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Barth and Žižek: Dialectical Theologians

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Introduction

Time will tell if Žižek's theological works will make a lasting impression in the theological world. Theology, and Christianity in particular, obviously made an impact upon him. Starting with his reading of Alain Badiou's book on Paul or reacting to the religious turn in critical theory by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, Žižek produced a fair amount of literature on religious themes. Žižek's recent interaction with theologian John Milbank illustrates how serious his commitment is to providing analysis via theology. By writing theology, Žižek is today an important voice for Protestant thought (Žižek 2009b: 293-4). The good thing about this is that Žižek seems to have heeded Adam Kotsko's suggestion to take theology seriously by interacting with actual theologians. Perhaps now it is time for Žižek to "sit down and work his way through Barth's *Church Dogmatics*" (Kotsko 2008: 125). At this point he referenced Barth once, quoting a secondary source about him (Žižek 2002: 48).

Why Barth? Barth is considered by many the most important theologian in the twentieth century. However, it is the radical Protestant streak in Barth that I find even more radical in Žižek. Because Barth never considered himself a death of God theologian, the connection to

Žižek builds upon some of Barth's more radical followers. My claim is that we should take Žižek's theology seriously by placing him squarely into the Hegelian, Protestant tradition of theology which includes figures like Barth, Bultmann, Tillich and other dialectical theologians.¹ Instead of ignoring Žižek's theology or writing it off as heterodoxy, it can be used as a force to challenge the way theology is practiced today. This paper is an exercise in attempting to get this trend moving by placing Žižek in conversation with Barth. The conversation will center on their focus on negativity in Barth's dialectical Word and Žižek's use of the death drive as they relate to the person of Christ; each turn to theology via revelation in analyzing the ideologies of the world. One of the goals is to remove the labels of Barth the theologian or Žižek the philosopher, if these labels interfere with the study of their thought, in order that we can see how they both comment in and out of their disciplines.²

I: Protestantism as a Tie that Binds

The death of God theologian Thomas Altizer, who Žižek is closest to theologically, writes: "Barth is the only modern theologian whom I profoundly respect" (Altizer 2006: 9).³ Altizer's reading of Barth serves as one connecting point to Žižek because he sees Barth's innovative theology in the same trajectory of Hegel and Nietzsche and thus claims he is "the deepest heretic of the twentieth century" (Altizer 2003: 75). The following quote by Barth illustrates this heretical tendency and it also is a sign on how close Barth is to Žižek's theoretical hero Hegel: "As Christians we must have the freedom to let the most varied ways of thinking run through our heads. . . . I myself have a certain weakness for Hegel and am always fond of doing a bit of 'Hegeling'" (Busch 1994: 387). Hegel stood at the crossroads of modernity and his thought continues to shape the way we practice theory (Ward 2010: 233). Some make it a point to challenge Hegel, but others adapt to Hegel in their work. I believe that Barth falls into the adapting category even though he was critical of him at times.⁴ What is interesting is that Barth's most important followers (Jüngel, Moltmann and Pannenberg) are openly more Hegelian than their teacher; I suggest that Žižek belongs to this group.

There is a small amount of literature that makes connections between Žižek and Barth. The two books that focus on Žižek's theology illustrate a couple of them. In Kotsko's *Žižek and Theology* he points out that Žižek's view of Christianity matches Barth's in that both get the joke of Christianity (in seeing the absurdity of the incarnation) and thus "share in common . . . a certain lack of fit within institutions and a corresponding lack of the dignity conferred by such institutions" (Kotsko 2008: 153-4). In Marcus Pound's book on Žižek he asserts that, first, both

validate a withdrawal from the world into the realm of theory and dogmatics, as if nothing is happening (Pound 2008: 18), and, second, following Kierkegaard, each have an understanding of a wide separation between grace and nature (Pound 2008: 91-2). Pound claims they share a “deeply Protestant theology of sin and grace” in that each set up nature and grace in opposition hoping that grace would overturn the ways of the world (Pound 2008: 92). This means that revelation is only found through faith in the event of grace.

The best way to see their understanding of revelation is to see their mutual distrust of natural theology via their understanding of the dialectic. Žižek ascribes to the “Protestant ‘disenchantment’ of the world” because for him there is a “gap between the earthly and the divine” (Žižek 2009a: 249). Because Žižek is a Hegelian he sees progress in the development of Protestant thought and his materialism is a rejection of the Catholic “magical universe endowed with spirituality” (Žižek 2009a: 249). In fact, he notes that his understanding of the dialectic is about “what eludes the subject’s grasp is not the complexity of transcendent reality, but *the way the subject’s own activity is inscribed into reality*” (Žižek 2009a: 244).

Barth believes that revelation is both a veiled and unveiled dialectical event (McCormack 1995: 16-20, 464-7). Terry Cross gives a good definition of the Barthian dialectic: “Dialectic reflects the fact that humans cannot encompass or master God with their views or concepts. Therefore, humans speak in brokenness, in fragmentary incompleteness” (Cross 2001: 210). One might add that it’s not just God we cannot master but human history and all matters of knowledge as well. Christophe Chalamet declares that “Karl Barth never ceased to be a dialectical theologian” (Chalamet 2005: 14).⁵ What confuses commentators is that in Barth’s later works he seems to be more apt to pronounce God’s Yes toward humanity than God’s No, yet he remains dialectical because the No is still there even though the critical side is emphasized less. In short, Barth put more work in his mature thought toward dogmatics even though he never abandoned the critical side. Chalamet notes that Barth went “all the way with the two trends of thought, not to be either realistic [dogmatic] or critically idealist (or employ a mix of the two) but to be both fully realistic and critical, in other words to present God’s revelation and hiddenness, or God’s “givenness” and non-“givenness”, as well as God’s love and freedom, in all their radicality” (Chalamet 2005: 73).

However, not everyone is thrilled with either Barth’s or Žižek’s modern, dialectical theology. German theologian Johannes Hoff sees Barth and ultimately Žižek as leading theology down an errant path. He views the movement of modern thought from Descartes and Kant as a wrong turn especially because it is based around the theological concept of God’s self-disclosure which he asserts is unbiblical (Hoff 2010: 168). This transition occurred because

revelation became an event of disclosure toward the human agent instead of being viewed through liturgical practice via the idea of praise and worship. Hoff's genealogical approach thus leads him to put the blame for this move squarely on Hegel that then leads to Barth. He suggests that the idea of self-revelation "is an invention of Hegel's heterodox philosophical narrative of an absolute spirit which relates itself to itself, though the theological success story of this concept is to be attributed to its Neo-Orthodox reformulation in Karl Barth" (Hoff 2010: 187-8). He will conclude his essay by stating that "only the tradition of pre-modern orthodoxy includes a response to the challenge of post-Kantian philosophy which avoids the trap of modern theology" (Hoff 2010: 196).

How does Hoff come to this conclusion? He states that three key points flow from the idea of self-revelation: one, it becomes the over-arching determining principle of modern theology; two, relational and dialogical thought replaces substance-metaphysical ones; and third, the distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity becomes blurred (Hoff 2010: 188-9). Hoff contends that Barth and his successors like Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann are eventually in a line that leads to the reinterpretation of God as the fragile Absolute of Žižek (Hoff 2010: 194-5). Hoff suggests that the road to Žižek comes from the historicizing of both Pannenberg and Moltmann. This is partially correct in the sense that one can make the case that Žižek's atheistic Hegelian reading of God is a radicalized Barthian concept of revelation. This quote by Žižek is a good example of what Hoff may be getting at: "God is hidden not to hide some transcendent Truth, but to hide the fact that there is nothing to hide. This is, to my Hegelian view, the whole point of Christianity as the 'religion of revelation': what is revealed in Christianity is not some new content, but the fact that Revelation belongs to the very nature of God, i.e., that God is *nothing but* his own Revelation to us" (Žižek 2009a: 236).

However, Hoff considers that "Barth . . . keeps his concept of the threefold 'modes' of the Trinity as close as possible to Hegel's dialectical idea of a Trinitarian self-movement, even though he never forgets to underline the priority of the eternal (i.e. immanent) Trinity" (Hoff 2010: 189). Here he blames both Barth and Catholic theologian Karl Rahner for following Hegel by blurring the lines that distinguished God in God's essence (immanent Trinity) and how God reveals Godself (economic Trinity). Again, Hoff would probably see Hegel's and Barth's legacy behind Žižek's words that "it is the 'economic' Trinity which is the truth, the true site, of Christianity, and the 'immanent' Trinity is nothing but its 'reification' into an independent process; more precisely, there is absolutely no gap between the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'economic' Trinity: what was going on in the earthly reality of Palestine two thousand years ago was a

process in the very heart of God himself; there was (and is) no higher reality backing it up” (Žižek 2009a: 254).

Here Hoff is following an interpretation that ignores the work of Bruce McCormack and others that shows that Barth seems to actually give the economic Trinity the place of prominence in light of his new understanding of the doctrine of election. Now of course this is Hoff’s point that Barth blurs the distinction between the being of God and God-in-act.

In CD II/2, Barth announces that Christ is not only the object of election but also the subject, which entails that Christ is at the center of God’s works (McCormack 2010a: 214). Barth came to the conclusion that “God is not in *abstracto* Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is so with a definite purpose and reference” (Barth CD II/2: 79). McCormack writes: “In that God chooses to be God for us in Christ, he is giving himself the being he will have for all eternity” (McCormack 2010a: 222). Election is an act of God’s self-determination in that it defines both the being and act of God. McCormack suggests that “Barth’s claim that Jesus is the Subject of election was motivated by worries over speculation” (McCormack 2008: 186). In short, one views the history of Christ as the revelation of God’s being-in-act, which means there is no hidden God behind this revelation (McCormack 1995: 458-63; McCormack 2010b: 79).

What are we to make of Hoff’s accusations? It seems that Hoff is right except for all the wrong reasons. Instead of constructing genealogies that show how modernity leads to nihilism and thus one must return to a time before when liturgy was liturgy which led to the peace of church, one can perhaps openly advocate the type of move Hegel made which was then taken up by Barth and even today by Žižek in order to speak to today’s world theologically. In contrast to Hoff, McCormack is correct when he writes that the “present moment in theology would seem to belong to those sympathetic to Hegel” (McCormack 2010b: 80). It is to take seriously Barth statement that Christ is “the Word spoken from the loftiest, most luminous transcendence and likewise the Word heard in the deepest, darkest immanence” (Barth 1961: 46-7). It is to this dark immanence that Christ must be found today if theology is to find an audience; it is my contention that Žižek is an important voice in the here and now with regards to this dark immanence. However, in order to keep the transcendent faithful to the immanent and vice versa, one needs a dialectic that can learn to live with the tensions of reality.

II: On Ideology through Christ’s Story

We have just seen how Barth and Žižek each belong to a Protestant, dialectical theology with their commitment to a doctrine of dialectical revelation. We will now look at how they utilize it

with regards to the social-political sphere. They both attempt to read it theologically via their understanding of God's revelation of Christ. As we have seen above, Barth theology is radical because his method reads everything through his understanding of Christ, yet Kotsko notes that even "Žižek can also be said to have a 'theological anthropology' insofar as Christ embodies what it means to be truly human" (Kotsko 2008: 131).⁶ What draws Žižek closer to a Barthian style theology is that both have roots in a leftist Hegelian social-political critique (Marquardt 2010: 177). The roots are so radical that they lead to interaction with Lenin. Žižek wants to see St. Paul's attempt at organization in the same way as Lenin (Žižek 2001: 2-4 and 2003: 9); and Barth wrote his *Romans* commentary with Lenin on his mind (Marquardt 2010: 185-9).⁷ Therefore, when looking at each thinker on the way they use theology to understand ideology, it is important to remember this fact. However, the most common point the two share is their basis in Kant, Hegel and German Idealism; this is more pronounced in Žižek but commentators have noticed how Barth works within this system (Roberts 1991: 3-7).⁸

The turn to religious thought in order to understand human reality is not without its critics. Mark Lilla is critical of both Barth and the neo-Paul writers including Žižek. He believes that Barth's eschatological rhetoric found in his *Romans II*, which Lilla calls a "masterpiece of the antimodern and antihumanistic rhetoric", led to the uncompromising attitude of thinkers including the Nazis during the Weimar years (Lilla 2007: 261, 277-285). Any religious, eschatological rhetoric has the potential to become an antihumanist, antiliberal political agenda. Lilla is even more scathing toward Žižek (and Badiou especially) because he sees Žižek's secularized Christianity as a potential embrace of revolutionary violence (Lilla 2008: 78-9). However, this is exactly the point of both Barth and Žižek in that each challenge both liberal and non-democratic systems. The idea that the liberal-democratic regime is without its faults, or cannot change for a better system, is the prevailing ideology today; religion serves as an outlet for people's frustrations across the world, whether Lilla will accept it or not. In fact, Lilla's complaint is similar to Hoff's in that both judge Barth and Žižek each for following the modern trend set by Kant and Hegel. Let us now see how both thinkers speak to the modern situation through theology.

Barth's dialectic starts with the relationship between humans and the world that takes place in a fallen reality. Sin perverts how we see God and how we see the world (Barth 1981: 118). It is fallen to the extent that humans give themselves over to what Barth calls the lordless powers. When ideology is perceived as something that is part of reality and that shapes the way humans live, it creates the modern individual who is lacking depth to his or her personality, like robot creatures that are programmed to move and flow like machines in reality: "The figure of the human robot, who neither asks nor is asked about his soul and therefore cannot ask about that

of others, who by an anonymous center of power is made, moved regulated, used and then discarded and replaced from an anonymous centre” (Barth CD III/2: 387). The robot human is lacking both the relational aspect to God and to his or her fellow human being. It is to be existing as an inhuman in a bureaucracy (Barth CD III/2: 252). John Webster notes that there is an element of play-acting in the way humans become slaves to their own games: “Human life is a sphere in which fantasy operates, in which human persons are not able to see themselves as they truly are” (Webster 2004: 69).

Part of the problem is how much of reality is structured by elusive lordless powers that came out from human thought and action yet inevitably become a hegemony over humankind; the alienation that human beings have with God inevitably leads into their own self-alienation even though they live under the illusion that they are free (Barth 1981: 213-5). Barth writes: “Through mankind’s fault, things are invisibly done without and above man, even above the human individual in all his uniqueness, by the host of absolutisms, of powers that seek to be lordless and that make an impressive enough attempt to exhibit and present themselves as such” (Barth 1981: 216). What exactly are some manifestations of the lordless powers Barth speaks of? Barth interpreter Paul Chung succinctly summarizes the lordless powers: “Human will in bondage and enmity to life is the result of [the] dominion of the lordless powers. In various realms such as politics, economics, human and natural science, technology, consumerism, and daily behavior, the lordless powers develop in every case their own effect. All these are expressions of the rule of capital and are forces of death” (Chung 2008: 439).

The three main headings that Barth puts them lordless powers are the following: Empire, Mammon and Ideology. As Chung noted, money or capital is behind much of these forces. Barth explains how the drive for money can create alienation among humans: “Money is a flexible but powerful instrument, which, supposedly handled by man, in reality follows its own law. In a thousand ways it can establish some opinions and even convictions and suppress others. . . . It can bring provisional paradise here and the corresponding provisional hell there” (Barth 1981: 224). According to Barth, ideology is boiled down to the “isms” that control society, the catchwords prevalent in public talk, and its slogans. He had a keen eye to see these things since he witnessed some of the most glaring examples of ideology in the twentieth century. For example, he declares that “we all listen to the most varied catchwords, we all use them more or less merrily, and in so doing we show that we ourselves are people who have been struck and stabbed and snared by systematized ideologies” (Barth 1981: 227). What keeps us blind to these things is the way we assume culture is our world; this occurs when our desire is perverse.

Barth, in Žižekian fashion, asks: “Is it not true that the tumult of the desire for enjoyment there corresponds only too closely in the enjoyment itself a thirst for desire” (Barth 1981: 230)?

Barth notes that there is a special relationship between human beings and the world. Self-consciousness comes from what we desire: “I am aware of myself only when I realise the distinction between me and my desiring and make use of my power over it” (Barth CD III/2: 409). In fact, the two are connected and interpret each other:

The encounter of the intelligible with the intelligent cosmos does not mean only that the former declares and makes perceptible to the latter its being, movement, order and forms. It means also that it awakens and stimulates it to a spontaneous work of ordering and fashioning corresponding to the particular way in which it, too, is the cosmos. As the intelligible cosmos exists wholly for the intelligent, it desires and demands that in its own way and work the latter should also exist for it. To put it dramatically, it yearns and cries out to be humanised (Barth CD IV/3: 148).

From the very beginning of his theological thought, Barth makes us aware of the way the Church sides with the prevailing ideologies. The world is ruled by lordless powers somewhat created by human desire, this means that one is forced to strive against the status quo. (Barth 1981: 173). Barth declares what this looks like: “More restless than the most restless, more urgent than the most urgent revolutionaries in his immediate or more distant circle, he asks: ‘Where art thou, peace of all the world’” (Barth CD IV/4: 201)? Responding to Barth’s work on the lordless powers, Gorringer insists that “Christians are summoned to revolt not against people, but for all humankind and therefore against the disorder which controls and poisons and disrupts all human relations and interconnections. It is a militant revolt against the lordless powers, the motors of society, the secret guarantee of our conventions, customs, habits, traditions, and institutions” (Gorringer 1999: 265).

So what is so special about Christianity that it can help people to begin to break out of these symbolic chains? Žižek’s answer is love, but a love toward those that are oftentimes outcasts (Žižek 2000: 123). We will look at Žižek’s understanding of this in a moment but first we will explore his psychoanalytical view of ideology which leads him to his theological conclusions.

Žižek uses the idea of the Freudian death drive to explain the movement of negativity upon a person. Death drive is the gap in the order of being that gives rise to autonomy. Žižek asserts that “the lesson of psychoanalysis is that humans are not simply alive, but possessed by a strange drive to enjoy life in excess of the ordinary run of things – and ‘death’ stands simply and precisely for the dimension beyond ‘ordinary’ biological life. Human life is never ‘just life,’ it is always sustained by an excess of life” (Žižek 2001: 104). According to Johnston, it is a “disruptive negativity” because it helps the human subject realize that it is not “enslaved to the

tyranny of the pragmatic-utilitarian economy of well-being, to a happiness thrust forward by the twin authorities of the pleasure and reality principles” (Johnston 2008: 185). In other words, this drive helps to break us out of the conformity of the everyday world because in essence humans have this anti-adaptive tendency.

Part of Žižek’s project is combining German Idealism’s view of absolute self-relating negativity with the psychoanalytical notion of the Freudian death drive (Johnston 2008: 126; Kotsko 2008: 112). His main focus is on the antagonisms; he never loses sight of the discontents and the negative aspect of reality. Borrowing a phrase from Hegel, Žižek claims that the human subject must live life tarrying with the negative. The negative shows us that there is something that does not fit between the human subject and his or her social reality. It is to adopt the parallax view of reality which he defines as “the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral ground is possible” (Žižek 2006: 4). In other words, human consciousness must view the world against the backdrop of its inherent incompleteness. Closely tied to this is the concept of ontological difference which Kotsko defines as “the domain of beings is finite, but also non-totalizable” (Kotsko 2008: 119); Žižek calls it “the ultimate parallax which conditions our very access to reality” (Žižek 2006: 10). Therefore, Johnston asserts that Žižek’s thoughts on subjectivity lead us to consider that we are both a “subject as an overdetermined effect of subjection” and a “subject as an unpredictable upsurge of freedom” (Johnston 2008: 286).⁹ In short, we do not realize how bound and how free we really are. Johnston summarizes Žižek’s conclusions: “This quest to formulate a joint philosophic-psychoanalytic theory of autonomous subjectivity leads Žižek to a profound reconsideration of the very ontological foundations of materialism—what ultimately enables the event of subjective freedom is the fact that material being is already perforated by irreducible antagonisms and inconsistencies” (Johnston 2008: 287).

Žižek’s turn to Christianity is partially an attempt to use what is often perceived as a religious and hierarchical ideology itself by thinkers as far back as the Enlightenment and Marx. That is part of his challenge, yet one can also read a genuine appreciation of parts of the tradition in and of itself. Žižek, as a materialist, writes that a “truly logical materialism accepts the basic insight of religion, its premise that our commonsense reality is not the true one; what it rejects is the conclusion that, therefore, there must be another, ‘higher,’ suprasensible reality” (Žižek 2009a: 240). This is why Žižek fits under the label of a death of God thinker; he, in fact, ascribes to the death of God in connection with loss of the big Other. What this means is that “Žižek’s ‘God’ reveals himself in a radically self-emptying process, to the point where God’s love for the world results in sacrificing his own transcendence—that is, his own distance from the

world, if you will—in order to be more fully God” (Davis 2009: 18). This is why Christ’s cry from the cross is the “basis” of his theology (Pound 2008: 23). Jesus, on the cross, recognizes that there is no big Other.

Žižek declares that the emptiness of the God of Beyond is what separates the Christian tradition from other faiths because it “renounces this God of Beyond, this Real behind the curtain of the phenomena; it acknowledges that there is NOTHING beyond the appearance – nothing BUT the imperceptible X that changes Christ, this ordinary man, into God. In the ABSOLUTE identity of man and God, the Divine is the pure *Schein* of another dimension that shines through Christ, this miserable creature” (Žižek 2001: 89).¹⁰ This is a vivid picture of the suffering God, which Žižek finds in the thought of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “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 theater of shadows but the place of real struggle” (Žižek 2006: 184). This is why, according to Žižek, “Christ is the ‘vanishing mediator’ between the substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community” (Žižek 2009b: 29).¹¹ The freedom in the new spiritual community is not bound to forms of guilt, like the type that over-emphasize God’s mercy and justice by having Christ die for our sins; they make a fetish out of Christ in that we are bound and indebted to him and made to continually feel guilty for in essence causing his death (Žižek 2008: 190-1). Therefore, Žižek’s Christianity is a faith of Revelation where the Messiah has already arrived in that “God took upon Himself the risk of putting everything at stake, of fully ‘existentially engaging Himself’ by, as it were, stepping into His own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing Himself to the utter contingency of existence” (Žižek 2003: 136). It is to realize that “Christ directly embodies/assumes the excess that makes the human animal a proper human being” (Žižek 2001: 99). This action now gives people who follow his example the freedom to also assume the excess of life (Žižek 2001: 105).

The idea of the incarnation of Christ is the way this is an expression of grace and love. Žižek declares that “Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others” (Žižek 2003: 33; Žižek 2000: 96). Following Christ’s words in Luke 14:26 where he tells people to hate their family for his sake, this love is the force that helps people unplug from the organic community that they were born into (Žižek 2000: 121 and 160). What is that thing that Žižek says that we should love? Kotsko claims that, for Žižek, “Christian love is a radically material love that aims at the part of the subject that escapes social inscription” (Kotsko 2008: 110). This love is the element that will relieve us of the burden of desire: “desire is always caught in the logic of ‘this is

not that, it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction, while love FULLY ACCEPTS that “this IS that” (Žižek 2001: 90). Elsewhere Žižek claims that “trusting appearances, a loving person sees the other the way she/he effectively is, and loves her for her very foibles, not despite them” (Žižek 2000: 128). Furthermore, Žižek writes, contemplating 1 Corinthians 13, that only those that are aware of their lack (a Nothing) and their incompleteness can properly love: “we love because we do *not* know all” (Žižek 2003: 115; 2000: 146-7; 2001: 147). This is why Žižek appreciates the Apostle Paul because he is someone totally engaged in the cause of Christ and looks beyond social distinctions; it is to really accept somebody for who they really are and not an idealized version of them.

The new beginning that Paul talks about is the “wiping the slate clean” for a person (Žižek 2000: 127). Žižek believes that we can learn from Paul’s idea of the messianic community the “disavowal of the symbolic realm itself: I use symbolic obligations, but I am not performatively *bound* by them” (Žižek 2003: 112). In fact, he claims that “the basic point of Christianity proper is precisely to break out of the vicious superego cycle of the Law and its transgression via Love” (Žižek 2000: 145). Žižek interprets the injunction to love thy neighbor of the Judaeo-Christian through Lacanian categories thus:

This injunction prohibits nothing; rather, it calls for an activity *beyond* the confines of the Law, enjoining us always to do more and more, to ‘love’ our neighbor – not merely in his imaginary dimension (as our *semblant*, mirror-image, on behalf of the notion of Good that we impose on him, so that even when we act and help him ‘for his own Good’, it is *our* notion of what is good for him that we follow); not merely in his symbolic dimension (the abstract symbolic subject of Rights), but as the Other in the very abyss of its Real, the Other as a properly *inhuman* partner, ‘irrational’, radically evil, capricious, revolting, disgusting . . . in short, beyond the Good. This enemy-Other should not be punished (as the Decalogue demands), but accepted as a ‘neighbor’ (Žižek 2000: 111-2).

Žižek’s move toward Christianity can be seen through his emphasis in valuing the particular and the material. It is to see God other than a distant being that captures us in the superego cycle of Law and transgression, but instead opens up opportunities for freedom through the subjective presupposition of the Spirit (Žižek 2009b: 60).

In some sense, we see that Žižek uses revelation as the means to interpret God’s act-being, just as Barth suggests (Barth CD IV/1: 186). According to Barth, through the act of Christ’s suffering we then learn that humility and obedience is part of God’s character (Barth CD IV/1: 199, 159 and 247; McCormack 2010b: 73-7). We saw above how Barth makes this move because he understands election to be the self-determination of God’s being-in-act revealed in the history of Christ. Gorringer notes: “In taking our place Jesus allows himself to be fully claimed by our lowliness and misery, and this is the glory of his humanity which reflects the inner

being and essence of God” (Gorringe 1999: 199). By becoming incarnate, Christ was exposed to the very alienation, suffering, nonbeing and the nothingness that human beings as sinners are exposed to, yet Christ’s mission was to hasten toward these things for our sake (Barth CD IV/1: 253). Barth claims that the “meaning of the incarnation is plainly revealed in the question of Jesus upon the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’” (Barth CD IV/1: 185)? Barth speaks often about how Jesus in his incarnation often suffered along with his fellow human beings (Barth CD III/2: 211). However, Christ suffered more than any other human being had suffered because of the gravity of his mission (Barth CD IV/1: 175-7). In Christ, the “Almighty exists and acts and speaks . . . in the form of One who is weak and impotent The glorious One is covered with shame. The One who lives for ever has fallen a prey to death. The Creator is subjected to and overcome by the onslaught of that which is not” (Barth CD IV/1: 177). McCormack asserts that election illustrates that God is found in his historical act on the cross: “In that God gives himself over to judgment and wrath, suffering and death, God does so in fulfillment of that for which God has eternally determined himself. He gives himself over to that in and through which his true being is realized. Thus God is never seen more clearly as the God that he truly is than when he suffers death on a cross. Here is where his true being is disclosed” (McCormack 2008: 225). Nonetheless, unlike Žižek, Barth wants to assert that even in this moment of Christ’s alienation on the cross, God does not suffer contradiction and ultimately still remains in control (Barth CD IV/1: 185). Therefore, one finds help from God because God never finds a hopeless case among us humans because we have “not fallen lower than the depth to which God humbled himself for [us] in Jesus Christ.” (Barth CD IV/1: 480). Thus, one’s dialectical response is to live “totally resolute yet totally modest, totally fearless yet totally without illusions, totally courageous yet totally humble” (Barth 1981: 185).

Many Christians can ascribe to Barth’s ideas about God and humanity; they are radical, in some sense, but not to the extent of Žižek’s thought. On the other hand, Žižek’s heterodox Hegelian reading of the cross may be unsettling to some. However, there are two points that deserve attention because they address real problems in some accounts of the Christian tradition. First, Žižek, in an almost Barthian move, asks why do Christians struggle with the God-Man idea? Why do they constantly posit the God beyond the revelation of Christ? According to Žižek, it is because they would feel more secure with God as the great puppeteer than really embrace the freedom that God has created through Christ: “Do those who call themselves ‘Christians’ not prefer to stay with the comfortable image of God sitting up there, benevolently watching over our lives, sending us his son as a token of his love, or, even more comfortably, just with some depersonalized Higher Force” (Žižek 2009b: 25)? This move

illustrates the desire to go around the monstrous aspects of society and the dark moments in God's own history as seen in the life of Christ. It is to be resolute in doing nothing; it is to allow evil to occur in this world and to simply hope that God will clean it all up in the end. In other words, it is to look for the God of transcendent security than to enjoy the fellowship of the suffering God and his children. Žižek points out that to be like Christ is to share in his abandonment, to be considered a fool like he was. Hence, Žižek asserts: "Our radical experience of separation from God is the very feature which unites us with Him" (Žižek 2003: 91). In other words, was Christ really suffering to the extent of utter abandonment or was he bluffing, knowing full well everything was ultimately going to be fine?

Second, Žižek raises the problem of making a fetish out of the suffering figure of Christ on the cross. In short, people often excuse the most horrible examples of violence perpetrated upon the helpless by using Christ as an example of quietly suffering through his death on the cross; the command is to not fight back but to passively accept it. As we have already seen, Žižek has already noted how Christ was not so quiet on the cross. Furthermore, he uses a painting by Michelangelo as a reference to a defiant Christ on the cross: "For the first time in the history of painting, an artist tried to capture Christ's abandonment by God-Father. While Christ's eyes are turned upward, his face does not express devoted acceptance of suffering, but desperate suffering combined with . . . an underlying attitude of angry rebellion, of defiance" (Žižek 2009a: 277).¹² This reading makes sense for Žižek, who reads Job, another figure who was not so quiet, in Christ's story. By connecting Job-Christ, Žižek has created an example within the Christian tradition for those on the outskirts, who experience daily suffering; a defiant Christ on the cross is expressing the all too human emotion of the anger at injustice and abandonment. Therefore, the suffering God is not as a passive sufferer but one who looks upon injustice and the violence that often flows from it with holy anger. Since the goal of depicting a suffering God is to help us identify God with our life, both in its light and dark dimensions, the idea that Christ accomplished this in a moment of righteous indignation helps our own ethic as we live in an unjust world. It is to be both humble and obedient to the cause, yet angry at the moments when the nothingness feels like it can consume reality.

Conclusion

It is important to understand the way Barth and Žižek use theology historically. Barth's theology was an attempt to respond to the social-political crises of his day whether it was the nationalism of World War I or World War II. Today, Žižek makes a similar challenge against the hegemony of

the liberal-postmodern, global world. What their critiques show is that the Christian scriptures are used either for the reification of the prevailing powers or utilized against them, pointing out their basis in ideology. I believe that one can make this critique either as a believer in the living God (Barth) or as an advocate of the death of God (Žižek), but in order to do this one must recognize the modern paradigm that figures like Hegel introduced. I have argued that Žižek's voice is important for theology today because there is a tendency to either fall back into premodern orthodoxy (Hoff) or to celebrate the liberal regime as the standard by guarding it against the critique of radical thought (Lilla). In doing this, Žižek shows himself to be following, to some extent, the dialectical theology of Barth.

- 1 Tillich's method of correlation and Žižek's use of pop culture as a method of correlation are compared in Kotsko's book (Kotsko: 140-5). Žižek quotes both Bultmann and Bonhoeffer in a couple of his works (Žižek 2003: 118 and 2006: 184). Thus there only a small interaction with any of the main dialectical theologians.
- 2 Here I follow Rudy Koshar's work in attempting to read Barth as one of the major intellectual voices of the twentieth century (Koshar 2008).
- 3 Altizer speaks favorably about Barth throughout his writings; this does not prevent him from criticizing Barth's followers (or Barthianism) as a "toothless theology" (Altizer 2006: 24). Žižek's utilizes Altizer's theological method in his debate with Milbank (Žižek 2009a: 260-1).
- 4 Two writers who have seen the importance of bringing Hegel and Barth together is Andrew Shanks and Graham Ward (Ward 2004 and Shanks 2005). Shanks realizes that "Barth is also, it has been said, even if not entirely hostile, nevertheless quite mistrustful of Hegel. In my view the two of them need to be reconciled" (Shanks 2005:78). Conversely, what both Ward and Shanks attempt to do is to actually read Hegel as a Christian thinker.
- 5 Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar's classic thesis is that Barth's turning point in his thought occurred in 1931 with his study of Anselm thus abandoning dialectical thought for analogical. This thesis has been challenged by Bruce McCormack (McCormack 1995: 1-28). Chalamet notes that the "idea of a turning point does not do justice to the undeniable continuity in Barth's theology, which continued to be founded upon God's veiling and unveiling" (Chalamet 2005: 225).
- 6 An interesting connection that both Barth and Žižek share, that is out of the scope of this paper to cover sufficiently, is in their use of the Old Testament book Job. Both thinkers regard Job as a kind of Christ or as a faithful witness who foreshadows Christ, even though he differs from Christ in that he is just a man. For Barth's view see (Barth *CD IV/3*: 383-88, 398-408, 421-34 and 453-61). An example of Žižek's view is in (Žižek 2003: 124-27).
- 7 Marquardt's work continues to be controversial. He sees Socialism as a guiding point from *Romans I and II* even into Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, where many commentators see a turn from his earlier politically guided work when he was known as the Red Pastor. The most controversial point is his thesis that Barth wrote his comments on Romans 13 in relation to Lenin's *State and Revolution*. See George Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) for a number of essays discussing Barth's relationship to Socialism based around Marquardt's work.
- 8 An example of this is found in a recent article by McCormack where he compares the use of Schelling in Tillich and Barth to claim that Barth is closer to him. In addition, he also puts forth the idea that Barth is careful not to let a type of philosophy to dictate how his theology should operate yet at times will borrow ideas and methods from Kant, Schelling and Hegel without having to only choose only one of these thinker's methodology (McCormack 2010b: 78). Building on McCormack's work, it would be interesting to see a study comparing Žižek's work on Schelling with the way Barth uses him.
- 9 Johnston also adds that "individuals, usually unconscious of their true subjectivity, are simultaneously more heteronomous and more autonomous than they (want to) believe or know."
- 10 See (Žižek 2006:105 and 187) where he claims, borrowing from Martin Luther, that Christ identified himself with real man; in other words, his own shit, and see (Žižek 2006: 184) where he quotes Bonhoeffer's statement that "only a suffering God can help us now."
- 11 Also see (Žižek 2009b: 60) where he writes that "*what dies on the Cross is not only the earthly-finite representative of God, but God himself, the very transcendent God of beyond*. Both terms of the opposition, Father and Son, the substantial God as the Absolute In-Itself and the God-for-us, revealed to us, are sublated in the Holy Spirit."
- 12 Žižek also notes the way Christ's right hand is positioned in a way that is almost accusatory. According to Žižek, it mirrors the way that Satan is often depicted in art as an accuser.

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