take in the wake of his "magnum opus":

To make explicit the connection with the rise of Christianity, then, one must look for some type of event to emerge out of the slums that will somehow allow the "Gentiles" who are plugged into capitalism to "unplug" and join in the creation of something new. And what does one do while waiting for such an event? Žižek's own practice may provide some clues: practicing ideology critique as a form of hysterical provocation, returning to the "missed opportunities" of the revolutionary past with a view toward what it might mean to redeem them, and trying to trace out the theoretical shape of the event and of what it might look like to "unplug"—in short, to wait in hope, so as to be ready to greet the event when it comes (2008b: 128).

The book that immediately followed, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, partly vindicated this prediction insofar as it consists in a series of meditations on past revolutionary failures. In addition, it repeats virtually word-for-word his analysis of the slums from *The Parallax View*, with some additions about Hugo Chavez's mobilization of slum-dwellers (2008a: 424-28). I have long been a critic of Žižek's generous use of cut-and-paste in his writing, and I have normally found his claims that such a practice sheds new light on the passages by re-contextualizing them to be unconvincing. Yet in this case, I do think that the re-contextualization is productive, insofar as it moves the analysis of slum-dwellers from a seemingly minor political interlude in a "heavy theoretical" work into a much more programmatic "political" work. The continued emphasis on the slums — together with Žižek's segment in the film *The Examined Life* where he wanders about a garbage dump, arguing that we need to learn to love our own filth — also seems to resonate with my claim that "if the Christ-event is any indication, one must expect the event to come not 'in glory', but in humility and shame, as foolishness, as a stumbling block, as a scandal" (Kotsko 2008b: 128).

I followed my prediction by conceding that "it remains unclear to me, based on Žižek's writings, what one can expect the collective bound together by the 'Holy Spirit' to look like in practice, beyond very abstract formal characteristics" (2008b: 128). To my mind, *In Defense of Lost Causes* does not provide much help on this front, nor does his section on "divine violence" in the small book *Violence*.<sup>vi</sup> This brings me to what is, at least for me, the most important passage in Žižek's recent writings, the only thing I've read since finishing *Žižek and Theology* that feels genuinely new: the conclusion of his response to Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, where he attempts to answer the question of what his ethical approach would look like in practice (297-303). Pointing out the mutual co-implication of atheism and religious belief, Žižek wants to find a form of materialist ethics that would go beyond the negative gesture of disallowing a religious basis, and his first step is to claim that we must go beyond the logic of sacrifice, which always derives some excess *jouissance* from the very act of renunciation: "What one should sacrifice is sacrifice itself" (300).

So far, this is nothing new — in fact, it repeats most of the basic themes of *On Belief*. The advance comes when he begins discussing Agota Kristof's novel *The Notebook*, which for him is "the best literary expression" of an ethical stance that goes beyond the sentimentality of moralism and instead installs "a cold, cruel distance toward what one is doing" (301). The novel follows two twin brothers who are "utterly immoral — they lie, blackmail, kill — yet they stand for authentic ethical naivety at its purest" (301). He gives two examples. In one, they meet a starving man who asks for help and get him everything he asks for, while claiming that they

helped him solely because he needed help, not out of any desire to be kind. In another, they urinate on a German officer with whom they find themselves sharing a bed, at his request. Žižek remarks, “If ever there was a Christian ethical stance, this is it: no matter how weird their neighbor’s demands, the twins naively try to meet them” (301).

Yet Žižek then takes things in a direction that many Christians will likely be uncomfortable with: not only do the boys naively try to help others, they also punish people who maliciously refuse others help. In one example from the novel, a woman not only refuses to give bread to a starving crowd of Jews but actually eats the bread in front of them, leading the twins to put ammunition in her oven; in another, they blackmail a priest who has sexually molested a little girl, so that they can give the money to the girl’s family. Žižek also provides his own hypothetical example:

Along these lines, it is easy for me to imagine a situation in which I would be ready, without any moral qualms, to murder someone in cold blood, even if I knew that this person had not killed anyone directly. In reading reports about torture in Latin American military regimes, I found particularly repulsive the (regular) figure of a doctor who helped the actual torturers conduct their business in the most efficient way: he examined the victim and monitored the process, letting the torturers know how much the victim would be able to endure, what kind of torture would inflict the most unbearable pain, etc. I must admit that if I were to encounter such a person, knowing that there was little chance of bringing him to legal justice, and be given the opportunity to murder him discreetly, I would simply do it, without a vestige of remorse about “taking the law into my own hands” (302).

This is a bold statement, to be sure, but one that I think many would sympathize with on some level. After going through some additional examples, including an assisted suicide, Žižek summarizes the ethical core that he takes away from Kristof’s novel as follows:

This is where I stand — how I would love to be: an ethical monster without empathy, doing what is to be done in a weird coincidence of blind spontaneity and reflexive distance, helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity. With more people like this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion (303).

When I first read this passage, I had the strange sense of being surprised at the same time that I felt it couldn’t be any other way. His description of these sociopathic twins really does capture the core of his weirdly amoral ethics, which has always been at the core of Žižek’s appeal for me—more than his ontology, his use of theology, or his explanations of some of the most difficult figures in the history of philosophy, I was drawn to his work by the sense that he offered

a real alternative to the abstract moralism of the Christianity I knew from childhood and from the cloying sentimentalism of the liberals who get such deep satisfaction from nursing their correct opinions. I claim several times in my book that most often the aspect of a philosopher's thought that is most helpful for theologians can be found when religion isn't the primary focus, and for me, Žižek is no exception. His ethics provided me with a way to talk about what I have increasingly come to see at the core of the gospel: a radical amorality, no less joyous for its rigor, a lawlessness that neither serves the other for the sake of fulfilling a norm nor harms the other for the sake of violating a commandment, but attends directly to the other, with all the weirdness and unpredictability that entails.

Did I “predict” this particular account of his ethics, then? I wouldn't claim that, though it does move in the direction of filling in one of the major gaps in the current stage of his thought, attempting to answer the question of what the non-ideological order (sometimes called “Holy Spirit”) might look like. Yet it is only a first step. Even assuming that one agrees with him that the world would be a better place with “more people like this,” significant work is required to develop a convincing account of how a social order based around such ethics might be structured and of how we get there from here.

In developing such an account, Žižek would face significant obstacles. Above all, he would need to find some way that a social order not based on a master signifier could be durable rather than simply episodic. Falling into the trap of either sneaking the master signifier back in or valorizing the moment of revolution in itself with no reference to future sustainability would lead him back into the dilemma that motivated his engagement with Christianity in the first place. If he is unable finally to break through that impasse, then he will be forced to affirm that finally there is no hope, no real alternative to ideology: the revolutionary outburst would be ultimately parasitic on the existing order and would have no concrete outcome other than the installation of a new ideological order. In that case, he would be falling back into the position of perversion, of encouraging violation of the existing order as a “release valve” that serves finally to reinforce order — or, in other words, he would be repeating the very betrayal of which he accuses historical Christianity.

Such an outcome isn't inconceivable. Too often, one gets indications that his dialectical habits of thought could easily collapse into a nihilistic, Christopher Hitchens-style contrarianism and that his understandable impatience with the liberal mainstream could lead him to become functionally conservative. Were that to happen — and certainly many readers of Žižek would claim it already has — all the theologians sympathetic with Radical Orthodoxy who have seen a potential ally in Žižek may well claim to have been vindicated, letting bygones be bygones when

it comes to all that talk of a “soft-Fascist vision.” For my part, though, I would follow the example of Žižek’s own preference for the fraught “middle period” of great thinkers (such as Heidegger and Schelling), just when they first begin to grasp the full magnitude of the problem they’ve set themselves and yet before they come up with an all-too-easy solution. That is to say, I would continue to hold onto the productively open Žižek that we enjoy currently, the Žižek who has not yet given into the temptation to betray the contradiction at the core of his thought. If it comes to that, I’ll gladly embrace my book’s obsolescence, confident that the thought it points toward remains more authentically new than whatever Žižek happens to have written last and hopeful that, whether in Žižek’s work or elsewhere, it will resurface once again.



- <sup>i</sup> I discuss the emergence of this reading in chapter 3 of my book.
- <sup>ii</sup> My review of this volume may be found in *Political Theology* (2010: 141-144).
- <sup>iii</sup> Lossky 2001. In his first citation of the book (101, n. 3), Žižek expresses some dissatisfaction with Lossky's treatment of Roman Catholic mysticism, but nevertheless relies heavily on him for the rest of the essay.
- <sup>iv</sup> Žižek limits himself to *The Contemporary Jesus* (Altizer 1998). Though Altizer appears on page after page of this essay, his name strangely only occurs in the index once. As someone who has done several indices, however, I think it's clear how this mistake happened — Žižek uses Altizer as a kind of authority, leaving out explicit reference to Altizer as the source of the quotes after the first use of his work, almost as if naming Altizer would imply too great a divergence between their views. Paradoxically, then, Altizer's influence is so pervasive as to go unnoticed.
- <sup>v</sup> I develop this reading separately in my article "Politics and Perversion: Situating Žižek's Paul," (2008a).
- <sup>vi</sup> Žižek 2008b. Henceforward, whenever anyone asks me what Žižek book they should start with, I will unhesitatingly point them toward this engagingly written, uncharacteristically focused volume.

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