

## Žižek and religion: Notes for a dialogue

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**Abstract:** This article intends to bring some notes to understand the role of religion in the work of Slavoj Žižek. It is quite clear that religion is a big problem that Žižek faces in some of his books and to us it is quite clear as well that his concern about this theme is extremely important to his view on politics and psychoanalysis. This article points out some insights about the main themes that Žižek works in his books about religion. We have no intent to encompass all the repercussion of Žižek's thought about religion, but we believe that this article opens a good approximation to the theme of religion in Zizek's work.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Religion, Atheism, Death of God.

Žižek intervenes in the dialogue between psychoanalysis and religion in the same way as he seeks to make psychoanalysis to dialogue with other areas of knowledge. In this regard, it is interesting to note how psychoanalysis is nowadays received by politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 2004) and by philosophy (Badiou, 1998; Žižek 2006; Saflate, 2008). Several interesting readings on psychoanalysis have been carried out in its constant dialogue with philosophy, which is in itself a great phenomenon in the dialogue between the two areas. This movement takes place in a sort of transversality compared to the post-Lacanian schools centered on names like Colette Soler and Jacques Allain Miller, egresses from the seminaries of Lacan and the

École Freudienne of Paris, created by Lacan in the 1960s up to the 1980s, when they were dismissed. In this sense, we can mention the Slovenian school of which Žižek is a member. Thus, psychoanalysis gradually becomes very important to authors of philosophy and social theory who seeks in Freud and Lacan any elements to think about the different social relations, receiving contributions of the philosophy itself in return.

Since the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, there are substantial philosophical readings of psychoanalysis as a form of social criticism. For example, we can mention the works of Adorno, in which psychoanalysis appears as a theory capable of providing forms of understanding about adherence to totalitarian leaders, the libidinal and unconscious roots of the fascination produced by leaders as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin.

In the mid-twentieth century, in the postwar period, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and Sartrean existentialism are responsible for innovative readings of psychoanalytic theory by taking Freud out of his hegemonic reception. The unconscious is read by Lévi-Strauss as a structural matrix isomorphic to the linguistics' model invented by Saussure. It is in this scenario that Lacan emerges within the French psychiatrist tradition.

The academic education of Žižek occurs through the Lacanian School of Slovenia, outside the main fundamental axes that determined the reception of the Freudian thought. This fact in itself is noteworthy since it gives Žižek's thinking a striking feature of bringing other elements into religious and political debate. Since the fall of the socialist regime in Yugoslavia and the capitalist democratization that crossed Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, Žižek's thinking has been building in constant dialogue with this reality experienced by him.

Žižek's doctoral thesis is entitled *The practical and theoretical relevance of French structuralism*, but only in 1989, with the publication of *The most sublime of the hysterics - Hegel with Lacan* (1991), the result of a doctoral thesis with Jacques Allain Miller, in France, that Žižek emerges as a relevant thinker on the international scenario. In this respect, the thinking of Žižek will not only focus on a specific issue, but will imbricate to several areas, among them the religious question.

The Žižek's interest in the phenomenon of belief would come from the notion of universalism that would be both a Christian and Eurocentric notion, but at the same time it stands as an universal agonistic that would oppose its humanist version, generating the horror. For Žižek, Christianity would have made a radical opening in

universality by disconnecting the community from its substantial character. The false universal would be what should be criticized in religious ideology.

According to Žižek, to assume a belief in the present days is something seen as shameless, but at the same time, it is something which no one escapes. This point is emphasized by Žižek (2004) when he states that, secretly, we all believe, for God is unconscious, which means that it is natural for the human being to succumb to the temptation of belief. So, the true atheist is not the one who simply does not accept the existence of God, but much more than that, he endorses the non-existence of the great Other capable of organizing the world for the subject.

Christianity stands for Žižek as an atheistic religion per principle, for in Christ's sacrifice what would be at stake is a great emptiness that wipes out the sin not aiming to pay a fault, or to repay God for something that was pending, but aims to restore in the sacrifice itself the union of God with men. Christ is the *monstrum*, or the exceptional that cannot be explained only in rational terms and, paradoxically, is that upon which rests the rational — or simply, all Christian discourse. In the Christian religion the Absolute dies, which means that the distance between God and men becomes an inherent distance from the god himself. Whoever dies on the cross is the Absolute itself, which is reborn as a symbol in the Holy Spirit as a human community. Christianity makes the split between subject and divinity into a split in God Himself. According to Žižek

[...] the one who dies on the cross is not the earthly and finite representative of God, but God himself, the transcendent God of the beyond. The two terms of the opposition, Father and Son, the substantial God as in itself absolute and the God for us, or revealed to us, die, that is, they are surpassed in the Holy Spirit. [...] This means that, for all its founding power, the Spirit is a virtual being, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition: it exists only to the extent that the subject acts as if he existed. Its status is similar to that of an ideological cause, such as communism or the Nation. ( Žižek & Milbank, 2009 : 108)

It is possible to realize that there are several ways of approaching the problem of religion, and in Žižek we see that even though he is an atheist, he cares enough about this kind of question. In some of his books, Žižek is interested in religion more consistently, as in *The absolute fragile, or why is it worth fighting for the Christian legacy?* (2001), *On The Belief* (2004), *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), and *God in pain. Inversions of the Apocalypse* (2015). In these books we perceive a concern with

religion, and especially with Christianity, in a more theoretical way and, at the same time, in a constant dialogue with contemporary theologians. The books *The monstrosity of Christ* and *God in pain. Inversions of the apocalypse* are books made from Žižek's dialogue with the theologians John Milbank and Boris Gunjević respectively.

Žižek's concern about religion will take the form of a criticism of religion. Within a Marxist-materialist vision, Žižek will propose to understand the religious phenomenon as something that must be overcome by the contemporary man, but at the same time is something worthy of being taken into account by the subject. Žižek states that "it is sometimes far more subversive to destroy religion from within, accepting its basic premise, then revealing its unexpected consequences, than denying the existence of God entirely." (Žižek 2015, p. 7). This implies that Žižek's proposal will not be the famous materialist critique of religion that since Feuerbach (1989, 2007), or Marx (1964, 1979), and even through Freud (1927/2006, 1930/2006) will attempt to show the fictitious, imaginative, illusory character of the belief in God in the name of an enlightened view of its non-existence, but it will be given in a slightly different way, i.e., showing the incongruities that comes when the religious proposal is taken seriously.

It is Hegel (1970, 1984, 2007) who provides Žižek with the tools to think of psychoanalysis as a critique of contemporary doxa and at the same time it is Hegel who stands as Žižek's great philosophical support for the dialogue with psychoanalysis and social criticism. Žižekian atheism not only denies the existence of God but aims to destroy God's fiction from within so that fiction about God does not increase on the subject in the form of a denial of the kind "I know that there is no God, but He is an uplifting illusion." To Žižek, is very clear that the notion of incarnation must be seen in a literally way, or in a more specific way, the death of Christ as son of God is the death of any representation of a transcendent God. When Christ dies on the cross, there a new form of understanding of God arises. The old God as a person, as someone who is watching our steps has no longer place after the death of Christ. That's why for Žižek the Christianity is an atheistic religion. In the core of the proposal of Christ there is the fact that God and man are the same in a very non-transcendent way.

Something that characterizes our postmodern era is the return of the religious dimension in a variety of ways: from Christian fundamentalisms, Islamic to the New Age-type thoughts. This postmodern situation highlights the difficulty of thinking about religion in our time. In this sense, Žižek will try to think the contemporary dialogue between Marxism and Christianity assuming that

there is a direct line between Christianity and Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side of the barricade against the furious onslaught of new spiritualisms - the authentic Christian legacy is too precious to be left to fundamentalist zealots. ( Žižek 2001: 27)

In this way, it can be seen that Žižek's proposal will displease both sides of the dialogue. On one side, the more orthodox Marxists attached to Marx's atheist materialist critique will see in Žižek's proposal a kind of loosening of Marx's proposal for the religion that characterized it as "opium of the people", fruit of a specific infrastructure that would be overcome by overcoming the capitalism. On the more orthodox Christian side, Žižek's proposal will sound like an attempt to give up the more metaphysical character of the Christian assumption in the name of a social reform that embraces only one part of the Christian legacy. The heart of the matter here is the fact that the Christian legacy is much broader than some Marxists and some Christians want to make it look like.

Christianity shows itself as a religion that subverts what Žižek calls "Event" which is nothing more than the impossible Real of a structure, of its synchronic symbolic order that cannot be fully recognized or symbolized or confessed. Christianity insists that the belief in the temporal event of the Incarnation is the only way to eternal truth and salvation, and that is why Žižek will call Christianity the religion of love. For him, "in love, we choose a finite temporal object that 'means more than anything else' and we focus on it." (ŽIŽEK, 2001 p.100). This religion of love is the only one capable of making eternity to depend of a temporal event, in other words, the conversion of the subject. It is in this sense that Davis (2014) states that

Zizek's God reveals itself in a radical process of self-emptying, until the point in which the love of God for the world results in sacrifice of his own transcendence – or, in a more precise way, his own distance from the word if we want – to become a more complete God. (DAVIS 2014 : 30)

This characteristic places Christianity as the religion of confession as Freud pointed out in *Moses and monotheism* (1939/2006). In that book Freud states that Christianity is always ready to confess the primordial crime (the death of the primeval father now represented in the figure of the Christ) and thus reveal its traumatic impact by pretending to be able to make peace with him through the rites.

Thus Christianity and the belief in a general way pose as a great problem for Žižek and demand a deepening to think such subjects in the Slovene author. Žižek's

philosophy may often seem unsystematic because it deals with extremely diverse subjects, such as Hollywood film criticism and everyday objects such as Coke and Kinder Egg, but we can think of a continuous thread linking the reflections of Žižek represented by return to Hegel through Lacan, the renewal of Marxism and at the same time an original interpretation of German idealism. It is important to emphasize that despite its importance in the contemporary scenario, Žižek is not a philosopher who proposes new concepts, but rather original re-readings of other philosophers, which often leads the academy to see him with evil eyes. However, we see that Žižek can be extremely profitable for thinking about religion in the contemporary world, and how religion has gained increasing attention in our postmodernity, this project is extremely important for our time. If the author is badly seen by the academy for not formulating many new concepts, this fact does not prevent us from raising his thoughts and finding good guidelines for some of our contemporary problems. In this sense, the critic that Žižek proposes on religion open the path to understand how he sees the christian legacy in our contemporary world. That's why the subtitle of his first book about religion is "*why is it worth fighting for the Christian legacy*". The legacy of Christianity to Žižek consists in des-transcendentalise the notion of God opening the path to a new freedom of man. That's why to him the true atheism needs to pass through christian experience; because only christianism is the religion that postulate the death of God.

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