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THE MONSTROSITY OF ŽIŽEK'S CHRISTIANITY

While the exchange between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ* has become one of the most widely discussed books in religious thought in the past decade or so, the real question remains: why does it matter? Is it largely because Žižek routinely offers good theater, even when confined to the printed page? Does the "conversation" signify merely the latest tag team match between the latest prominent representatives of the most two "dialectically" differential camps of postmodern Continental thinking - the "radical theologians" and Anglo-Catholic "neo-Orthodoxy"? The key lies perhaps in Žižek's statement on the book jacket: "my claim is that it is Milbank who is effectively guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism; in my atheism, I am more Christian than Milbank."

What do we make of this statement? On the surface it sounds very much like what Thomas J.J. Altizer has always contended, namely, that one can only be a "Christian" in the most trenchant sense if any faith stance is founded first and foremost on the signification of the Cross. The Cross is not a symbolic formulation of the incarnation so much as the Lacanian symbolic order in which the doctrinal discourse of the divine becoming human, of *logos* becoming flesh, dissembles the unrecognizable Reality that God died once and for all. The stark materiality of the Cross, as well as the pathos and terror of Christ's fateful physical suffering on Good Friday, speaks to the pure singularity of this once-and-for-all event. It is not so much the *mysterium horrendum* of the Infinite having been "sacrificed" on the altar of finitude, but the abject failure of any *logometric*, or even a symptomological, reading of the abysmal event itself. The raving of Nietzsche's madman that the "event" has "not yet reached the ears of men" underscores this inkling.

The fact that Altizer could not get a word in edgewise during his putative "dialogue" with Žižek about death-of-God theology at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Montreal in the fall of 2009 may seem less ironic than prophetic. Žižek's hyper-Christian, materialist atheological theology outstrips

not only Milbank's pseudo-radical, anti-modernist, neo-sacramentalist "orthodoxy", but also Altizer's self-proclaimed death-of-God theology. Altizer may have discovered the inner secret of all Christian confessional theology, but throughout his career he has retained the rhetoric of the standard *evangelium*, providing us with his own "dogmatic" interpretation not so much of Nietzsche's event as the historical event itself of crucifixion. Otherwise, there could not be a "gospel of Christian atheism," only a silence reeling from the shock of the Real. Altizer reads backward from dogma, or a regime of symbolic enunciation, to the singularity of the event. Žižek, on the other hand, reads forward from the singularity itself, taken as a kind of Lacanian fracturing of the speech of the enunciating subject, to its familiar symbolic correlation.

The occasion for Žižek's reversal of the ontologism of death-of-God theology is not so much his appropriation of Lacan, however, as his use philosophy of Schelling, whom Žižek regards as the true wild card in the career of "ontotheology." Prior to Žižek, Schelling was regarded largely as a strange footnote to German idealism, or at most the missing link in the genealogy of Hegelianism. It is Schelling's insistence on an *Ungrund*, a "Not-ground," a "God before God" who is both responsible for the creative nature of God and the historic-conceptual process of opposition, strife, and differentiation, that inspires Žižek. Žižek obviously over-Lacanizes Schelling. There is far more to the odyssey of Schelling's work and its long-term effects than Lacan's radical Freudianism can freight. But in the current sepulchral twilight of the once scintillating post-structuralist project, which fronted for Lacan for a long while just as Marxism fronted for Hegel, Žižek's persistence has forced us to confront not the arbitrariness so much as the lack of intellectual transparency commonly attributed to postmodern thought. So much of Žižek's exposition of Schelling derives from Schelling's key assertion in his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* that "the law of the ground [*Gesetz des Grundes*] is just as original as the law of identity."¹

Here we find an anticipation of Deleuze's identification of the event as the virtual production of the actual, a realization that the Same is neither beginning, nor

¹Schelling's importance for postmodern philosophy, which Žižek brings to the fore, is encapsulated in this well-known statement. So much of postmodern philosophy, particularly the work of Deleuze, can be viewed as a reaction against Hegel, who in turn developed his own dialectic as a reaction to Schelling. Hegel could not bear the thought that philosophy could intuit the "ground," the primal identity, of what is in the cosmos. While identity cannot be philosophically posited or presupposed, as far as Hegel is concerned, neither can it be metaphysically deduced by invoking the law of non-contradiction. There must be a temporal process to its development, the "labor of the negative" – hence the dialectic. "The issue between Schelling and Hegel," as Andrew Bowie observes, is "whether the Absolute can, as Hegel thinks, be grasped by the process of reflection." Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 56. For a further and closer reading concerning the controversy between Schelling and Hegel, see John Laughland, *Schelling versus Hegel: From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

end, nor a kind of “halfway house” where alterity can take account of itself as somehow positive, as in the Hegelian dialectic. Sameness, or *Identität*, has a genealogy or, as Žižek himself puts it in various ways, every beginning itself has its own beginning. The real “in reality” is *in itself* discrepant, discontinuous. Hence Lacan’s famous “barred S” constitutes something much more telling in Žižek than an algebraic notation. The bar denotes the irreconcilability of the divergent trajectories of self-reflection that designates the subject’s *subjectivity*. In Lacan Schelling’s *Ungrund* “grounds” itself as an endless subjectification. Unlike Lacan’s patients, however, Schelling’s God experiences no *jouissance*. “God” can only, as Žižek would say, “enjoy” his symptoms, which is the same to say that that in the same register there remains a radical, ever subjectifying, subject that can never produce a theological representation of the barred S itself. The only term for this “s” is perhaps the word “freedom,” which suits Schelling and Žižek alike. Žižek’s assertion that he is the most “Christian” of Christians, not simply and comparatively more Christian than Milbank, stems from this unacknowledged and backhanded introduction of the old, “paralactical” principle from Schelling of the *Ungrund* into more the conventional idiom of Christian theology.

In Žižek we have what we may call a “Christian nontheology,” if we take a cue from François Laruelle’s “nonphilosophy.” The subject is neither a mark nor a locatable *signified*, but a locus of “circulation” among elements in the interplay between desire and language. Žižek’s non-God, therefore, can only be identified “subjectively,” merely a shifting object-supplement, no longer the Big Other, naturally, but the Big *Objet Petit A*. Ultimately Žižek’s project is “political”, because it de-ontologize politics and ethics altogether while putting to rest once and forever the idea of Sartrean responsibility, the Derridean aporia, or any other overt or covert version of decisionism. The sign of the split subject entails an endorsement of what he describes as “the pragmatic paradox of ordering you to be free,” which also “exhorts you to dare.”² The dare corresponds fairly transparently to the divine act of creation in Schelling. Both creation and dare are what Žižek terms a “self-relating negativity,” approximates “the ‘impossible’ relationship between a drive *qua* real and its object, *objet petit a*, a drive doomed to circle for ever around its object-cause).”³ Žižek’s resuscitation of German idealism amounts, in fact, to a *re-Hegeleanizing of the post-structuralist Hegel* for the sake of a new, self-conscious (or perhaps we should say “subjectivized”) political actionism that will wean people away from Hegelianism in its entirety.

Žižek, nevertheless, locates the subjectification of the subject not in German idealism, or any other type of idealism per se, but in the *failure* of the subject. The failure of the subject is isomorphic with the failure of idealism, that is, the kind of subjective idealism inaugurated with Descartes, which finds its true bearings in Kant’s “transcendental” philosophy, and that allegedly reaches its apotheosis in the Hegelian thesis of the Absolute *becoming* Subject through the

²Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York, Verso, 2005), 483.

³Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (New York: Verso, 1996). 48.

dialectical movement of self-reflexivity, becoming in its unique concretely universal totality *an und für sich*.

Žižek, in fact, makes this point somewhat tongue-in-cheek in his preface to *The Ticklish Subject* by parodying the oft-recited opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto*. "A spectre is haunting Western academic, the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre..."⁴ But what Žižek *actually means* by the "Cartesian subject" is something radically different from any kind of orthodox or even "transcendental" Cartesianism. Žižek's is not really advocating a "return to the subject." Subjectivity becomes "the indivisible remainder," the barred S which can never be rubbed out, rolled over, or bracketed in the discourse *de rerum natura*, whether it be metaphysical, ontological, critical-transcendental, idealist, structuralist, or whatever. Heretofore we have always referred to this remainder as "consciousness," but the phrase is too long heavily laden with mystified implications of autonomous selfhood, an "identity" that leaves completely out of account à la Schelling the realization that such an *Identität* is always *pre-ontological*.

While Žižek occasionally compares himself to historic Protestantism, he is really out to demonstrate that the height and breadth of the Reformation imagination inexorably must collapse into a Marxist materialism, especially the odd "libertarian" kind that he with various flourishes avows over and over again. And this new kind of libertarian Marxism comes down to a "perverse core" of so much of the Western political and ethical heritage, which includes both Christianity and Marxism, yet can be assimilated to neither concept as these "traditions" are normally understood. Contrary to some of his critics who are quick to pounce once they think they have figured out exactly what he is saying about the connection between the history of philosophy, politics, and religion, Žižek does not use the religious as a form of leverage to get beyond the religious. It is safe to say that is exactly where he has always wanted to land, though he is perhaps more comfortable with his surroundings, which he at last recognizes, than his critics would be, if they actually understood his stance.

Žižek's seemingly playful notion of a "perverse core of Christianity," which he introduces in his earlier work *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, compares well with the Real in Lacan. A "perversity" is something that ends up tortured and twisted into unrecognizable shapes through the incommensurability of these two kinds of signifying processes. Perversion is not a type of rhetorical caricature; it is what remains embedded, coiled, and concealed within the very illusions of normativity and the performance, including linguistic performance. It is the kind of "truth" a psychoanalyst strives for the patient to uncover through the unwinding of the tightly structured dissemblances peculiar to his own discourse. The quest for philosophical truth is no different, as far as Žižek is concerned. What we call "religion" has its own perverse core, and that perverse core is Christianity. Christianity, in turn, has its own perverse core, which is the

⁴*The Ticklish Subject*, xxiii.

crucified God. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek hammers together the scaffolding for the more complex kind of analysis he carries out later in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. Any theory of the “religious” cannot be essayed by theorizing from the singular to the universal: “Christ was, before his death, a universal concept (‘Jesus the Christ-Messiah’), and, through his death, he emerged as the unique singular, ‘Jesus Christ.’ Here universality is *aufgehoben* in singularity, not the other way around.”⁵

The question in *The Monstrosity of Christ* is, as Milbank himself rightly spots, a “question of the interpretation of Christianity.”⁶ But the debate between Milbank and Žižek is ultimately not about Christianity at all, not in the sense that Milbank implies. The debate is really about method in its broadest meaning. Milbank views Žižek in his would-be Hegelian obsessions as the truly “last” of the modernists, where his sophisticated Lacanian refinement of Altizer’s “Christian atheism” amounts to nothing more than a “heterodox version of Christian belief” which is uniquely Protestant. Milbank plays on Žižek’s rhetoric of the “post-metaphysical” to make much the same point early in his career when he claimed that radical orthodoxy with its own “strange” reading of the historic doctrines of the Eucharist, as opposed to his caricaturing of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derridean postmodernism, was the only possible, navigable transit route beyond “ontotheology.” What he terms “the nub of the issue” between himself and Žižek is putatively a simple dispute over who is truly radically heterodox or radically orthodox. At one point, however, he paradoxically accuses Žižek of “orthodoxy,” albeit not a sufficiently radical one. “Is it more radical and Christian to say,” Milbank asks, “in heterodox fashion (with Hegel), that the infinite ‘is only the absurdly self-grounding finite, or is it more radical to say, in a kind of hyperorthodox fashion with Eckhart, that the infinite and the finite both coincide and do not coincide” - in other words, the “orthodox” Chalcedonian “fully God and fully man.” Milbank adds: “in the first case we have the tediously mysterious abolition of mystery; in the second case we have the fascinatingly mysterious exposition of mystery in all its simplicity.”⁷

Milbank, of course, entirely misses the point of what Žižek is up to. The question of Christianity - and we should add the question of the religious, especially if the object is to theorize - has never been about “mystery.” The category of mystery is one of the arch-categories of the process of “postmodern” mystification, which Žižek sees as an expansive Enlightenment universalism, following the trajectory of a dying star in its “red giant” stage (or, as Žižek calls Milbank, a “Red Tory” who wants an all-encompassing socialist state largesse specifically under the umbrella of a reactionary Catholic-feudal class structure) collapsing into the form of a “white dwarf,” an even more “obscurantist” style of “religion without religion.” Milbank confuses simplicity with singularity. Singularity is what

⁵Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Boston MA: MIT Press, 2003), 17.

⁶Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), 117.

⁷*The Monstrosity of Christ*, 169.

draws both *infinitely* and *abjectly* all the structures – even the most *paradoxical* or even *paralogical* ones – of language and signification in the direction of a *parallax*, or “split,” subjectivity that is truly primordial in its postmodern, *postmetaphysicality*. The “Christ event”, as Rudolf Bultmann originally named it, is the “true event.”

When “the Christian God,” Žižek writes, “manifests himself to other men as an individual man, exclusive and single, we are then “dealing with the singularity of a pure event, with contingency brought to an extreme – only in this mode, excluding all efforts to approach universal perfection, can God incarnate himself.” Finally, “this change can be succinctly described as the shift from the upward movement of the becoming-essential of the accident to the downward movement of the becoming-accidental of the essence.”⁸ The event-singularity, circumscribed by its horizon of its ever more intense “downward” circulation, is not a mystery. We must remember the sudden death-plunge of Nietzsche’s tightrope walker, the one who seeks to transit the abyss, but falls into it. That is what Žižek perhaps has in mind with his provocative and “perverse” signification of Christ’s “monstrosity,” which he characterizes as a tenebrous “truth,” wherein “the entire edifice of reality hinges on a contingent singularity through which it alone actualizes itself.”⁹ That is also what it comes down to in Hegel’s absolute self-disclosure of Absolute Spirit, according to Žižek. “In the triad of art, religion, and science (philosophy), religion is crucial as the site of a gap, of an imbalance between form and content.”¹⁰ Spirit is the horizon, the Absolute is the event, which as Hegel says cryptically at the conclusion of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, must undergo its Golgotha to become actual.

Žižek puts it as starkly as possible. “What dies on the Cross indeed God himself, not just his ‘finite container,’ a historically contingent name or form of God.”¹¹ Žižek criticizes Caputo’s suggestion, which actually follows the latter’s reading of Deleuze, that events “such as the death of God are not happenings per se, but something that “goes on in what happens,” the virtual productive that can be conjectured yet never derived from the experience of things within the temporal dimension. For Žižek, God dies in the exact same “univocal” sense that any human being dies, from a car accident, cancer, heart failure, or whatever. The event, for Deleuze and of course Caputo, is always an “excess” over its determinations. Yet, as far as Žižek is concerned, the excess is in its effects. That is why the death of God, which we can understand as a concretized, determinate event on the Cross (or when we look at a crucifix we perhaps have a kind of kitschy *memento mori* of it), is more shattering than any metaphor can contain.

Žižek professes that he really favors Altizer’s “apocalyptic” depiction of God’s death over Caputo’s putative “deconstructive” account of it as the final disclosure of the impossibility of ontotheology. He asks: what if “the entire

⁸*The Monstrosity of Christ*, 81.

⁹*The Monstrosity of Christ*, 80.

¹⁰*The Monstrosity of Christ*, 80.

¹¹*The Monstrosity of Christ*, 257.

history of Christianity, inclusive of (and especially) its Orthodox versions [not to mention its deconstructive ones], is structured as a series of defenses against the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection?"¹² The history of Christian theology—from Paulinism to Christian Platonism to “dialectical theology” and beyond—is, therefore, “structured” against acknowledgment of this perverse and “monstrous” incongruity between God as a sustainable “idea of God,” nested within a certain inaccessible revelatory particularity, and the particularity itself. Altizer’s essential theme, which he has drummed home for most of his career, is that “apocalypse” is not like Derridean messianism, that is, what *is to come*.

Jesus’ memorable, yet ambiguous words on the Cross – *telestai*, “it is finished” – mean exactly that, as far as Altizer is concerned. *Fini!* Done! But with a bang, rather than a whimper. According to Žižek, the “finished” singularity of this noniterable, nontheological actual event establishes not “truth” in either a religious or philosophical sense, but perhaps something akin to a truth-event that is more than truth. But this truth-event, the most real event, the singular event of all singular events, contains something even more significant than all religious or theological formulations heretofore have been able even to estimate. The condition of the event is *radical freedom*, the freedom of the subject from its ground as subject, the *Ungrund* of all ontology, ethics, politics, or even theological discussions about the “death of God.”

If Žižek is truly the most Christian of Christians, it is not because he is most self-reflexing and self-effacing. Žižek’s Christianity has little, if anything, to do with a Kierkegaardian “inwardness” or any symmetry between inner and outer, the life of the spirit and the life of action. The perverse core, the “monstrosity” of his Christianity, has to do with the Procrustean incommensurability between all “issues” of Christian theology and the subjectification of the Christian subject through the “dare” of the very fractured language of the theologico-symbolical to “take up one’s Cross,” to be “crucified” daily. Elsewhere, Žižek refers to this task as that of a “church,” a kind of “eschatological collective.” The monstrosity of Christ does not find its adopted progeny in a collective of deconstruction-minded, Lacanized, new and improved death-of-God theologians. Christian theology can do nothing more than discourse interminably about its impossible object of desire, its Deiform *objet petit a*. The cashout for Christ’s monstrosity is the perversity of the Christian life itself. That is something that about which Milbank can only come up clueless.

¹²*The Monstrosity of Christ*, 260.

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Although Å½iÅ¼ekâ€™s professed concern in the opening essay of *The Monstrosity of Christ* is to tender a “modest plea for the Hegelian reading of Christianity,” readers will be unsurprised to learn that there is nothing remotely modest about his petition. What Å½iÅ¼ek offers is a thoroughly materialist interpretation of Hegel: a perspective that twists Hegel from side to side, then turns him upside down and downside up, until all references to transcendence are utterly dialecticized and utterly de-substantialized. Å½iÅ¼ek is above all a Gothic writer, and the admirers who approach him as though he were Louis CK or Reggie Watts are thus falling into a kind of category error. Theyâ€™ve got the genre wrong, like the people who go to slasher movies and chortle every time the knife comes out. So thatâ€™s one version of Å½iÅ¼ekâ€™s Gothic method. There are thus three distinct claims weâ€™ll need to be able to tell apart. We can say, first, that Å½iÅ¼ek likes to read Gothic fiction and also the eerier reaches of science fiction—and thatâ€™s true, though he precisely does not read them the way a literary critic would. In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Å½iÅ¼ek and Milbank go head to head for three rounds, employing an impressive arsenal of moves to advance their positions and press their respective advantages. By the closing bell, they have not only proven themselves worthy adversaries, they have shown that faith and reason are not simply and intractably opposed. Å½iÅ¼ek has long been interested in the emancipatory potential offered by Christian theology. And Milbank, seeing global capitalism as the new century’s greatest ethical challenge, has pushed his own ontology in more political and materialist direction