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There's a Crack in Everything, That's How the Light Gets In - Žižek's *Parallax View* and *The Perverse Core of Christianity*

Cameron Stewart Freeman, Flinders University of South Australia

As Slavoj Žižek writes in his book *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (2003), one of the only options generally permitted Christianity in the 21st century is to re-activate the “dangerous memory” of Jesus and return to the radical core of truth and that had to be repressed in order for the institutional Church to establish itself.¹ In undertaking this task, this paper will set up a short-circuit between Jesus' most memorable teachings on the Kingdom of God (as recorded in the synoptic gospels) and Žižek's recently published magnum opus *The Parallax View* (2006) in a way that discloses a disturbing correspondence between his latest work on the “parallax gap” and the revolutionary kernel of the Christ-event while providing an unexpected opening for the politics of Žižek as a “fighting atheist” who claims the Christian legacy is worth fighting for.

This short circuit between Žižek and Christianity takes its leave from the contemporary quest for the historical Jesus, a quest which aims to isolate the original teachings of Jesus from his inscription in the Christian tradition proper by revealing the elusive voice-print of this subversive sage from Nazareth that is said to be buried beneath the hegemonic structures of the institutional Church.² And in turning to the central teachings attributed to Jesus in the synoptic gospels, this paper will begin by clearly showing that there is *formal structure* that is intrinsic to all of Jesus' most well-known parables and aphorisms. And by way of this re-construction of the stable pattern that underpins the narrative structure of Jesus' most recognizable parables (here we will examine just

three: the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the Friend at Midnight), it will be argued that Jesus' consistently employed a teaching strategy of *paradoxical reversals* that enabled him to re-define the rules and contours of the existing social order. And then it will be argued that the paradoxical core of Jesus' provocative teachings effect a kind of strategic intervention that is virtually synonymous with the irreducible shift in perspectives or "gap" between opposing views that has been unpacked in extensive detail in Žižek's recently published magnum opus *The Parallax View* (2006).

By turning to Žižek's most recent work, it is first of all necessary to describe precisely what he means by the parallax view. For Žižek, the parallax gap involves a constant shift in perspective between two points in which no synthesis or mediation is possible.³ In contrast to the popular New Age yearning to find a "balance" between binary opposites such as masculine and feminine (sex) or liberal and conservative (politics), Žižek affirms the inherent "tension" or irreducible "gap" brought about by a shift in perspective between two points, and thereby maintains that there is a kind of *minimal difference* which divides one and the same object from itself. As such, Žižek gives the standard definition of parallax as "the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight."⁴ In attempting to bring to our attention the subversive core of a properly dialectical materialism, the parallax view is not about a difference between two positively existing objects, rather we must replace the topic of the polarity of opposites (as two sides of the same coin) with the concept of the inherent "tension" between two perspectives and the minimal gap between an element and itself.⁵ Žižek therefore speaks of this parallax gap as a pure difference which cannot be grounded in positive substantial properties, as the "the non-coincidence of the One with itself" and discusses topics such as Heidegger's ontological difference, cognitive brain science and the political theory in terms of this irreducible antagonism that is effected by a shift in perspective or a minimal reflexive twist that cannot be mediated by any dialectical synthesis.⁶

While parallax simply designates the gap that separates the One from itself (2006, p.7), it is here that one can see that the status of the 'impossible Real' for Žižek is also parallaxic as well while seeing the precise sense in which his parallax theory differs from the standard Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of the Real. As the non-substantial gap between two points of view, the parallax view of the Real is opposed to the hard core of the Lacanian Real - the "impossible to say" that always remains the Same in all possible (symbolic) universes.⁷ The parallax Real, then, is not the hard kernel around which all our symbolic formations circulate, but rather "the hard bone of contention that pulverizes the sameness and accounts for the multiplicity of appearances."⁸ For Žižek, then, the parallax Real is the rock of antagonism or the disavowed X on account of which our view of reality is always and already distorted through a partial perspective, a strictly non-existent X which can only be reconstructed retroactively from a multitude of asymmetrical points of view.⁹

By reaching beneath the tired old dualisms of the Western philosophical tradition (nature vs.

nurture, mind vs. body) into the minimal difference or gap between two perspectives, whereby the Real for Žižek is the truth of perspectival distortion *as such* or the antagonism which ruptures our commonplace demand for direct access to an objective reality, we can now begin to set up this short circuit between Žižek's parallax theory and the radical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, for both of these radical approaches truth and meaning disrupt any pre-given horizon of expectation with the pure difference of a parallax gap by maintaining an irreducible tension between different points of view.

From the outset, it is agreed by virtually all New Testament scholars that the parables of Jesus opened a window onto a new world that he called the Kingdom of God.¹⁰ And moreover, in his pronouncements on the advent of God's kingdom, for Jesus the meaning of human life had been radically revised as our everyday expectations are turned on their head in order to bring about an altogether new figure of Reality in which our conventional sensibilities are offended and our all too human attempts to sit on the throne of the divine are regularly frustrated. As both a challenge and invitation, the parabolic structure of Jesus' teachings to be investigated here therefore reflects a transformed way of seeing the world that put into question our unexamined assumptions with a new way of seeing that corresponds remarkably well with the basic impulse of Žižek's extensive work in overturning many of commonly accepted beliefs with an unexpected reversal that shatters the co-ordinates of the existing order of things.

Before turning to the parables of Jesus themselves, we will briefly summarize the key insights of some of the more prominent parable scholars in modern times. Since the 1960s, modern parable scholarship has formed a reliable consensus in concluding that Jesus' parables had a profound and life-changing effect on his audiences. According to E. Linnemann, to utter a parable in certain situations is to "risk all on the power of language."¹¹ To further this claim, TeSelle asserted that the parables caused his hearers to "lose control" over their lives as "the story of their own lives has been torn apart" in the provocative encounter with the language of Jesus.¹² Other modern interpreters have spoken of parables as "revelatory and world-shattering",¹³ with the capacity to break open established thought forms by either saying the impossible, or turning the world upside-down.¹⁴ In causing the hearer to "re-examine the very grounds of his being, by a challenge that is effective at the very deepest grounds of existential reality"¹⁵ a parable may also be experienced by its hearers as a "calamity - as a disaster for their sense of self-worth and place in the moral order of things."¹⁶ And according to V.G. Shillington, the parables of Jesus are invested with "a sort of provocative power"¹⁷ so much so that the parables figure as evidence in the mystery of what ultimately provoked Jesus' execution.¹⁸

Moreover, there is also an emerging agreement amongst New Testament and historical Jesus scholars that the original power and revolutionary force of Jesus language has been lost and reduced to a series of moral or allegorical lessons¹⁹ in the historical development of the Christian Church. As numerous scholars including Jeremias, Via, Crossan, Ricoeur, Perrin, and Funk now attest, Jesus' parables neither provide a moral code or a clear-cut 'message', nor do they offer us a

pre-given Answer that sets in stone the objective meaning of our existence. Instead, as a harbinger of the Kingdom the parables of Jesus “tease the mind into ever-new perceptions of reality; they startle the imagination”²⁰ and function like symbols in that they “raise the potential for new meaning”²¹ and invite their hearer into a “new possibility of world and language”²², while simultaneously revealing to us his own experience of God.²³

While embracing the main currents of recent parable scholarship, the following section of this paper will briefly establish a new perspective on the historical Jesus by way of a simple structural analysis of just three of his most well known parables. By briefly unpacking how the “paradoxical structure”²⁴ within Jesus’ short literary narratives subverts, shatters, surprises and disorients their hearers²⁵ with an alternative view of reality, the aim here, then, will be to offer a formal indication of the consistent strategy at work in Jesus’ radical teachings and demonstrate how these radical teachings correspond most fruitfully with Žižek’s writings on the parallax gap and the principle of non-mediation. And from here, we will then turn to Žižek’s recent work on the revolutionary core of Christianity as a religion of the God-forsaken god, by demonstrating that Jesus’ own experience of the Kingdom of God is disclosed to us in terms a parallax shift between irreducible perspectives that shatters the pre-given assumptions of the existing social order and thereby opens up the radical experience of a certain unheard-of dimension²⁶ and an altogether new horizon of thought and action.

1. The Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32

In probably Jesus’ most memorable parable, with the prodigal son gathering his inheritance, what is at first expected to be a life of unmerited favor and luxury quickly becomes a life of destitution and poverty. Then, the prodigal son’s expectations of a life of poverty and servitude on his return home, is really an event that brings about the unmerited favor and luxury of the father’s compassion with a joyful celebration that symbolizes God’s unconditional love. Here we have an initial example of Jesus’ unexpected reversals of meaning.

In the same way, just as a life of shameful rebellion with the prodigal son is suddenly transformed into a honorable celebration homecoming with the unconditional favor of the father’s feast, what appears to be a life of unconditional favor with the dutiful son - who always lived in honor and obedience to his father, is really the root cause of his shameful rebellion and his corrupt refusal to share in the homecoming celebrations of the father’s feast.

Or more simply, while the prodigal son appears to be on the outside in self-imposed exile, he is really on the inside in homecoming, while the dutiful son appears to be on the inside in loyalty to his father’s home, he is really on the outside in self-imposed exile. And more succinctly: *those that appear to be shameful outsiders are really honorable insiders, while those that appear to be honorable insiders are really shameful outsiders...*

2. The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37

We can see the same linguistic structure here, for the Jewish priest and Levite, who appear to be agents of holiness and divine favor, are really objects of religious scorn and derision in passing by a beaten traveler lying in a ditch, just as the Samaritan – an outcast in 1st century Palestine, who at first appears to be an object of socio-religious scorn and derision is really the agent of holiness and divine favor in tending to the needs of the beaten man.

Or again, what initially appears to be a privileged Jew traveling along the road to Jerico, is really a victimized outcast dying in a ditch - an untouchable in the eyes of his fellow Jews, while what appears to be an untouchable - a victimized Samaritan outcast, is really the privileged agent of healing and a fore-most example of neighborly love. Or again, *those that appear to be upright are really degenerate, while those that appear to be degenerate are really upright.*

3. The Workers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16

With the laborers who spent all day working in the vineyard, their expectations of privileged status and extra pay from the landowner are revealed to be the root of their sense of injustice and their lack of gratitude. And at the same time, the apparent unworthiness of those who stood around all day - and the seeming injustice of their receiving equal pay for less work, is really the context within which God's unexpected and unconditional favor is revealed.

Or again, righteousness of those who labored all day in the vineyard for the same pay as those who started last, is really the context within which they are reprimanded for being jealous and ungrateful in the face a seeming injustice, the apparently unfair judgment of the landowner in his allocation of equal pay to those who worked least, is really a sign of the unmerited graciousness of God. So again, *the first will be last, and the last will be first.*

The Structure of the Real

It has been demonstrated above that the same paradoxical structure or what is also called a stable pattern of "bi-polar reversals" is clearly evidenced in Jesus' most well known parables. And while only three of Jesus' parables are examined here, it has been shown elsewhere that almost all of the parables of Jesus (30 out of 34) display precisely the same dynamic pattern of paradoxical reversals within their narrative structure.²⁷

Having briefly seen how this linguistic strategy of bi-polar reversals aims to subvert ones assumed horizons of meaning with a disorienting shift in perspective between two points, we can go on to propose the formal structure of Jesus' most memorable teachings that can make historical

sense out of the most distinctive features of his own message on the advent of the Kingdom: *what appears to be X is really Y, and what appears to be Y is really X.*

So where the existing social order tends to regulate collective conduct via a series binary oppositions such as neighbour/stranger or honour/shame as a one to one correlation between a signifier and its signified, there is a unexpected shift in perspective in Jesus' parabolic language that effects a shocking reversal of the given order of Being by employing paradoxical reversals and poetic displacements that cuts across the distinction between orthodox and heretic, saved and lost, insiders and outsiders.²⁸

As John Dominic Crossan writes in *The Dark Interval* (1975)²⁹, the authentic parables of Jesus are enigmatic, disturbing, and unnerving, as they radically undercut and de-legitimize the agreed upon myths of the commonly accepted world, thereby provoking us to think the impossible - the degenerate Samaritan is righteous, while the upright Jewish leaders are degenerate; the homecoming of a rebellious son is honored, whereas the dutiful son is found outside in rebellion. In the paradoxical teachings of the historical Jesus everything is turned upside down and inside out in an unrelenting attack on the very structure of ordinary human language and with a flagrant disregard for what is rational normalcy that Jack Caputo (2006) has recently likened to a "sacred anarchy".³⁰

Robert Funk, the President and co-founder of the 'Jesus Seminar', also confirms this insight into the dangerous memory of this 1st century Jewish sage when describes the contemporary reconstruction of Jesus that has emerged from his own scholarly investigations,

It is becoming clear that Jesus infringed the symbol system of his religious tradition so that he modified the fundamental structure of the correlative semantic code. The system of oppositions on which every linguistic code depends ... is a kind of screen or grid through which one sees the world. As a modification of the semantic code, the parable and the aphorism became an event of language: a new tradition, a new code, with new polarities - and thus a *fresh sense of the real*, emerged.³¹

Following on from the work of some of the more influential historical Jesus scholars such as Crossan and Funk, it is now possible to re-construct the earliest beginnings of the Christ-event in terms of this "fresh sense of the real" in the parabolic language of Jesus, and thereby re-activate the dangerous memory of Jesus, prior to his mythic inscription in the Christian tradition proper. And by unpacking the radical Christian dawn in terms of a "paradoxical reversal" that interrupts the semantic code of the existing order with an alternative vision of God's kingdom, we can now go on to establish the uncanny short-circuit between the scandal of the Christ-event and the central thesis of Žižek's latest work *The Parallax View* (2006).

Firstly, it has here been established that the most general feature of Jesus' core teachings is the paradoxical structure of bi-polar reversals outlined above that holds the tension between two

contradictory perspectives and renounces all attempts to collapse this minimal difference in a definite way by either reducing one aspect to the other or enacting a “higher” synthesis of opposites. So while the meaning of each binary term in narrative structure of Jesus' parables reverses into its opposite when brought to its extreme or limit-state, the key message of these teachings is “the irreducibly antinomic character of our experience of reality”³² in which there is no way to resolve the co-existence of these opposing tensions, no way to find a “proper” solution between them that provides us with direct access to the mystery of God's kingdom.

And just as it is structurally impossible to fix in place the irreducible tensions of Jesus' parables within any pre-existing horizon of binary oppositions, we can also recall that the “parallax view” for Žižek also names the inherent tension, gap, or non-coincidence of the One with itself.³³ As the irreducible antagonism around which the shift between two perspectives circulates,³⁴ Žižek maintains that there is a pure difference or gap at in the Real that cannot be grounded in positive substantial properties and refuses our demands for objective certainty.³⁵

So where for Žižek the Real of the parallax view can only be perceived in the shift from one vantage point to another, in the same way the parables of Jesus also give witness to the irreducible tension of the Real, in that they refuse to cover over the inherent gap between opposing view points (dutiful/rebellious, upright/degenerate), whereby these paradoxical shifts in perspective are not so much the obstacle that precludes our access to the Real, but an apprehension of the Real itself.³⁶

Therefore, the paradoxical structure of Jesus' explosive parables, in completely shattering the commonplace assumptions in the social landscape of 1st century Palestine, are virtually synonymous with Žižek's parallax view of the Real as the rock of antagonism, where the disavowed X that eludes our grasp and on account of which our vision of reality is disfigured³⁷ corresponds to the “stumbling-block” of Christian faith, which finds its earliest expression in the unexpected shift between contradictory perspectives in the parables of Jesus that consistently put into question the binary co-ordinates of the existing social order. These strategic shifts in perspective are further confirmed by Dominic Crossan who in commenting on the parable of the Good Samaritan argued that the person struggling to come to terms with the cognitive dissonance that is engendered by Jesus' paradoxical reversal of Good/Samaritan and Bad/Jew is simultaneously experiencing in and through this “hard bone of contention”³⁸ the advent of God's kingdom.³⁹

As Crossan further describes this uncanny resemblance between Žižek's core thesis of the parallax gap and the linguistic structure of Jesus' parables,

The literal point confronted the hearers with the necessity of saying the impossible and having their world turned upside down and radically questioned in its presuppositions. The metaphorical point is that ‘just so’ does the Kingdom of God break abruptly into human consciousness and demand the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgments, and established conclusions.⁴⁰

The paradoxical teachings of Jesus are therefore a radical form of strategic intervention that exposes the precariousness of our conceptual formations and disturbs the balance of the existing order of Being. And given that this shift between opposing perspectives is irreducible, and that there is no way to resolve the tension of opposites, there is a parallax shift in the voiceprint of the historical Jesus, where people can enter the Kingdom only if they don't expect to – only if they are lost, destitute and powerless, while those whose are saved in their claim to privileged access to God are more than likely to be lost in the wilderness. With this critical short-circuit between the subversive strategy of Jesus parabolic vision and what Žižek's calls the Real of antagonism, we find ourselves with a kind of “sacred irreverence” on account of which every fixed horizon of meaning is displaced, destabilized and disrupted by a parallax shift, for over and again in the key parables that were remembered, recorded and handed down to us the central message of God's kingdom is: the more saved you are (e.g. the upright, dutiful sons, invited guests), the more you can be lost, and the more lost you are (Samaritan outcasts, rebellious sons, uninvited guests), the more you can be saved.⁴¹

In essential conformity with the thrust of Žižek's most recent work, then, the paradoxical center of Jesus' parables keep the inherent gap in the Real open by refusing to pin down any fixed center of objective meaning and by consistently enacting a structural shift in perspective that interrupts ones normal horizon of expectation. In this way, Jesus paradoxes can be skillfully employed to outstrip any of those historically contingent constructions of truth and meaning that only foreclose on the advent of the Kingdom by instituting value-hierarchies and rigid inside/outside boundaries as a function of power, politics, religious prejudice, and so on. As such, the historical Jesus unpacked here is more of an anti-philosopher than a wisdom teacher, a kind of metaphysical pervert who robs us of all the protections and privileges, entitlements and ethnicities that are grounded on the “myth of the given” or constituted by any pre-existing order of Being. As the leader of the World Community for Christian Meditation, Father Laurence Freeman concurs, touching on how the parallax gap that constitutes Christian identity crosses lines that are normally considered taboo and is structurally open to the surprise new,

When Christians draw lines between themselves and others, Jesus remains a relentless and scandalous crosser of these lines. He quietly slips to the other side. Whenever an attempt to imprison him is made he disappears from sight and appears elsewhere. Thus is lived out the paradoxical nature of Christian identity. A Christian is simultaneously a member of a community and an outsider. It is as if Jesus still prefers to be with the outcast, however wrong their beliefs or behaviour, rather than with those who are self-righteously sure that only they are right.⁴²

In further drawing out this uncanny convergence between the radical core of Jesus' paradoxes and Žižek's parallax view of the Real as an irreducible antagonism, the difference between binary pairs such as the upright/degenerate or inside/outside is said not to be the difference of two opposed

poles but, the inherent cut or irreducible gap that cannot be covered over or contained in an unambiguous fashion and which discloses the creative tension of the Real at the innermost core of our subjectivity.⁴³

By introducing a sacred disturbance into the established order that cheerfully dissents from the habitual tendency to allow binary distinctions to settle firmly into place, the minimal difference in the paradoxical shifts outlined here can be called upon to transgress the limits of what is merely possible or reasonable, as it opens the space for the sudden emergence of an altogether new horizon of possibilities. For Žižek's parallax gap and the irreducible tensions of Jesus' paradoxes both bring forth and enact a radically empty horizon without any claims to pure objective meaning, and as such a horizon that can never ultimately be programmed, predicted or closed off once and for all.

With a strategic intervention that shakes the foundations of our institutional structures and beliefs systems, the internal discord of the paradoxical view set out here provides us with no objective order of truth and meaning but instead keeps the question open and "expects the unexpected" in a structural open-ness to an unforeseeable event, for as Jesus promises/threatens, the Kingdom will come like a thief in the night, and almost always from the place that we *least* expect. As such, these paradoxical shifts and turns that intensify the passion of faith with an irreducible gap that refuses to be mediated in dialectical synthesis, also shares with Derrida's deconstruction what Caputo calls religions "passion for the impossible"⁴⁴ a passion that is marked by the tolerance of ambiguity, and the prophetic desire to contradict the world, and which finds one of its most definitive contemporary expressions in the common thread that runs between Žižek's mind-bending paradoxes and the unexpected reversals of meaning in the radical core of Jesus' original teachings.

Therefore, in discovering the revolutionary power of Jesus' parabolic language-events with a formal structure that has been largely buried beneath the ossified institutional dogma that was erected in the historical unfolding of the Christian Church, we can conclude that the radical paradoxes disclosed here can create new thought and re-configure out-dated forms of religious life by re-activating the dangerous memory of this 1st century Jewish sage and re-capture the authenticity of the gospel message with a language that has been almost completely lost in the historical development of Christianity.⁴⁵

The Parallax View and Orthodox Christology

Nevertheless, while this re-construction of Jesus' authentic teachings may initially seem to isolate the founder of Christianity from the fallible and all too human system of myths and moral codes that was founded in his name, it is also worth pointing to evidence for some direct continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, particularly in one of the most authoritative and time-

honored statements ever forged by the institutional Church in constituting its doctrinal response to Jesus' time-honored question: "Who do you say that I am?"⁴⁶

In the face of a wide range of competing and conflicting schools in the early Church that had differing views on the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth, the founding statement of orthodox Christology was forged doctrinally in the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) which reflected on the central question of the Christian faith and went on to describe the irreducible tension of 'true man and true God' in the one person:

... one and the same Christ in two natures un-confusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; nowhere is the difference of natures annulled because of the union, but on the contrary the property of each of the two natures is preserved; each nature coming together into one person and one actual being, not divided nor separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God-Logos.⁴⁷

As the most authoritative statement on the person of Jesus in the early development of the Christian faith tradition, this classical formulation of the orthodox Christology also maintains the Absolute paradox (Kierkegaard) that sits at the heart of Jesus' own parabolic narratives. The co-existence of opposites with the irreducible tension between them is seen here in terms of the creative tension of 100% humanity and 100% divinity in one and the same Jesus. The distinctive mark of the Chalcedon confession, then, is the meticulous and painstaking way in which the creed maintains the distinction between the two natures – and the equally meticulous and painstaking way in which it maintains their inseparable union in one person of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

Echoing Žižek's parallax theory, the structural feature of orthodox Christology is the stubbornly and deliberately paradoxical nature of this statement and its refusal to come down on either side of the question of 'who' Jesus is and resolve the truth of Christian identity into a metaphysical center with a fixed and definite meaning. As Žižek writes in relation to the parallax view, we should renounce all attempts to reduce one aspect to the other or enact a dialectical synthesis of opposites. Rather we should assert the antinomy, here between the humanity and divinity of Jesus, as irreducible and conceive of the Real of the Christ-event as the irreducible gap between the positions itself.⁴⁹ In this way, Žižek's parallax view corresponds almost perfectly with the doctrinal foundations of the Christian tradition, both of which maintain an irreducible shift between perspectives without dialectical mediation (as in the Chalcedon confession). And furthermore, there are also grounds for continuity here between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith – which is the definitive disjunction in contemporary New Testament scholarship – for this same Christological paradox can also be seen in the linguistic structure of Jesus' most memorable parables, which also refuse to collapse the paradoxical tension between opposing perspectives into the fallacy of conceptual presence.⁵⁰

By living with the structural ambiguity of the parallax view, both Žižek and Christ point directly to an unseeable X around which these shifts in perspective circulate. There is, in this view,

no way to resolve the tension, to find a “proper” solution, for from a Christian perspective paradox is not a problem of solve but a Mystery to lived with, as Crossan states that “the big difference, it seems to me, is whether you have a goal with no center without being scared.”⁵¹

For the very starting point of Christology is that Jesus is God and a man, no argument is given, not even an attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction, just a direct witness to the irreducible paradox of the Incarnation: Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine.⁵² And from this non-foundational origin, the structural similarities with Žižek's core thesis are remarkable, for the enigmatic utterances of the historical Jesus and the founding gesture of orthodox Christology both disclose the truth of the Christ-event *not* in terms of the ‘direct’ view of an objective reality, but as the irreducible shift between perspectives which is caused by the Real of antagonism, as the directly un-seeable gap around which our discursive formations are constituted. With Žižek's philosophical penchant for inducing a certain degree of cognitive dissonance⁵³, the parallax gap makes two perspectives radically incommensurable in the same way that the unexpected reversals of meaning in Jesus' alternative vision of reality provide the “hard bone of contention”⁵⁴ that interrupts the normal operating procedures of the world – as “a disavowed X”⁵⁵ on account of which our conventional assumptions about reality are shattered and overturned.

The Atheistic Core of Christianity

Having briefly introduced this critical correspondence between Žižek's parallax view and the contemporary re-construction of the parables of historical Jesus, this paradoxical short-circuit reaches its highest pitch in the diabolical founding gesture of Christianity – the Crucifixion.⁵⁶ As Žižek argues, the parallax gap is witnessed here in the scandal of the crucified God, in which the perverse core of Christianity is disclosed in terms of the religion of the god-forsaken God. For with a characteristic reversal of expectation, the call of Jesus' to follow him on the way of paradox all the way to the Cross entails - not the fictional aspiration of a divine peace beyond the pull of competing forces, but the *impossibility* of detaching oneself from creaturely imperfection and vulnerability, where the Resurrection event is released in the sheer absence of all refuge from suffering. In this sense the Resurrection is effected in the irreducible gap that separates God from God's self, for when the pain of the dying and god-forsaken Jesus (i.e. the unconscious “shadow” of Christian theology) is neither avoided or compensated but directly confronted and accepted, then the transformation into new life can come upon us - and not in eternity, but right here and now, in the very instant of existence.⁵⁷

As Žižek explains the irreducible Christian paradox, in which the love of God shows up in the heart of our wounded humanity, with Christ crucified “the gap that separates God from man... is transposed into God himself... the properly dialectical trick here is that the very feature which appeared to separate me from God turns out to unite me with God.”⁵⁸ And just as the Kingdom

taught and practiced by Jesus arrives as an event that de-stabilizes the co-ordinates of the established order, Žižek also designates the radical core of the Christ-event as this gap in the Real that cuts across any foundational duality. For when we directly confront the scandal of the god-forsaken Jesus and 'fess up' to the pain of our own vulnerability and powerlessness without any attempt to cover over the traumatic/excess at the heart of the Real with the dialectical mediation of a metaphysical power play, the love of God can slip through the cracks to transform and bring new life to the commonly accepted order of things. And so, in the irreducible antagonism of the parallax gap, it is precisely where there is no refuge from the pain of irreparable loss that there is simultaneously nothing that can separate us from the un-containable excess of love that is the gift of Christ to the world.

In continuing the theme of this paper, in Žižek's approach to the Christian gospels, the love of God in Christ shows up in the very thing that we least want to confront – precisely at the instant where the suffering and dying Jesus is exposed to be an atheist, i.e. forsaken by God. And so at the heart of the Christ-event is the death of the God of classical theism, where the inconsistency of the One with itself deconstructs our messianic hopes and expectations and radically undercuts all privileged religious and hermeneutical horizons of truth and meaning.

And furthermore, with this irreducible shift between perspectives that joins together both the strategic interventions of Žižek and the paradoxical heart of Christianity, just as we cannot disambiguate the humanity and the divinity of Christ, neither can we divide the crucifixion and resurrection, for they are one and the same gesture and as such have to be held together in the dialectical tensions of faith. As the most extreme embodiment of the paradoxical structure of Jesus' own teachings, the risen Christ is not at odds with the wounded and dying Jesus, for just as our messianic expectations are shot to pieces at Golgotha, this shocking reversal is again overturned as a dead man comes back to life as the risen Christ. And so in accordance with the irreducible shift in perspectives in Žižek's parallax view, the crucifixion is shot through with resurrection, just as the resurrection is shot through with crucifixion, where each side questions the other and each side contains the seed of its opposite.

The basic point here then is that both the orthodox Christology of the Chalcedon confession (which re-captures the dangerous memory of Jesus' parabolic sayings) and Žižek's recent work on the parallax gap assert that the shift between any two opposing perspectives is irreducible, and that there is no way to resolve the tension with the demand for objective certainty. And by digging back into the early Christian dawn and re-constructing the radical teachings of Jesus on account of which every "given" order of Being is always already displaced, we can see anew the enigmatic sage from Nazareth, a social deviant, a provocateur, an open-eyed mystic and itinerant prophet who found himself at home eating and drinking in the company of rebels. As Robert Funk, the co-founder of the Jesus Seminar also contends, the authentic teachings of Jesus "all but obliterate the boundaries separating the sacred from the secular. He can teach us something that has nothing to do with what we know as Christianity or, indeed, with organized religion as such."⁵⁹ And in view of

this insight into what Caputo calls the “sacred anarchy” of the Kingdom, the Jesus of whom we catch glimpses of in the gospels may be said to have been *irreligious, irreverent, and impious*, as he spoke of the Kingdom of God in profane and even heretical terms that continually frustrate our conventional messianic hopes and expectations.⁶⁰

With the advent of a Kingdom that is freely given only to the undeserving and immediately revoked from those who claim to merit its possession, and where Jesus’ invitation to a free gift of Love will cost you precisely everything, and where the one that is lost is greater than the ninety-nine who are saved, the truly subversive, the revolutionary character of orthodox Christianity is precisely what the comfortable Western Church might be most in need of recovering.⁶¹ And just as the explosive nature of the Christian Gospel calls forth an alternative or counter-cultural way of life to the standard operating procedures of the world, a conclusion which is paralleled by Žižek who maintains that, “precisely what I find horrible in these new forms of spirituality is that we are simply losing our sense for these kinds of paradoxes, which are the very core of Christianity.”⁶²

So where the paradoxical nature of Christian identity is a baffling enigma that falsifies our onto-theological demand for direct access to reality, the characteristic thrust of Žižek’s thought also works within the binary opposites that constitute our thought-constructions (tolerance/fundamentalism, theism/atheism, authoritarian right/radical left), as he consistently employs unexpected reversals of meaning and a continual shift of perspectives that lends itself to a process of de-stabilizing the unexamined assumptions that underpin the commonly accepted world.

And just as the earliest memory of Jesus’ own teachings indicates that the irreducible shift in perspective brought about by his paradoxical reversals is precisely what ushers in an awakening to the Kingdom of God, as Žižek himself declares, the contemporary role of the philosopher is not to give clear objective answers about what we are to do today, but to simply facilitate this shift in perspective, to see things in a new way, to bring together things which seem to contradict each other, and tear apart things that seem to be one and the same.⁶³)

Christianity and Revolutionary Politics

From the point of view of the parallax view, the figure of Jesus shows up as a disruptive force that antagonizes the apparent security and certainty of our established institutional beliefs and practices, and as such his enactment of God’s kingdom can be put to work in order to generate new sites of active political resistance, which is also one of the overriding themes of Žižek’s provocative writings.

When the figure of Jesus appears on the scene, his scandalous words and deeds threaten to change the co-ordinates of the world as it is by effecting a strategic disturbance within the order

of Being in which all stable and universal features of the existing order are undermined.⁶⁴ With what Dominic Crossan calls a “Raid on the Articulate”⁶⁵ this subversive strategy of Jesus and the refusal to identify with the present order is for Žižek a vital precursor to any attempt at revolutionary change. And as possibly the only true remaining source of active resistance to the established powers that be, the radical subversion of “what is” (i.e. the metaphysics of presence) enacted by Jesus of Nazareth conforms well to Žižek’s parallax theory, for the eruption of the Christ-event is not a certain position that opposes another position, but an event that opens a new space for an alternative form of life by maintaining the irreducible gap between the binary oppositions itself and rendering the old hierarchies of power and domination obsolete.⁶⁶

And while disclosing the revolutionary potential of Jesus’ paradoxical teachings, as Žižek argues in his recent writings on the subversive core of Christianity, the unspoken lesson to be arrived at regarding the figure of Jesus on the Cross is that God is revealed to us in his absence and powerlessness, i.e. there is nothing there for us to guarantee the consistency and stability of ultimate meaning (i.e. the “myth of the given” and the God of metaphysical absolutes is dead).⁶⁷

With unexpected reversals that throw the established wisdom of the world into holy confusion, not only does Žižek consistently dissent from the rigorous and un-bending adherence to the order of pure objectivity, Jesus’ paradoxical language also undermines our belief in a pre-established dogma that decides the objective meaning of our deeds.⁶⁸ Furthermore, in refusing the “myth of the given” (i.e. the history of Being from Plato to Nietzsche), the parallax teachings of Jesus deprive us of support in what Žižek calls (following Lacan) the Big Other – as they consistently interrupt the socio-linguistic or symbolic network that guarantees fixed meanings by having a signifier correspond with its signified in a one to one fashion.⁶⁹

By cultivating the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and live with uncertainty in a way that interrupts the calculative rationalizations of the Western logos that only want to fix the rules of the social system and program the laws of meaningful symbolic exchange, we witness in the Christ-event the human face of God in the midst of an irreducible tension, where the absolute contradiction of God on a cross that finds its earliest expression in the narrative structure at the core of Jesus’ most well-known teachings. As a discourse that breaks radically from all previous forms of onto-theology and refuses to give clear rational answers to questions of ultimate meaning, the intrinsic shift between opposing viewpoints in the language-events of Jesus instead generates the un-decidability and ambiguity that sets up the conditions of possibility for the real movements of Christian faith.⁷⁰

By siding with the weak and vulnerable and dissenting from the structures of power and privilege that constitute the established order of Being, with the “Logos made flesh” in Jesus, the astonishing reversal of expectation here is that the ultimate meaning of our lives appears as a kind of fleeting, elusive and transient nonsense. The Real of the Christ-event is therefore a weird intrusion into our ordinary everyday lives that resists full inscription into its binary oppositions that constitute the social fabric, and by setting up this short-circuit between Žižek and the historical

Jesus it also seems possible to open a new space for forms of active political resistance that can subvert the established order.

This cross pollination of Jesus and post-secular thought also explains Žižek's interest in Christianity in the first place, for the dangerous memory of Jesus constitutes a radical political act, or as Žižek writes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, “an impossible gesture of pure expenditure [that] can change the very co-ordinates of what is strategically possible within a historical constellation.”⁷¹ In a move that suspends the (apparently) hard contours of reality, for Žižek the most radical core of a human being is a concrete practical-ethical engagement or choice which has no pre-given objective assurances, an act that brings into being a (hitherto) Impossible Real: an “excessive” trans-strategic intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing structures of power and privilege.

By clinging tenaciously to two contradictory ideas at the same time, and refusing to collapse the tension between these opposing poles, Jesus' paradoxical teachings can be so structured as to be appropriate currency for the discourse on ultimate truth, and particularly the revelation of the Kingdom that they were originally intended to express, while also corresponding with the political dimension of Žižek's thought by facilitating the creation of a alternative space outside the parameters of what appears to be 'possible' in the existing social world.⁷²

As a 'utopian' gesture that changes the co-ordinates of the possible, the way of paradox in the authentic voice-print of the historical Jesus and the antagonistic gap of the Real Žižek's parallax view, both de-stabilize any attempt to divide the world into good vs. evil. And with this radical subversion of the existing order that resists full inscription into its binary oppositions that constitute the social fabric, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams also concurs, for with the advent of the Kingdom of God, “no Christian believer has in his or her possession some kind of map of where exactly the boundaries of that place are to be fixed, or a key to lock others out or in.”⁷³

This paradoxical core of Christianity and Žižek's irreducible shift in perspectives can also be applied to the current geo-political quagmire of the US occupation of Iraq. For when there is no way of telling for certain a free and democratic nation from an emerging tyranny - either here in the increasingly proto-fascist West or over there in the Middle East, and when there is no way of telling an illegal bombing from a legally sanctioned war, a brutal dictator from bad intelligence, or an Islamic extremist from a one-eyed Western imperialist; when there is no way of telling a democratically elected leader from a religious fear-monger, a nation of civilized people from a collection of fearful and desperate barbarians; when we can no longer honestly tell the difference between any of these opposing tensions, then we are in a fruitful space for the coming of the Kingdom. For in accordance with the parables of Jesus, when all clear-cut boundaries between the Good and Evil collapse, we are ripe for the advent of Kingdom, where we are called to live with an intricate shift in perspective between our favorite two-somes, where each side questions the other, and where each side secretly contains the seed of its opposite. And precisely where those

who see the world in “black vs. white” terms are the root cause of so much of the religiously fueled violence, is isn’t it true that we all continually show both sides – the religious believer and the secular atheist, the saint and the sinner, the sacred and the obscene - and are we not in continual unrest because the one side of us is continually disturbing the other and because we can only hold the ambiguity between the two and never collapse this creative tension by coming down in favor of either side once and for all?⁷⁴

By wrapping up the seed of Christian dogma in the dangerous memory of Jesus’ of mind-bending paradoxes, this paper has shown an unexpected convergence between Žižek’s parallax view and the radical teachings of Jesus’ hidden away within the earliest sub-stratum of Christianity. And in re-activating the revelatory shock of revolutionary paradox within the unforgettable narratives of the historical Jesus, with astonishing stories that scramble the wires of the our most time-honored beliefs and practices, the Kingdom of God is here disclosed as an event that shatters the co-ordinates of the existing social order, where nothing ever happens quite the way we think it will... and so all we can do is expect the unexpected and awaken to the thunderous silence of the midnight sun.

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Endnotes:

¹ Žižek 2003, p.5-6

² This quest was popularized in the 1990s by John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk and a controversial group of North American scholars known as The Jesus Seminar. See Funk, R. and Hoover, R. (1993) *The Five Gospels: the search for the authentic words of Jesus* : new translation and commentary. New York, Polebridge Press, Macmillan Publishing Company.

³ Žižek 2007, p.7

⁴ Žižek 2007, p.17

⁵ Žižek 2007, p.7

⁶ Žižek 2007, p.17-18

⁷ Žižek 2007, p.26

⁸ Žižek 2007, p.26

⁹ Žižek 2007, p.26

¹⁰ Perrin 1976, p.39 the following statement of Perrin is illustrative of the consensus: “The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt and today no scholar does, in fact, doubt it. Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it.” (cited in Crossan 1973, p.23)

¹¹ Linnemann 1966, p. 32

¹² TeSelle 1975, p. 78-79

¹³ De Boer 1988, p.231

¹⁴ Crossan 1971-72, p.294

¹⁵ Perrin & Duling 1982, p. 417

¹⁶ Borsch 1988, p. 14

¹⁷ Shillington 1997, p.18-19

¹⁸ Shillington 1997, p.21-22

¹⁹ As Perrin states in his work *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, “the parables are allegorized and moralized in the Christian traditions to a point at which one can live with them and draw helpful lessons from them.” Perrin 1976, p.201

²⁰ Perrin 1976, p.106

²¹ Funk 1966, p.137

²² Crossan in Perrin 1976, p.168

²³ Perrin 1976, p.159

²⁴ For the purposes of this study, then, paradox can be defined as an apparently contradictory statement that in fact is well founded; or a seemingly absurd proposition that can be accepted as truthful. Websters’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged, Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986

²⁵ Crossan, “The Good Samaritan: Towards a Generic Definition of Parable”, *Semina* 2 (1974) 82-107, esp. 98, 105

²⁶ Žižek 2003, p.6

²⁷ See the author’s doctoral dissertation - *The Structure of the Real: Paradox, Post-Metaphysics and the Teachings of Jesus*, Flinders University Press 2006

²⁸ See Caputo 2006, Ch.5 - At the time of writing this essay, a pre-publication draft of the above mentioned text was generously provided by John D. Caputo, and since this pre-publication copy had no page numbers in its draft form, there are no page numbers given in the references to this work in this present study.

²⁹ See Crossan, J. D. (1975). “The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story”, Allen, TX: Argus Communications.

³⁰ For more discussion see Caputo’s recent work “The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event”, Indiana Press, especially part II

³¹ Funk 1982, p. ix (italics added)

³² Žižek 2006, p.20

³³ Žižek 2006, p.7

³⁴ Žižek 2006, p.20

³⁵ Žižek 2006, p.19

³⁶ Žižek 2006, p.26

³⁷ Žižek 2006, p.26

³⁸ Žižek 2006, p.26

³⁹ Crossan 1973, p.53

⁴⁰ Crossan 1973, p.65

⁴¹ Caputo 2006, Ch.5 - also see Luise Schottroff in *The Parables of Jesus* (2006) who also argues that we need to develop a “non-dualistic” parable theory that critiques the following hermeneutical assumptions: 1) the ideology of Christian superiority over other religions, 2) dualisms in various areas of theology, 3) dualistic assumptions that underlie Christian notions of guilt and sin, and 4) the orientation towards a Christian “duty” to maintain the social status quo and its structures of power

⁴² Freeman 2000, p.149

⁴³ Žižek 2006, p.38

⁴⁴ Caputo in Ward, Ed. 2001, p.471 - to be precise, as Caputo maintains - “the impossible” refers here not to a logical but to a phenomenological impossibility.

⁴⁵ Jesus’ own realization of the Kingdom of God became, within only a few generations: 1) the early Church speaking about 2) the apostles, who spoke about 3) the resurrected Jesus, who originally spoke in 4) the paradoxical narratives set out here, about 5) his own experience of the Kingdom of God. (Funk 1982, p.2-3) Thus we can see the beginnings of the foreclosure of the original words of Jesus beneath the dogma of the Christian Church in its declarations about the ‘Only Begotten Son’ of Yahweh, etc. (Of course, there are also numerous exceptions to the down-ward translations of Jesus original teachings into literal-mythic forms, most notably in aspects of St. Augustine, and much of Nicholas Cusanus, Meister Eckhart and Kierkegaard, amongst others)

⁴⁶ Mark 8:27-33

⁴⁷ Harnack 1961 Vol. IV, p.220 cited in Waetjen 2001, p.114

⁴⁸ Wilterdink 1971, p.124-25 - In the same way, Kierkegaard also advises us that we ought not “think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like a lover without the passion...” (Kierkegaard 1967, p.46)

⁴⁹ Žižek 2007, p.20

⁵⁰ According to 20th century German theologian Paul Tillich, the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is the only genuine paradox in the Christian message. (Tillich, vol.1, p.150-51) And as Chesterton puts it “Christianity is a superhuman paradox where two opposite passions may blaze beside each other.”(Chesterton 1959, p. 155)

⁵¹ Crossan 1976, p.310

⁵² Wilterdink 1971, p.124-25

⁵³ Cognitive dissonance is the term first used by social psychologist Leon Festinger to describe the state of discomfort created when we hold two opposing thoughts in the mind at the same time.

⁵⁴ Žižek 2006, p.26

⁵⁵ Žižek 2006, p.26

⁵⁶ Žižek 2006, p.99

⁵⁷ For further discussion see Caputo 2006, chapter 11

⁵⁸ Žižek 2007, p.106

⁵⁹ Funk 1996, p.302

⁶⁰ Funk 1996, p.302

⁶¹ See Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Zizek, eds., (Duke Univ. Press, 2005)

⁶² Interview with Žižek in Delpech-Ramey, J. (2004) - http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue1-2/Slavoj_Zižek/slavoj_Zižek.html

⁶³ See audio recording of Žižek at the Roxie from the opening of Žižek! – the movie, on: <http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2005/04/28/17351371.php>

⁶⁴ Žižek 2006, p.107

⁶⁵ Crossan 1976

⁶⁶ Žižek 2006, p.20

⁶⁷ Žižek 2003, p.127

⁶⁸ Žižek 2003, p.171

⁶⁹ Žižek 2003, p.171

⁷⁰ As Altizer maintains, Christ is unique only in that his life and teachings embody deeper internal discord than the teachings of any other religious tradition, and as such Christianity the only religion in which God seemed, for an instant, to be forsaken by God. (Altizer 1997, xix)

⁷¹ Žižek 2002 —*The Borrowed Kettle*, cited on ChristianityToday.com, *Philosophy and the End of the World*. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2006/006/5.30.html>

⁷² Žižek, “An act does not occur *within* the given horizon of what appears to be ‘possible’—it redefines the very contours of what is possible” (2000, p.121) cited in Woodiwiss, A. *Philosophy at the End of the World*,
The gospel according to Slavoj Zizek.
by Ashley Woodiwiss

⁷³ Rowan Williams - http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/060217.htm

⁷⁴ Caputo 2006, Ch. 5