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Special Issue – Žižek's Theology

From a Perverse to a Suffering God – On Slavoj Žižek's Materialist Reading of G.K. Chesterton¹

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Introduction

In the opening lines of his 'Introduction' to *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek makes the suggestion that the time has come to reverse Walter Benjamin's first thesis from *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* in which the latter famously proposed that 'historical materialism can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of theology' (Žižek 2003: 3; Benjamin 2002: 253). In other words, Žižek's suggestion here seems to be, that if theology is to realize its full potential, it has to enrol the service of materialism. This reading is affirmed by Žižek when he, just a few pages later, elaborates and supplements his opening reversal of Benjamin's thesis by advancing the following remarkable assertion:

My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience. (Žižek 2003: 6)

The first thing to notice here is how Žižek has italicized ‘only’ thus emphasizing, as I have just implied, that if Christianity (and Christian theology) is to access its own subversive potential, then it *must* necessarily enlist the service of materialism. The other crucial thing to notice is of course that Žižek stresses the reciprocity of this claim. In brief: *genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other*. My aim in this paper is to unfold the meaning and implications of this assertion of a dialectical relationship between theology and materialism through an account of Žižek’s reading of the English literary critic, novelist, poet, and writer of detective stories, but also ‘amateur theologian’, Gilbert Keith Chesterton.² Chesterton is mentioned in Žižek’s work as early as in *For They Do Not Know and Enjoy Your Symptom!* in which he refers to the hints made by Chesterton at the end of his well-known ‘Defence of Detective Stories’ of how the law is itself scandalously founded upon an act of transgression (Žižek 2008a: 29, 192; Žižek 2001a: 83). Yet, it is not until after his more extensive engagement with Christianity in *The Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief* that Žižek seriously considers Chesterton’s theological writings. In the succeeding period, however, Chesterton has been one of Žižek’s most recurrent and important theological references.³

The reason why Žižek’s reading of Chesterton constitutes a particularly good illustration of the dialectical relationship that he claims exists between theology and materialism is that this reading, which is overtly sympathetic but nevertheless also critical, follows the trajectory of a displacement in Chesterton’s theological thought that goes from an idealist to a proper materialist dialectic. To phrase it in Žižek’s Lacanian vocabulary: a displacement from a theology grounded in the ‘masculine’ logic of the ‘constitutive exception’ to a theology grounded in the ‘feminine’ logic of ‘not-All’.⁴ Or, in terms of the concept of God: a displacement from a (transcendent) omniscient and omnipotent God to a (immanent) doubtful and impotent God. This theological displacement is at the centre of Žižek’s reading of Chesterton, but he touches upon some of the ontological, ethical and political consequences related to this displacement as well.⁵ Besides this issue of the relationship between theology and materialism, what also makes Žižek’s reading of Chesterton worthy of consideration is that it offers a helpful way to encircle and contextualize Žižek’s own position in a broader theological landscape. These matters will be in focus (particularly) in the second section of this paper. I will, however, begin my exposition with an outline of Žižek’s critical account in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* of Chesterton’s so-called ‘Doctrine of Conditional Joy’ as an illustration of the ‘perverse’ version of Christianity, which according to Žižek “[...] forms the very core of ‘really existing Christianity’” (Žižek 2003: 53). Thus, although Žižek is first of all interested in the critical and political potential of Christianity, his theological engagement includes a critique of religion as well; yet, a critique of religion, which, as Žižek himself fully acknowledges, is implicit to – at least part of – the Christian theological tradition itself.

The Perverse Core of Christianity

Žižek's first extensive involvement with Chesterton, which is also his first real theological engagement with him, takes place in the second chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* entitled 'The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy' (an explicit reference to Chesterton, who uses this phrase in one of the essays in his book *Orthodoxy*). The chapter begins with an exposition of the 'basic matrix of paradoxical self-negating reversal', which, according to Žižek, constitutes the most 'Hegelian' and 'subversive' feature of Chesterton's work (Žižek 2003: 35-36). More precisely, this 'basic matrix' is, as Žižek explains, characterized by the dialectical process in which "[...] the external opposition (between Law and its criminal transgression) is transformed into the opposition, internal to the transgression itself, between particular transgressions and the absolute transgression that appears as its opposite, as universal Law" (Žižek 2003: 35-36). The basic insight at stake here is perhaps best illustrated with one of Žižek's absolute favourite references, namely Bertolt Brecht's famous proverb: 'What is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of new bank.' Chesterton deploys this dialectical matrix to expose, among other things, the inconsistency of so-called 'liberal' critics of religion who in their fierce battle to free man from religious oppression end up sacrificing the very thing (freedom) they were fighting for (Chesterton 2007: 131). By drawing parallels to the current so-called 'defence' of liberal democratic values through the torture of terrorists who threaten these values, and more generally to the message of contemporary post-ideological 'politics', that instead of trying to change the world, we should refashion ourselves through new 'subversive' forms of subjective practices, Žižek emphasizes the relevance of this matrix (Žižek 2003: 37-38).

Being the Instrument of the Big Other

However, Žižek is first of all interested in Chesterton's 'basic matrix', because it constitutes a useful means to disclose the *perverse* logic, which, according Žižek, not only manifests itself in exceptional situations such as the aforementioned 'torture of terrorists in the name of democracy', but also constitutes one of the most decisive and tricky aspects of contemporary late-capitalist society (Žižek 1999: 248; Žižek 2001b: 20).⁶ Capitalism has, as Marx and Engels famously note in *The Communist Manifesto*, played a 'revolutionary part' in history in the sense that it 'melts all solid into the air' including the hierarchical and prohibitive structures of a traditional authoritarian social order (Marx and Engels 2002: 223). Yet, these traditional social structures served not simply as a suppressive mechanism, but also notably as the background against which man could assert his freedom. And according to Žižek, perversion should be seen precisely as an attempt or a strategy to cope with a (modern) situation in which "[...] we can no longer rely on the pre-established

Dogma to sustain our freedom, on the pre-established Law/Prohibition to sustain our transgression [...]” (Žižek 2003: 53). Yet, to understand this claim fully we need to clarify the term ‘perversion’, which Žižek perceives in a broader sense than it is normally understood. More precisely, he extends the term beyond the sexual context to which it is traditionally linked, applying it instead primarily to political situations – thus for instance describing Stalinism and Nazism as utterly perverse political ideologies (e.g. Žižek 1993: 195; Žižek 2001b: 139; Žižek 2008b: 69; Žižek 2008c: 227; Žižek and Daly 2004: 114, 127-128).

Following Lacan, Žižek defines the ‘pervert’ as ‘a person who assumes the position of object-instrument of the will of the big Other’ (Žižek 2007a: 105; Evans 2010: 139).⁷ A relevant example of a pervert, that Žižek himself refers to in the first chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, could be Judas (Žižek 2003: 16). At least if we think of Judas in the terms proposed by Žižek; that is, as someone who sacrifices his own salvation and assumes the role of the necessary tool in the greater Cause of God’s salvation of mankind (Žižek 2003: 15).⁸ But, why would anyone do this? Žižek’s Lacanian answer is: Because the pervert finds enjoyment in occupying this instrumental position. More precisely, the pervert’s enjoyment derives, as Žižek notes, from the fact that he conceives of himself as absolved from (the responsibility of) his own actions insofar that he is merely a tool in the hands of the big Other’s will (Žižek 1993: 71; Žižek 2006a: 303; Žižek 2007a: 105). Think, for instance, of the meticulous bureaucrat who with an ill-concealed satisfaction in his voice tells you: ‘Sorry, but I am just following the rules.’⁹ Yet, another trait of perversion is, according to Žižek, that the pervert, in contrast to for example the hysteric, knows the will of the big Other (Žižek 1993: 71; Žižek 1999: 248). Again, think of the bureaucrat who rhetorically asks you: ‘don’t you think I know the rules.’ However, what is particularly in focus in Žižek’s interest in perversion is the question of the law. As Žižek explains in *The Plague of Fantasies*, what distinguishes the pervert is that:

[...] in contrast to the ‘normal’ subject, for whom the law functions as the agency of prohibition which regulates (access to the object of) his desire, for the pervert, the object of his desire is Law itself – the Law is the Ideal he is longing for, he wants to be fully acknowledged by the Law, integrated into its functioning ... (Žižek 2008b: 17)

Thus, in sum, Žižek counter-intuitively portrays the pervert not as a subversive rebel who liberates the repressed flip-side of normality, but as a closet-conservative whose transgressions (and the pleasure he gets from these) are intimately tied to a secret belief in the Law as such, or in other words, in the existence of the big Other. As Žižek stresses, ‘perversion is not subversion’ (Žižek 1999: 247). Quite the contrary, perversion is a conservative ‘solution’ to the problem of the decline of authorities, or in theological terms, the death of God.¹⁰ And now, let’s return to Chesterton.

The Limit of 'Conditional Joy'

Despite his obvious veneration for Chesterton, Žižek nevertheless, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, presents a severe critique of him. More precisely, Žižek's critique is aimed at the kind of principle or logic best captured in what Chesterton half-jokingly calls the 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy'. And as we shall see, the issue of perversion is at the very heart of this critique. But first, let us take a closer look at Chesterton's doctrine.

In chapter four of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton sets out in his typical counter-intuitive manner to show how fairy tales are not only not pure non-sense, but indeed 'entirely reasonable things' (Chesterton 2007: 40). And, to cut a long story short, his argument is that what makes them reasonable is precisely that they follow the logic summarized in the 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy'. So, what is the message of this doctrine? Chesterton describes it in this way:

The note of the fairy utterance always is, 'You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, *if* you do not say the word 'cow''; or 'You may live happily with the King's daughter, *if* you do not show her an onion.' This vision always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things depend upon a small thing withheld. All the wild and whirling things that are let loose depend upon one thing that is forbidden. (Chesterton 2007: 46)

This quote offers two important insights. First, it illustrates the fundamental message of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy, namely that our joy is always conditioned by an omission, that we can only enjoy something fully, *if* we at the same time renounce something else. In other words, the basic 'you-may-if-you-don't' structure of the 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy' is equivalent to the ('masculine') logic of a constitutive exception, which Žižek relates to idealism (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 82-101). The second thing that the quote illustrates is that this founding exception is completely arbitrary: The exception that allows me to live in a palace of gold and sapphire is that I do not say the word 'cow'. And more importantly, according to Žižek, Chesterton implies that the function of this arbitrary limitation ('*if* you don't say cow') of our access ('you may live in') to an object ('a palace') is to remind us that this object "[...] is given to us through an inexplicable arbitrary miraculous gesture of divine gift [...]" (Žižek 2003: 41-42). What is crucial in the present context is that although the Doctrine of Conditional Joy is here related to fairy tales, for Chesterton this doctrine summarizes, as Žižek notes, 'the basic Christian lesson' contained in fairy tales (Žižek 2003: 41).

If we now turn to Žižek's exposition of Chesterton's position in the second chapter of *The Puppet of the Dwarf*, we cannot fail to notice how, after having provided a series of entertaining illustrations of the logic at stake in Chesterton's Doctrine of Conditional Joy, what appeared to be unreserved enthusiasm is quite abruptly replaced by a far more critical attitude. The starting point

of Žižek's critique is Chesterton's inversion in the last chapter of *Orthodoxy* of the well-known and widespread conception that paganism as a joyful affirmation of life, while Christianity is supposed to force a regime of renunciation and guilt upon life. Against this conception Chesterton's makes the following claim:

The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom. (Chesterton, 2007: 149; cf. Žižek 2003: 48)

Clearly Chesterton's message in this passage is that Christianity serves as the exception which in fact *allows* us to enjoy the pleasures of paganism. Thus in other words, the underlying logic is the same as the 'you-may-if-you-don't' structure of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy: You may enjoy your pagan freedom, if you do not believe in pagan Gods, that is, if you are a good Christian. But, what is the problem with this claim?

Žižek's incriminating answer is that this claim demonstrates the properly *perverse* nature of Chesterton's Doctrine of Conditional Joy. In Chesterton's reading of Christianity (in terms of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy) the Christian, like the pervert, is enabled to indulge in pleasures ('dancing like children and drinking wine like men') not despite of, but precisely because of his act of renunciation ('rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests'). Like the pervert, the enjoyment of being a Christian is conditioned by a belief in prohibition, or in more general terms, the Law, the big Other. Although, the focus here is on Chesterton's reading of Christianity, according to Žižek, this logic of perversion applies not merely for this particular reading, but is at the 'very core of really existing Christianity' (Žižek 2003: 53). Žižek elaborates on this logic on several occasions throughout *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (subtitled precisely *The Perverse Core of Christianity*), describing among other things in the opening of the book how the 'Christian pervert' conjures a perverse God; that is, a God who incites man to sin only so that he afterwards, by sacrificing himself, can redeem man (Žižek 2003: 15-19). Or, in terms of the law: God only gave the law to generate sin, so that he afterwards could assert himself as an omnipotent God with the power to absolve man from this sin (Žižek 2003: 118; cf. Žižek 1999: 148).

However, to be correct, Žižek does not simply characterize Chesterton's reading of Christianity, and more generally 'the core of existing Christianity', as perverse, but as a perverse *solution* (Žižek 2003: 53). More precisely it is, according to Žižek, a perverse solution to the abovementioned problem of 'the fall of authorities' related to the rise of modernity (Žižek 2003: 53). Yet, Žižek's own understanding of Christianity also invites another more paradoxical reading: Namely that the Christian claim, that if we just believe that God sacrificed himself for our sins, then we are allowed to indulge in all kinds of transgressions, is a perverse 'solution' to a problem

that grew out of Christianity's own declaration of the death of God. In this perspective, the Christian is a 'pervert' insofar as he represses the message of the non-existence of the big Other, which subsists at the very heart of Christianity itself in terms of Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross.¹¹ Thus, in a certain sense we can say that Žižek here exerts a critique of religion against Christianity which it is actually itself the root of; at least if we understand Christianity, as Žižek suggests we should, as the 'religion of atheism' that 'attacks the religious hard core that survives in every belief in the existence of the big Other' (Žižek 2003: 171). And so, to paraphrase Žižek (PD 16), we could say that the 'entire fate of Christianity, its innermost kernel, relies on the possibility of a non-perverse reading of the death of God', that is, a reading in which God does not live on unaffected of his own death, remaining the exceptional guarantor of our actions (Žižek 2003: 16). In summary, the essence of Žižek's objection against Chesterton is that although Chesterton's writings contain the means to expose the logic of perversion imbuing our present culture, in the end his own version of Christianity obeys the very same logic – thereby maintaining the 'religious hard core' which it was supposed to be critical of.

Against this background the burning question is of course: Is not another reading of Christianity, a reading which is not based upon the structure of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy, a reading which does not abide by the logic of perversion, possible? Žižek not only raises this question, he also indicates a possible answer. Thus, towards the end of his chapter on Chesterton in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek (PD 51-52) proclaims that: "The crucial question here is: how does this 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy' relate to the Pauline suspension of our full commitment to earthly social obligations [...]" (Žižek 2003: 51-52). As Žižek explains, he understands this 'Pauline suspension' as a stance or an attitude that consists in living our lives in an *as if not* mode; that is, living, as he put it paraphrasing 1 Corinthians (7:29-31), in a way in which 'you mourn as if you were not mourning, rejoice as if you were not rejoicing, buy as if you had no possessions', and so on (Žižek 2003: 53).¹² Now, let me cite Žižek's answer to his 'crucial question' of the relationship between Chesterton's Doctrine of Conditional Joy and the Pauline attitude of 'as if not' in its full length:

Are they two versions of the same principle? Are they not, rather, two opposed principles? In the 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy', the Exception (be home by midnight, etc.) allows us fully to rejoice, while the Pauline *as if not* mode deprives us of the ability fully to rejoice by displacing the external limit into an internal one: the limit is no longer the one between rejoicing in life and its exception (renunciation), it runs in the midst of rejoicing, that is, we have to rejoice as if we are not rejoicing. The limit of Chesterton is clearly perceptible in his insistence on the need for firm external standards [...]. (Žižek 2003: 52)

Again, Žižek's basic objection against Chesterton's reading of Christianity here is that, due to his 'insistence on the need for firm external standards', or to put it in terms of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy, his insistence on an exception constitutive to our (transgressive) behaviour, he remains within the framework of perversion. Now, the question, to which we shall turn in the next section, is: Is it possible to present another reading of Chesterton, a reading in which his conception of Christianity does not rest on the logic of perversion outlined above? That is, perhaps a more Pauline reading of Chesterton?

A Pauline Reading of Chesterton

In the opening of his 2009 essay "From Job to Christ: A Pauline reading of Chesterton", Žižek affirms the standard view according to which Paul is the founder of Christianity insofar that he bestowed it with its most essential trait by shifting the centre from the acts and teachings of Jesus to the minimal message of Christ's death and resurrection as an act of salvation (Žižek 2009: 39; cf. Žižek 2008a: 29, 78).¹³ Or, to be correct: Žižek does in fact, and quite symptomatically, omit the resurrection, focusing entirely on the death of Christ (Žižek 2009: 39).¹⁴ According to Žižek, this theme of the death of God still constitutes a challenge today, and for reasons which are indeed consistent with the critique of the 'perverse core' of 'really existing Christianity' that he presents in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. Or, as he formulates it himself: "Today, two thousand years later, this death of God is still an enigma: how to read it outside the pagan-mythic topic of divine sacrifice or the legalistic topic of exchange (payment for sins)?" (Žižek 2009: 39). As we shall see, Žižek's claim is basically that Chesterton, if he is read properly, offers us the potential for a non-perverse reading of the death of God. Indeed, his claim is even that it was "[...] Chesterton, who thought through the notion of the 'death of God' to its radical conclusion: only in Christianity God himself has to go through atheism" (Žižek 2009: 39). Thus, in what follows I will sketch out how Žižek identifies a displacement in Chesterton's theological thought towards a conception of God which is consistent with a non-perverse reading of the death of God. This displacement moreover includes the potential for a shift 'towards a materialist theology.'

To Have Done with External Standards

In his reading of Chesterton in the essay "From Job to Christ", Žižek begins where we left him in the previous section, that is, with a critique of what he in the above quote from *The Puppet and the Dwarf* described as Chesterton's 'need for firm external standards', or in other words, his reliance on the ('masculine') logic of a constitutive exception. More precisely, Žižek's point of departure is Chesterton's famous 'metaphysical thriller' *The Man Who Was Thursday*, which,

along with his short “Introduction to the Book of Job” and a few detours to *Orthodoxy*, constitutes the main textual basis of the reading of Chesterton that Žižek presents in this essay.

In a key passage from the first part of this novel, Chesterton describes the important episode which leads to the recruitment of the book’s main-character, named Syme, into a special taskforce of ‘philosophical policemen’ formed to fight nihilist philosophers and their political equivalents, anarchists (Chesterton 1986: 44-46). In brief, Syme accidentally encounters a police officer who arouses his curiosity when he reveals that he is a member of a special task-force exclusively engaged in fighting philosophers, who, as he tells Syme, are far more dangerous than regular criminals. Why? Well, as it is explained to Syme, an ordinary crook, a thief for example, might violate a particular law by stealing, but his very wish to acquire more property shows that he nevertheless respects the idea of personal property; he just wants more of it for himself. Philosophers, on the other hand, disrespect the very idea of property as such; or, in short, philosophers not only disrespect a particular law; they disrespect the Law as such.

As I have mentioned earlier, Žižek definitely acknowledged the dialectical, even Hegelian, element in Chesterton’s writing, nevertheless his basic complaint against Chesterton in his discussion of the passage from *The Man Who Was Thursday* summarised above is precisely that he is not dialectical, or rather Hegelian, enough. Because, as Žižek puts it, “What Chesterton doesn’t get is that *universal(ized) crime is no longer a crime—it sublates (negates/overcomes) itself as crime and turns from transgression into a new order*” (Žižek 2009: 40).¹⁵ And as he additionally explains, the crucial point that Chesterton does not recognize (at least at this point in the novel) is that the universalized crime that he assigns to the philosopher/anarchist lawbreaker should also be assigned to the lawmaker who in his act of instituting the law of Order does nothing different than the anarchist whose transgression aims at instituting the law of Chaos. Instead of acknowledging that the antagonism between crime and law is internal to the law itself, Chesterton indirectly insists on the need for the law as a firm external standard. Žižek summarizes his critique in the following manner:

What Chesterton fails to perceive is that the ‘universalized crime’ that he projects into ‘lawless modern philosophy’ and its political equivalent, the anarchist movement that aims at destroying the totality of civilized life, *is already realized in guise of the existing rule of law*, so that antagonism between Law and crime reveals itself to be inherent to crime, the antagonism between universal and particular crime. (Žižek 2009: 41)

However, immediately after raising this critique of Chesterton, Žižek continues his discussion of *The Man Who Was Thursday* by modifying the very same critique. Thus, stressing that although Chesterton implicitly distinguishes between law and crime in the passage on the philosopher-criminal in the beginning of the novel, asserting law as an external standard, at the end of the

novel he nevertheless very explicitly confirms the identity of crime and law (Žižek 2009: 41). To understand Žižek's modification of his critique we will have to see how Chesterton enacts this identification of law and crime at the conclusion of *The Man Who Was Thursday*. However, to do this properly, we first need just a little more information about the plot of Chesterton's novel.

After his encounter with the police officer from the special task-force of philosopher-fighting policemen described above, the main character of the novel, Syme, is recruited by the mysterious Chief of this task-force (reduced to a 'heavy voice' in a 'pitch-dark room'), who sends him on a secret mission to penetrate the seven-member 'Central Anarchist Council' in charge of a powerful organization minded to annihilate the existence of civilization (Chesterton 1986: 48-49). During the course of this mission, Syme ends up being elected as 'Thursday'; that is to say, as one of members of the Central Anarchist Council (to preserve secrecy, the members are only known to each other by the name of a weekday), whose president is 'Sunday', a big man of tremendous genius with an awe-inspiring aura (Chesterton 1986: 29-40).

Now, let us return to Žižek's modification of his critique of Chesterton. What Žižek refers to when he stresses that "At the novel's end, the message is precisely the identity of crime and law [...]", is the highly surprising twist in wait for the reader in the final showdown of the novel, where Thursday and the other six members of the Central Anarchist Council, who have all turned out to be undercover policemen just like Syme, confront the president of the Central Anarchist Council, Sunday. Žižek puts it like this:

Here the novel passes from mystery to a metaphysical comedy: we discover two surprising things. First, that Sunday, president of the Anarchist Council, is the same person as the mysterious never-seen chief who hired Syme (and other elite detectives) to fight the anarchists; second, that he is none other than God Himself. (Žižek 2009: 41)

In other words, what Chesterton does here in the final chapter of *The Man Who Was Thursday* is to assert the identity between crime and law, which he indirectly rejects at the beginning of the novel, in the narrative form of the identity between the arch-villain Sunday and the chief of the special police-force; hereby renouncing his earlier 'insistence on the need for a firm external standard' (in the form of the law). The other no-less-decisive move that Chesterton makes is, as Žižek notes, to completely change the angle of the book from a detective story to a metaphysical comedy, or perhaps rather a 'theological thriller'. This shift in perspective underlines Žižek's real interest in Chesterton's novel, namely its conception of God.

So, what kind of God is it that Chesterton promotes in the double figure of Sunday/the Police Chief? Žižek answers this question with a short recourse to one of his favourite passages in 'Chesterton's theological masterpiece', *Orthodoxy*. This is a passage that definitely deserves a lengthy reproduction:

When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist. (Chesterton 2007: 130; cf. Žižek 2009: 43-44)

In other words, the God that Chesterton depicts in narrative terms in *The Man Who Was Thursday* as the split figure of Sunday/the Police Chief, who, as Žižek notes, 'fights himself', and who, as Chesterton puts in the above quote, 'seemed for an instant to be an atheist', is a God basically characterized by an inner discord, an inner antagonism. Now, in Žižek's account this raises two serious questions. The first question concerns the locus of this antagonism. That is: is the antagonism that characterizes God due to our limited perception of God; or is this antagonism inscribed into the very heart of God himself? As Žižek puts it: "[...] when God appears simultaneously as the top policeman fighting the crime and the top criminal, does this division appear to our finite perspective (and God is 'in himself' the absolute One without divisions)? Or is it, on the contrary that [...] God in Himself *is* the absolute self-division?" (Žižek 2009: 45). The second question concerns the more precise character of this division. That is to say: Is Chesterton's double-figure, his divided God, in the end a kind of 'unity of opposites', a harmonious reconciliation of his two sides, a unity balancing his self-division, or is God really in discord with himself?

As Žižek presents it, Chesterton manages to answer these two questions by virtue of the same modification of his conception of God. This modification is enacted by Chesterton, when, at the very end of the novel, Sunday/the Police Chief (God) as a reply to Syme's question if he has ever suffered the same way as the members of the council have suffered while fighting him, answers: "[...] 'can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?'" (Chesterton 1986: 183). Thus, the attentive reader of *The Man Who Was Thursday* will, as Žižek remarks, have noted how we have here not merely a duality of the evil Sunday and the good Police Chief, but rather a trinity of the features of God. In Žižek's words: "[...] the whole point of the novel's final pages is that, to the opposition between the benevolent God of peace and cosmic harmony and the evil God of murderous rage, one should add a third figure, that of the *suffering* God" (Žižek 2009: 47).¹⁶ The fact that God in Chesterton's reading is a 'suffering God' means first of all that God is involved with his creation, indeed involved in the suffering and discord of his creation, like Sunday/the Police Chief is involved in the suffering of the members of his council/task-force. And thus to answer the first of the above questions: God is not beyond, untouched by, the antagonism personified in the double figure of

Sunday and the Police Chief, God does not merely 'appear' as divided in our finite perspective. On the contrary, in the figure of a suffering God this antagonism, this division, is incarnated in God himself, most unmistakably of course in Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross, 'Father, why have you forsaken me?'. So, to answer the second question: Insofar that God *is* this self-division voiced on the cross, there cannot be a harmonious divine reconciliation of the antagonism, a suffering God cannot be a balanced 'unity of opposites'. This is a crucial point, because as Žižek stresses:

The insight into the speculative identity of Good and Evil, the notion of God's two sides, peaceful harmony and destructive rage, the claim that, in fighting Evil, the good God is fighting himself (an internal struggle), is still the (highest) *pagan* insight. It is only the third feature, the suffering God, whose sudden emergence resolves this tension of God's two faces, that brings us to Christianity: what paganism cannot imagine is such a suffering God. (Žižek 2009: 47-48)

I will elaborate on this decisive issue of Žižek's conception of the Christian God as a suffering God in a moment, but first let us pursue Žižek's reading of Chesterton in "From Job to Christ" a little further to see how the latter finally overcomes the (masculine) logic of the constitutive exception with regard to his notion of God, laying open the road 'towards a materialist theology'.

Towards a Materialist Theology

Near the end of his discussion of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Žižek notes how the issue of suffering, introduced by Chesterton in the final chapter of the novel, cannot but bring to mind the *Book of Job*, and therefore also Chesterton's short, brilliant "Introduction to the Book of Job." What primarily interests Žižek in Chesterton's commentary on this biblical text, is how Chesterton stresses that the *Book of Job* does not provide any satisfactory answer to why Job suffers, to why God tests Job, or in Chesterton's wording, to why God refuses to 'explain his design'. And more importantly, commenting on this reaction by God, Chesterton remarks that: "The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man" (Chesterton 1916: xxii). In other words, in Chesterton's view, what God does when he is confronted with the 'riddle' of Job's suffering is he relocates this riddle. As Žižek explains: "[...] he [God] resolves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job's mind into the thing itself—he comes to share Job's astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe [...]" (Žižek 2009: 48). Thus, what Chesterton performs here in his reading of the *Book of Job* is of course the properly dialectical move from 'in-itself' to 'for-itself' that Žižek describes in *The Ticklish Subject* as "[...] the

crucial Hegelian gesture of transposing epistemological limitation into ontological fault” (Žižek 1999: 55).

Moreover, it is against this backdrop we should understand Žižek’s claim, a few sentences further into the text, that through this reading Chesterton succeeds in exceeding the logic of the constitutive exception. Or as he puts it specifically in regard to Chesterton’s conception of God:

God is here no longer the miraculous exception that guarantees the normality of the universe, the unexplainable X who enables us to explain everything else; he is, on the contrary, himself overwhelmed by the overflowing miracle of his Creation. Upon a closer look, there is nothing normal in our universe — everything, every small thing that is, is a miraculous exception; viewed from a proper perspective, every normal thing is a monstrosity. For example, we should not take horses as normal and the unicorn as a miraculous exception even a horse, the most ordinary thing in the world, is a shattering miracle. *This* blasphemous God is the God of modern science, since modern science is sustained precisely by such an attitude of wondering at the most obvious. (Žižek 2009: 50)

To further illuminate this assertion and unfold the consequences of the displacement in Chesterton’s notion of God toward a ‘blasphemous God of modern science’ that it implies, Žižek introduces the two logics characterizing Lacan’s ‘formulas of sexuation’ (e.g. Lacan 1998: 78-81). Let me just give a brief recapitulation of these formulas, roughly following Žižek’s presentation in *For They Know Not What They Do* (Žižek 2008a: 121-123). The masculine formula states that: ‘All X are submitted to the phallic function’ [but] ‘there exists an X who is not submitted to the phallic function’. The feminine formula states that: ‘There does not exist any X who is exempt from the phallic function’ [but] ‘Not-all X are submitted to the phallic function’. Now, with this as his implicit basis, Žižek explains that:

Chesterton obviously relies on the ‘masculine’ side of universality and its constitutive exception: everything obeys natural causality—with the exception of God, the central Mystery. The logic of modern science is, on the contrary, ‘feminine’: first, it is materialist, accepting the axiom that nothing escapes natural causality which can be accounted for by rational explanation; however, the other side of this materialist axiom is that ‘not all is rational, obeying natural laws’—not in the sense that ‘there is something irrational, something that escapes rational causality, but in the sense that it is the ‘totality’ of rational causal order itself which is inconsistent, ‘irrational,’ non- All. (Žižek 2009: 50)

As Žižek hints in the above quote, this move from the (masculine) logic of the constitutive exception to the (feminine) logic of non-All also constitutes a passage from idealism to materialism, that is, from a prioritization of transcendence (the exception) over immanence (the universality it is constitutive of) to an inversion of this prioritization in the sense that in genuine materialism “[...]”

immanence generates the spectre of transcendence because it is already inconsistent in itself” (Žižek 2004: 61).¹⁷ To sum up, the notion of God that Chesterton, according to Žižek, outlines in his “Introduction to the Book of Job”, and in glimpses such as in the end of *The Man Who Was Thursday* and in the portrayal in *Orthodoxy* of God as being himself an atheist, is above all an *incomplete* God. That is to say, a God who is as confused and harassed by his own creation as man is, a God who, just like the human beings who believe in him, wavers in this faith, indeed, a God who even suffers the way that man does. And it is precisely due to this claim to God’s incompleteness and even impotence, paradigmatically expressed in Christ’s cry of dereliction, that Žižek holds that the Christian notion of God is compatible with materialism: “[...] within the field of religion, the singular point of the emergence of materialism is signalled by Christ’s words on the cross ‘Father, why have you forsaken me?’ — in this moment of total abandonment, the subject experiences and fully assumes the inexistence of the big Other” (Žižek 2001c: 180).

It is obviously such a reading of Christianity Žižek has in mind when he in the opening of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* asserts that only through a ‘materialist approach’ can we reach the subversive core of Christianity. But, how should we understand the other part of Žižek’s assertion, that is, why do we have to go through this Christian experience of total abandonment or alienation to become a true materialist? And how should we understand Žižek’s claim that this is a specifically *Christian* experience? In extension to a remark in *The Monstrosity of Christ* on Jean-Luc Nancy’s reflections on Christianity and atheism, Žižek proposes the following statement, which can be read as a rudimentary answer to these questions:

[...] a true materialism not only asserts that only material reality ‘really exists,’ but has to assume all the consequences of what Lacan called the nonexistence of the big Other, and it is only Christianity that opens up the space for thinking this nonexistence, insofar as it is the religion of a God who dies. (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 287)

That true materialism assumes the full consequences of the nonexistence of the big Other means, in short, that it assumes the inconsistency, the contingency, of reality itself (Žižek 2006a: 79). And this is precisely what the above reading of Christianity stresses: With its conception of the death of Christ as the death of God himself, Christianity does not merely reveal that there is nothing but material reality; rather, it reveals that this material reality is itself inconsistent, incomplete. The specifically Christian aspect of this claim is, as Žižek stresses in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, exactly that in contrast to “[...] the standard form of atheism [where] God dies for men who stop believing in him; in Christianity, God dies for himself” (Žižek 2003: 15). This is not only a proper ‘dialectical’ materialist reading of Christianity, it is also a non-perverse reading insofar that its emphasis on the death of God undermines any attempt to assume the role of being the instrument of the big Other. Moreover, what also guarantees such a non-perverse reading is that the above understanding of

the death of God precludes a sacrificial reading of this death: God does not die for us, he dies for himself. This non-perverse God who dies for himself is a God who refuses to guarantee the meaning of our reality, a God who is no longer above or beyond, but engaged in this reality, as in his answer to Job and in Christ's cry on the cross.

Another key issue in regard to the question of how to avoid a perverse reading of the death of God (i.e. a reading in which God himself remains unaffected by his death and lives on as the guarantor of our lives) is the issue of resurrection. In a word, how can we maintain the idea of resurrection without it meaning that we also restore God as Absolute and transcendent? Not surprisingly, Žižek's solution to this problem is Hegelian: "[...] Crucifixion and Resurrection [...] 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" (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 291; cf. 267). Or, perhaps we should rather say that Žižek's Hegelian solution is 'Pauline', because as Žižek notes himself, in Paul's gesture of re-reading the death of Christ as 'the greatest triumph':

[...] we encounter again the fundamental Hegelian motif: 'reconciliation' does not convey any kind of miraculous healing of the wound of scission, it consists solely in a reversal of the perspective by means of which we perceive how the scission is already in itself reconciliation — how, for example, Christ's defeat and infamous death are already in themselves reconciliation. (Žižek 2008a: 78)

This 'materialist reading', to use Žižek's words, in which 'death and resurrection are strictly contemporaneous' also sheds some light on the subtitle of Žižek's essay "From Job to Christ – A Pauline reading of Chesterton" (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 287). Indeed, Žižek's point with this subtitle seems to be that if read the way he suggests, what Chesterton performs in the final Chapter of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, in his "Introduction to the Book of Job" and with his reference in *Orthodoxy* to the atheism of the Christian God, is precisely such a Pauline/Hegelian (materialist) move of a 'parallax shift', through which an external difference is transposed into the thing itself. Now let's return to the issue of Žižek's conception of the Christian God as a suffering God.

'Only a Suffering God'...

Actually Žižek touches upon the issue of a suffering God already in his brief discussion of Job in the last chapter of *The Puppet and Dwarf*. Here Žižek introduces Job as the key figure in his attempt to develop a quite original account of the origin and specificity of Judaism.¹⁸ As part of this account, Žižek presents the following interesting reading of the story of Job (Žižek 2003: 124-127; cf. 2008a: lii-liii; Žižek and Daly 2004: 161-162; Žižek 2008d: 152-153). In Žižek's view Job is not,

as it is often claimed, patiently enduring his suffering with a firm faith in God, quite the opposite, Job complains endlessly, refusing to bear his fate (Žižek 2003: 125). Moreover, when Job is confronted by his three ‘theologian friends’ with their attempt to justify his suffering (God is just, so Job must have done something wrong to deserve this) he refuses to accept this ‘standard ideological sophistry’ as Žižek terms it (Žižek 2003: 125). What is at stake here according to Žižek, and this is crucial, is not merely the question of guilt, but the issue of the meaning(lessness) of Job’s suffering, because, as Žižek stresses, what is distinctive in the story of Job is precisely Job’s insistence on the meaninglessness of his suffering – a meaninglessness, which according to Žižek, is confirmed by God himself when the latter takes Job’s side at the end of the story, claiming that it was Job, and not his ‘theological friends’, who spoke the truth (Žižek 2003: 125). Žižek’s startling conclusion is that by this refusal to ascribe meaning to Job’s suffering, *The Book of Job* probably constitutes the first example of a critique of ideology in human history (Žižek 2003: 125; cf. Žižek 2008a: lii; Žižek and Daly 2004: 161). And in a long comment on Job in one of his conversations with Glyn Daly, Žižek gives the following elaboration of what he has in mind by this claim: “[...] the moment you accept suffering as something that doesn’t have a deeper meaning, it means that we can change it; fight against it. This is the zero level of critique of ideology – when you don’t read meaning into it” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 161). One could of course make the objection against Žižek on this point that rejecting the meaning of one’s suffering could just as well be made with reference to God: there is no meaning to my suffering, because the ways of God are inscrutable. However, Žižek explicitly rejects such an idea that ‘the ways of God as inscrutable’ in *The Monstrosity of Christ*:

The legacy of Job precludes such a gesture of taking a refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us to be a meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. [...] Christ’s death on the Cross thus means that we should immediately ditch the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology—Christ’s death on the Cross is the death of *this* God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any ‘deeper meaning’ that obfuscates the brutal reality of historical catastrophes. (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 54-55; cf. Žižek 2008d: 153)

In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek presents another more indirect argument against this notion of God as a secret Master who sees the complete meaningful picture of what man merely perceives as a meaningless stain. While stressing the same parallel between Job and Christ in terms of meaningless suffering as indicated in the above quote, Žižek also notes a decisive difference between them insofar as “[...] in the case of Christ, the gap that separates the suffering, desperate man (Job) from God is transposed into God Himself, as His own radical splitting or, rather, self-

abandonment” (Žižek 2003: 125-126). What this difference does is precisely to underscore the rejection in the Christian tradition of God as a transcendent omnipotent and omniscient Master: In Christianity the ways of God are not inscrutable, quite the contrary, as Žižek notes, Christianity is the religion of revelation and what it reveals is precisely that there is nothing hidden: God *is* this suffering, impotent, doubting man hanging on a cross (Žižek 2003: 127).

One noteworthy consequence of this recognition of a critical insistence on meaninglessness in Judeo-Christian tradition is that it leads Žižek to question the range of Alain Badiou’s definition of religion. While he does not explicitly state anything like that in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek does indicate such a critique of Badiou in *The Parallax View*. Commenting on Badiou’s suggestion in an interview from 2004 that the simplest definition of religion is the idea that truth and meaning are identical, Žižek stresses his agreement with Badiou that this gap between meaning and truth should be emphasized as the minimal difference separating religious idealism from materialism (Žižek 2006a: 181). Adding that Badiou is also right in advancing two opposing attitudes towards this gap between meaning and truth: a postmodern renouncement of truth all together in preference to the multiplicity of meaning, *versus* a stance that engages in discerning a dimension of truth outside meaning, that is, in short, as Žižek puts it in Lacanian parlance, “[...] the dimension of truth as *real*” (Žižek 2006a: 181). However, in the subsequent section of the book entitled ‘When God Comes Around’, Žižek modifies and elaborates on the first of these claims in a very relevant way, suggesting that Badiou’s above definition of religion does perhaps not capture all religions:

The key question about religion today is: can all religious experiences and practices in fact be contained within this dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? Does not Judaism, with its imposition of a traumatic Law, adumbrate a dimension of truth outside meaning (which is why Judaism is the mortal enemy of any Gnostic obscurantism)? And, at a different level, does not the same go for Saint Paul himself? (Žižek 2006a: 182)

In Žižek’s view, the best way to clarify this question would be by examining a situation in which religion itself faces “[...] a shock which dissolves the link between truth and meaning, a truth so traumatic that it resists integration into the universe of Meaning” (Žižek 2006a: 182). The paradigmatic example of such a situation is of course when theology faces the problem of evil, the question of how to reconcile the existence of God with the fact of the phenomena of excessive evil such as the Holocaust. Now, according to Žižek, the traditional theological responses based upon an insistence on the omnipotence of God are basically the following: that evil is God’s punishment, that evil is God’s way of testing our belief, or that evil is simply an indication of how God works in mysterious ways (Žižek 2006a: 183). However, there is, Žižek says, also another theological answer to this problem, which refers to “[...] a God who — like the suffering Christ on the Cross —

is agonized, assumes the burden of suffering, in solidarity with human misery” (Žižek 2006a: 184). And he elaborates on this notion of a suffering God in the following helpful way:

[...] God’s suffering implies that he is involved in history, affected by it, not just a transcendent Master pulling the strings from above: God’s suffering means that human history is not just a theatre of shadows but the place of real struggle, the struggle in which the Absolute itself is involved, and its fate is decided. (Žižek 2006a: 184)

With this characterization of God as ‘suffering’, Žižek joins the company of some of the most important protestant theologians of the 20th century for whom the issue of God’s ‘passibility’ has been absolutely fundamental.¹⁹ Although Žižek himself is perhaps not entirely aware of this context, he nevertheless immediately after the passage quoted above explicitly refers to the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘profound insight’ that ‘only a suffering God can help us’. An additional example could be Jürgen Moltmann, another German theologian, who in his short essay, “The Crucified God and Apathetic Man”, makes the following statement setting him fully on par with Žižek: “A theology after Auschwitz would be impossible [...] were not God himself in Auschwitz, suffering with the martyred and the murdered. Every other answer would be blasphemy. An absolute God would make us indifferent” (Möltmann 1974: 10). This suffering God is precisely a God who does not reduce the dimension of truth encountered in the *real* of suffering to a dimension of meaning.²⁰

Let me end this section and thus my outline of Žižek’s thought on the notion of a suffering God in the only proper Žižekian manner, that is, of course, with a joke. In the *Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek suggests that the best way to illustrate what he is aiming at with his reference to a suffering God is by means of the following joke (Žižek 2003: 137-138). Three guys who have all been condemned for political crimes share the same cell in Lubyanka KGB prison in the late 1930s. While they are getting to know each other the first guy says: “I was condemned to five years for opposing Popov” – a top nomenclature representative at the time. The second guy says: “Ah, but then the Party line changed, and I was condemned ten years for supporting Popov.” Finally the third guy says: “I was condemned for life, and I *am* Popov.” I probably hardly have to point out that the structure of this joke constitutes the materialist-theological logic par excellence, the logic of incarnation: God/Popov abolishes the distance between himself and man, and he does so by displacing this external distance into himself, by getting involved in, taking part in, the sufferings and alienation of man, by becoming man.

Concluding Remarks

I would like to conclude this paper with a brief reflection on a more general level of the theological implications of Žižek's engagement with theological tradition with regard both to the field of theology and Žižek's own work. Let us begin with the latter. If we take seriously, as I have tried to do throughout this paper, on the basis of his reading of Chesterton, Žižek's claim in the opening of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other, then the role of theology in his work cannot be reduced to the status of an illustration or exemplification on par with his use of obscene jokes and pop-cultural references;²¹ but more importantly, it cannot just be dismissed as a purely negative concern. I will try to illustrate and justify the last part of this assertion a little further through a short discussion of the critique of Žižek's engagement in theology made by John D. Caputo in a review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* of Žižek's probably most explicitly theological work to date, *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

Near the end of his thorough and well-written review of this book, Caputo directs a rather harsh critique against Žižek. Not only does he question the sincerity in Žižek's engagement with Christianity by suggesting that the latter's interest in theology is the result of a pure coincidence and in the end not even directed against Christianity as such, Caputo also accuses Žižek of merely playing patronizing psychoanalytical games, whose final aim is nothing but the undermining of the 'Christian patient's' belief in God. In Caputo's own words:

[...] we all know that Žižek can very well make his main case with no mention of Christ at all, that he can use the seminars of Lacan, the films of Alfred Hitchcock or the novels of Stephen King just as well. His whole point, as he says elsewhere, is subversive: to build a Trojan-horse theology, to slip the nose of a more radical materialism under the Pauline tent of theology in order to announce the death of God. [...] He discusses Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Crucifixion the way an analyst talks with a patient who thinks there is a snake under his bed, trying patiently to heal the patient by going along with the patient's illusions until the patient is led to see the illusion. (Caputo 2009: unpaginated)

Well, the only proper answer to this critique is of course the 'vulgar-psychological' claim, which persists at the very heart of the theological tradition itself, that Caputo's ill-concealed indignation is indeed the best indicator of the truth of Žižek's reading of the gospel, that it proves that Žižek's reading succeeds in actualizing the scandal of the Gospel. Furthermore, Caputo's suggestion that Žižek acts like an analyst, whose message is that God is dead, is neither precise nor radical enough; Žižek's message is rather that God himself is the analyst telling us that he is dead. What Caputo cannot accept is not, as he pretends, Žižek's (presumed) insincere engagement with theology, but precisely the scandalous (atheist) essence of the Christian message itself: a God who suffers and dies. Caputo will hear nothing of such subversive and speculative talk. Instead of

lofty speculations about the monstrous Christ, Caputo clearly prefers the earthbound benevolent figure of Jesus. As he states in the ending lines of his review: "Truth to tell, I think Jesus (who does not even make the index in this book) would have been utterly dumbfounded by this polemic about the metaphysics of Christ" (Caputo 2009: unpaginated). Thus, in this way Žižek's theological engagement highlights the tension at the heart of Christian theology between the 'two beginnings' of Christianity, between Jesus and Paul. To Žižek, there is no doubt that the emphasis should be put on Paul as the real founder of Christianity, because "[...] it was Paul who shifted the centre from Christ's acts and teachings to the redemptive quality of his death" (Žižek 2009: 39). Or in other words, the only genuine reading of Christianity is Pauline reading.

¹ The responses to Žižek's theological engagement are growing rapidly both in the more general reception of his work (e.g. Kay 2003; Butler 2005; Sharpe and Boucher 2010) and in theological circles (e.g. Blanton 2004; Boer 2007; Crockett 2007; Depoortere 2007; Kotsko 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Milbank 2005, 2009, 2010; Pound 2008). Thus, many of the theological themes (e.g. sacrifice, belief, law, agape, incarnation, the trinity, grace, iconoclasm, monotheism) and several of the theological thinkers (e.g. Paul, Pascal, Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard) touched upon by Žižek have been discussed in the reception of his work. However, as far as I know, there exists no account that focuses explicitly on Žižek's reading of Chesterton, even though the latter is a key-figure in Žižek's theological considerations.

² Although it is perhaps not customary to consider Chesterton a theologian, as Aidan Nichols notes in the introduction to his book *G.K. Chesterton – Theologian*, Chesterton has nevertheless written extensively on theological issues and Christianity in general (Nichols, 2008: xi). Among other things he has published a highly estimated commentary on Thomas Aquinas and in *Orthodoxy* – a work that Žižek designates as 'Chesterton's theological masterpiece' (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 48), he sets out to "[...] discuss the actual fact that the central Christian theology (sufficiently summarized in the Apostles' Creed) is the best root of energy and sound ethics" (Chesterton 2007: 5). Thus, even if Chesterton is not a theologian by profession, he is indeed, to borrow Stratford Caldecott's expression, an 'amateur theologian' and in the best meaning of the word (Caldecott 1998: unpaginated).

³ In addition to the second chapter entitled "The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy" in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek has dedicated two essays explicitly to Chesterton, namely: "Hegel – Chesterton: German Idealism and Christianity" published in the Lacanian journal *The Symptom* in 2006 and "From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton", which is basically an extended version of the 2006 text, printed in the 2009 anthology *Paul among the Philosophers*. Furthermore, Chesterton plays a decisive part in the argument that Žižek unfolds in his 2007 article "Towards a Materialist Theology". As the titles suggest, all four of these texts revolve around theological matters. It is, however, in *The Monstrosity of Christ* that Žižek refers most extensively to Chesterton and theology, but this is partly due to the fact that the first of his two contributions to this volume include a compilation of the aforementioned texts on Chesterton (minus the chapter in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*). In contrast, the second contribution contains a few 'new' comments on Chesterton in relation to Žižek's discussion with John Milbank. In addition to these texts, which explicitly focus on Chesterton, there are lots of scattered references to the latter on several different matters in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, *Bodies with Organs*, *The Parallax View*, *In Defence of Lost Causes* and *Violence*.

⁴ Žižek gives a concise and clear account of these two 'logics' (and their relationship to the issue of materialism and idealism) in his first essay in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 88-89).

⁵ Žižek deals with the ontological consequences in the essay "Toward a Materialist Theology" (Žižek 2007b: 21f.), the ethical consequences in the last part of "From Job to Christ – A Pauline Reading of Chesterton" (Žižek 2009: 50f.) and the political consequences in the final chapter in the *Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 288f.). However, it is beyond the scope of the present paper to go further into and give an exhaustive exposition of these consequences.

⁶ This is a thesis which Žižek takes over from Lacan, who, in his late work, regards perversion as a 'generalized hegemonic social structure' (Chiesa 2007: 7).

⁷ As Žižek notes in his exposition of the notion in *How to Read Lacan* the 'big Other' has several features (Žižek 2007a: 7-21). Here the 'big Other' (operating at the symbolic level) is understood in its primary sense as 'the subject's presupposition of an ideal order that guarantees the ultimate meaning and consistency of the subject's experience' (Žižek 2001a: 58).

⁸ Of course Judas' betrayal takes on an even more perverse character if we, as Žižek suggests, see it as provoked by the 'secret injunction' in Christ's statement to his disciples that 'truly, one of you will betray me' (Žižek, 2003: 15). As Žižek stresses, in a certain sense, "[...] the entire fate of Christianity, its innermost kernel, hinges on the possibility of interpreting this act [Christ's injunction to betray him] in a non-perverse way" (Žižek, 2003: 15).

⁹ A more extreme version of this example would be the Nazi-criminal Adolf Eichmann. Thus, according to Žižek, Eichmann cannot be properly understood in Hannah Arendt's terms of 'the banality of evil'; that is, as an 'ordinary' man caught up in bureaucratic machinery, eager to fulfil his duty, promoting his career and so on (Žižek and Daly 2004: 127-128; cf. Žižek 2008b: 300). In contrast to Arendt's claim, Žižek argues that Eichmann was indeed a pervert; that we need to see his behaviour (and the behaviour of Nazi-bureaucrats in general) as closely tied to an 'obscene economy of enjoyment' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 127-128).

¹⁰ In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek describes this 'solution' in the following way: "[...] today's desperate neoconservative attempts to reassert 'old values' are also ultimately a failed perverse strategy of imposing prohibitions that can no longer be taken seriously" (Žižek 2003: 53). It is, according to Žižek, against this backdrop that we should understand Lacan's reversal, in *Seminar II*, of Dostoevsky's famous suggestion in *The Brothers Karamazov*: if God does not exist, the result is not, as Dostoevsky suggests, that everything is permitted, but on the contrary, that nothing at all is permitted (Žižek 2007a 91-92). Or, as Žižek puts it: "Instead of bringing freedom, the fall of the oppressive authority [...] gives rise to new and sterner prohibitions" (Žižek 2007a 92).

¹¹ Indeed, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek explicitly suggests that we can understand the whole history of Christianity as the history of the repression of its own inner core: "[...] what if the entire history of Christianity, inclusive of (and especially) its Orthodox versions, is structured as a series of defenses against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection?" (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 260).

¹² Žižek elaborates more thoroughly on this later on in the book during his discussion of Giorgio Agamben's reading of Paul in *The Time That Remains* (Žižek 2003: 111-112). Here Agamben presents a more extensive reading of 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and in particular of the Pauline formula 'as if not' or 'as not' (w'j mh)) which seems to be Žižek's model (Agamben 2005: 23f.).

¹³ Let me just note in passing that Žižek already advances this type of reading of Paul in *For They Do Not Know* in which he notes how Paul's "[...] rereading of the death of Christ gave Christianity its definitive contours" (Žižek 2008a: 78; cf. 29).

¹⁴ I will return to this issue later.

¹⁵ Žižek advances a similar objection against Chesterton of not 'being Hegelian enough' in the second chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Žižek 2003: 42-53).

¹⁶ Žižek presents a similar portrayal of God already in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* where he states that: "God is neither just nor unjust, simply impotent" (Žižek 2003: 125-126). Yet, in this text Žižek does not relate the conception of God as impotent/suffering to Chesterton, but to the *Book of Job*. However, in "From Job to Christ" Žižek does, as we shall see, in return make a link between Job and Chesterton precisely on this point.

¹⁷ For a further elaboration of this point, see Adrian Johnston's *Žižek's Ontology* (Johnston 2008 142-144).

¹⁸ I will not elaborate further on this account here, but instead refer to Adam Kotsko's lucid outline of it (Kotsko 2008b: 88-93).

¹⁹ See Richard Bauchham's article "'Only the suffering God can help': divine passibility in modern theology" for a helpful survey (Bauchham 1984). This focus on God's passibility among (especially) contemporary protestant theologians is probably closely linked with the Luther renaissance and in particular his 'theologia crucis' that has taken place in the 20th century.

²⁰ As Žižek also notes, Bonhoeffer's suffering God, and more generally the suffering God of modern protestant theology, has a forerunner in German Idealism: "It was Schelling who wrote: 'God is a life, not merely a being. But all life has a fate and is subject to suffering and becoming. . . *Without the concept of a humanly suffering God . . . all of history remains incomprehensible*'" (Žižek 2006a: 184).

²¹ Of course, another question is if Žižek's use of obscene jokes and pop-cultural references can be reduced in this way to mere illustrations and exemplification. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to go into this issue, see instead Todd McGowan's article "Serious theory" for a discussion of this matter (McGowan 2007).

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