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## **A modest plea for a Chestertonian reading of *The Monstrosity of Christ***

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Much has been made of the ‘theological turn’ in recent critical theory, and *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank 2009) seeks to examine the relationship between theology and contemporary theory by bringing together two of their most significant contemporary thinkers. In his introduction, Creston Davis portrays the dialogue between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek as a response to the failure of communism and the apparently inexorable rise of capitalism: materialist Marxism, argues Davis, is no longer able to challenge capitalism, and must draw on theology as a source of hope and a fund for resistance. For Milbank, this means that only transcendence can make materialism possible; for Žižek, that only a Christian atheism enables effective resistance. The book consists of three essays and an introduction: Žižek lays out his ‘Hegelian reading of Christianity’; Milbank responds, arguing for a paradoxical rather than a dialectical hermeneutic; Žižek concludes with further explanation of why he favours dialectics over paradox.

Žižek’s Hegelian Christianity is an atheism which reads the death of Christ on the cross as the death of God as ‘big Other’, the transcendent being who guarantees the order and meaning of the cosmos. Crucial to Žižek’s argument is his understanding of Hegelian dialectics: where some take dialectics to mean that a thesis generates its own antithesis, and that these two are subsequently reconciled in a higher unity (such as Love), on Žižek’s reading of Hegel this antagonism is resolved by the ‘negation of negation’. For example, Chesterton argues that thieves do not oppose but actually support the idea of property: ‘Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it.’ The Hegelian move that Chesterton fails to make is to see that not only is crime ‘essentially moral’, but that

*'morality itself is essentially criminal'* (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 44): property is theft. The negation of the ecological idea that human activity in the world violates the natural order of things is the argument that it is the notion of a 'natural order' imposed on the world which most profoundly violates it. The antithesis is the truth of the antagonism: crime is the truth of property, crime the truth of law.

Žižek detects a Hegelian triad in Christian history (as told, contentiously, by Vladimir Lossky): Orthodoxy envisages a unity between Scripture and individual Christians; this unity is disrupted by Catholicism, which alienates the two by giving the Church autonomous existence as mediator between them. Within Protestantism, this alienation is not resolved but redoubled: the mediating Church vanishes, leaving only the believer and the divine Word, entirely alienated from one another. Only at this point can the final move be made: the alienation between God and humanity is the alienation of humans from themselves. There is no God, and the 'Holy Spirit' is 'virtual' being, existing only insofar as we act as though it exists. Christ lives on in the community of the church only as Martin Luther King lives on in the civil rights movement.

For Žižek, only Christ makes atheism possible, functioning as a 'transitional object' like the favourite teddy bear of a small child negotiating the relationship between internal and external worlds. The teddy bear both is and is not the child, is and is not the external world, and by marking the distinction between the two acts both as a bridge and a border, creating the two spheres between which it mediates. Eventually the bear loses its function as the antagonism between inner and outer worlds is inscribed throughout reality as the child knows it, and is in fact constitutive of this reality. Both inner and outer reality are functions of the human mind, and human subjectivity is possible only insofar as some element of the subject evades the subject's control. We made the world, but it overwhelms us, and the element of the world which is beyond our control is the 'monstrosity' which is Christ. Christ, like the teddy bear, is a 'vanishing mediator', expressing our alienation from ourselves, and, by dying, forcing us to the realisation that this alienation is within us, is constitutive of our very selves.

As we rely on alienation for selfhood, so law relies on transgression. Law appears as an imposition from outside, forbidding the satisfaction of our innermost desires, when in fact it is prohibition which creates those desires. The key to escaping the destructive cycle of law, sin and desire is not to move beyond the law to love, but to recognise that both law and sin are within us - that there is no 'big Other', no transcendent parental lawgiver - and to fully embrace the law as our own self. Only Christianity makes such an atheism possible, because only in Christianity does God die. This is why Žižek is a Protestant: our ethical choices are not mediated to us by our communities, but each of us is responsible for ourselves alone. 'The true formula of atheism is "there is no big Other"' (297).

Ethics cannot be based on the notion of sacrifice, which substitutes the approval of the big Other for the pleasure of the thing sacrificed. Ethics must not concern itself with the way our actions are seen by others, but only with consistency and fidelity to the self: 'I do what I have to do

because it needs to be done, not because of my goodness' (301). Such ethical 'naivety' requires a 'monstrously cold reflexive distance', and the book concludes with Žižek's second description of 'how I would love to be: an ethical monster without empathy ... helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity' (303).

Milbank highlights his points of agreement with Žižek: both agree that modernity is Hegelian, Western, European and Christian; and that none of these facts undermine its importance or universality. The two part ways at Žižek's insistence on an atheist reading of Christianity; but for Milbank, the real issue is not the existence of God, but the conflict between Žižek's Protestant and Catholic tendencies. Moreover, Milbank detects a 'latent Žižek' who admires Catholic thinkers such as Chesterton and Eckhart precisely for the paradoxical (Catholic) elements of their thought (113). For Milbank, Žižek's atheist reading of Christianity stems from a too-ready acceptance of Protestant thinkers such as Luther and Boehme, and a misreading of Meister Eckhart. He argues that Žižek fails to acknowledge the contingency of history, and so neglects the possibility that modernity could have taken Catholic rather than Protestant form. This failure to consider Catholicism as superior to Protestantism has important ethical and political consequences, leading Žižek, via Hegel and Lacan, to a nihilistic assessment of the world, in which desire is necessarily frustrated, and the possibility of erotic fulfilment replaced with a 'love' which is arbitrary and empty.

Milbank argues instead for a paradoxical, analogical or 'metaxological' vision of reality which permits an enchanted, erotic view of the world and surpasses dialectics. For Hegel, north is 'not-south', and as it relies entirely on the idea of 'south' for its definition, the two are ultimately indistinguishable. Hegel's mistake, according to Milbank, is to extend this reading to the whole of phenomenal reality. Negation is not always sufficient for definition. To leave the North Pole is not merely to head south: it might be to head for Ljubljana or Nottingham. This problem of 'multiple opposites' – that any given thing is not definable solely by its opposition to one other thing – illustrates the limitations of the Hegelian dialectical approach. Phenomenal reality does contain dialectical elements, and elements of monstrous conflict (139), but these are subsumed within the larger and more fundamental category of the metaxological. Milbank draws on Richard of St Victor's discussion of the Trinity to argue that the Holy Spirit, lying between the two 'poles' of Father and Son, constitutes an 'extra' third, mediating between the two, allowing dialectical difference to remain unresolved, and ensuring that Being is not nothingness but participation in the plenitude of God, and that peace, not conflict, is the ultimate ontological reality. The Holy Spirit is not a vanishing but a remaining mediator, holding together identity and difference, reason and faith.

To illustrate the concept of the metaxological, Milbank uses the example of the world viewed in the morning mist, which both highlights differences and blurs everything together. The mist both hides and reveals, illustrating that we are able to see, if not to conceptualise, a happy 'coincidence of opposites'. The paradoxical nature of the misty scene is its beauty, its unity revealed through its differences. It is in the infinity of God that contradiction can be held together peaceably. Individual qualities, tending towards this infinite, become identical: the good man is also

perfectly, just, courageous, and wise, and for this reason Christian ethics is an ethics of apparently opposed extremes rather than the Aristotelian *via media*.

The paradoxical nature of the created world is the paradox of gift. The doctrine of the Trinity ensures that God is 'pure giver, gift, and renewal of gift, without remainder' (200). We are freely given, but in possession of being only insofar as we exist as gratitude, insofar as we long to return to the God who gave us. We are naturally oriented to God, but can attain our end only through the additional gift of grace. For Milbank, paradox is the fundamental ontological principle, holding together reason and poetry; the incarnation of Reason in the person of Christ ensuring that reason is accessible only through poetry. Catholicism is the balance between reason and poetry, and so the history of Christianity is not the history of a slowly emerging truth, but the endless attempt to hold this balance.

Milbank argues that 'the crucial thing at issue between myself and Žižek is the question of the interpretation of Christianity' (117), and much of their disagreement comes down to hermeneutics: whether Christ is best read through Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Žižek) or Thomism (Milbank). For Milbank, dialectics is to blame for Žižek's inability to conceive of modernity in a Catholic, rather than a Protestant, register, and Lacanian psychoanalysis leads to the rejection of desire in favour of an arbitrary, empty decision to love. For Žižek, Milbank's Thomist assertion of ultimate ontological peace prevents him confronting the 'traumatic *skandalon*' (248) which is the true meaning of the cross; 'what if', he suggests with Altizer, 'the entire history of Christianity ... is structured as a series of defences against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection?' (260). Because of the centrality of this disagreement to the book as a whole, it is a shame that Milbank's engagement with Lacanian thought is so meagre: other than stating that Žižek's Lacanian thought leads him to 'the tragic recognition of the inevitable failure of desire' (118) there is no discussion of key Lacanian concepts such as drive, the assumption of desire, and the relationship between prohibition and desire. It is a pity that neither Žižek nor Milbank engage more fully with Marcus Pound's *Theology and Psychoanalysis* (2009), which argues for a Catholic reading of psychoanalysis, an alternative to the 'life-and-death struggle between religion and psychoanalysis' (241) which both Milbank and Žižek seem to envisage.

Another key theme is materialism. Žižek argues, via quantum physics, for the 'ontological incompleteness of reality itself.' The world is constituted of 'irreducible multiplicities' playing out across the background of 'Zero, the void' (90). This means that 'materialism has nothing to do with the presence of damp, dense matter', so much so that 'if we see in raw, inert matter more than an imaginary screen, we always secretly endorse some kind of spiritualism' (91). As a result, logical materialism has to 'sacrifice Matter' to 'get rid of Spirit.' For Milbank, 'Materialist materialism is simply not as materialist as theological materialism' (206), and Žižek's materialism does not – Žižek would agree – allow 'matter to "matter"' (125). This argument has weight only if it is granted that matter ought to matter, but Milbank does little to make this case. His most extended discussion

of matter is his description of the misty morning in which 'Everything is univocally bathed in ... vagueness' (160); 'the mist constantly denies yet establishes itself by dispersing; the shadowy shapes propose themselves and yet show forth a dense content which is only that of an ontic miasma' (162); and 'the mist is perceived as a glorious veil that hides only to reveal an extra, diaphanous covering' (165). Both the divine and the earthly are translucent and shadowlike, in stark contrast to Chesterton's earthier work, where matter assuredly does matter: 'if by vulgarity we mean coarseness of speech, rowdiness of behaviour, gossip, horseplay, and some heavy drinking, vulgarity there always was wherever there was joy, wherever there was faith in the gods' (Chesterton 2006). Žižek's ethical vision is at its least compelling in his revulsion for the 'disgusting proximity' of other human beings, and Milbank's argument would be stronger if he, like Chesterton, were to enthusiastically embrace the earthier elements of human life as the locus of the divine.

Milbank's argument relies on his claim that his ontology is more appealing than Žižek's. His Catholic metaphysical vision is 'much more literally sexy', and 'achieves a materialism in a joyful, positive sense – whereas Žižek's atheism achieves only a sad, resigned materialism which appears to suppose that matter is quite as boring as the most extreme of idealists might suppose' (125). The claim that 'for Žižek the world is an essentially dark place that embodies an inherent negativity' (8) is reasonable; but Žižek himself is hardly known for being tedious, boring or solemn, and even Milbank has to acknowledge his 'quirky subjectivity' and 'clownlike' demeanour (113). Milbank's vision of the world may ultimately allow for more fun than Žižek's, but he does little, rhetorically, to convince the reader of this, and in failing to address key Lacanian concepts, he is unable to challenge Žižek's claim that Lacan's thought, in his later work at least, is '*not* tragic, but comic' (245).<sup>i</sup>

This brings us to the question of the political and ethical outworking of paradox and dialectics, a theme surprisingly marginal to a book supposedly concerned with resisting capitalism. Milbank goes no further than to argue that patriarchy is rightly missed and that Eckhart was a 'Red Tory'; Žižek, notorious for his reluctance to provide practical solutions to the problems he diagnoses, describes his desire to act ethically whilst minimising contact with other human beings. Both are frustrating: Milbank's rose-tinted view of medieval times, while perhaps not quite the 'soft Fascist' vision (250) Žižek takes it for, typifies his tendency to read Christian history as reaching its climax with Aquinas, and declining thereafter, and Žižek, for all his enthusiasm for 'political organisation' (291) seems to actively dislike those whom such an organisation would benefit. Neither would satisfy Chesterton, who advocated the love of places and people along with the unsentimental recognition of their flaws, underrating their virtue whilst overrating their value (Chesterton 1995: 76).

The two also disagree on the significance of common sense. The point of Milbank's description of the misty morning is to prove that we encounter and accept paradox all the time: we 'intuit' being in our 'natural condition' (175). But for Žižek, what religion provides is precisely the 'premise that our commonsense reality is not the true one' (240). Žižek argues that Milbank

misreads Chesterton's defence of the extraordinariness of the ordinary when he takes it mean that it is easy to believe in fantastical creatures; but he is no less guilty of misreading Chesterton in appropriating him for an attack on common sense. It may be that, once belief in an irrational God who sustains the rationality of the universe is done away with, Chesterton's argument leads logically to Žižek's ethics, but such a reading sits uncomfortably with the Chesterton who enthusiastically mocks his contemporaries (who bear no mean resemblance to Žižek himself) for their lack of common sense: 'A man approaches, wearing sandals and simple raiment ... and says, "The affections of family and country alike are hindrances to the fuller development of human love;" but the plain thinker will only answer him, with a wonder not untinged with admiration, "What a great deal of trouble you must have taken in order to feel like that"' (2006: 96). The extraordinariness of the ordinary is precisely what encourages Chesterton to be 'more inclined to believe the ruck of hard-working people than to believe that special and troublesome literary class to which I belong' (1995: 53).

Where Žižek is closer to Chesterton than Milbank is in his eagerness to unsettle and upend his readers' assumptions. For Žižek, the encounter with Christ is fundamentally traumatic, forcing us to question our pat answers, and utterly transforming the relation of law and sin. It is on this issue of trauma that Žižek's claim to be more orthodox than Milbank sounds most persuasive: for Žižek, the events of Christ's life and death change everything, where for Milbank the Incarnation is merely the crystallisation of the paradox we see all around us, and Christ's death and resurrection are notable primarily by their absence. There is no sense in Milbank's essay of the 'dark and awful' (Chesterton 1995: 145) Passion which is so important to both Žižek and Chesterton; no sense that the cross might be a monstrosity as well as redemption.

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- i This is one of the reasons why it is such a shame that Milbank is not given the opportunity to respond to Žižek's second article.