

Dwarfs, Ghosts and Monsters Against the Big Other – Žižek’s use of Christianity Caleb Anderson – Sociology 401

Amid the rise of ‘post-secular’ discourse and religious fundamentalism, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has remarked that “what we truly need is a dose of good old atheism”, which is “modern Europe’s most precious legacy” (Žižek 2008b: 133,139). He would certainly include himself in this atheist tradition, not only in the popular sense but in stressing the psychological and political importance of understanding that there is no god. However, over the past decade¹, Žižek has become increasingly attracted to Christianity. This “theologico-political turn”, which Žižek suggests may be the “first true taste” of twenty-first century thought, also encompasses Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Terry Eagleton and Antonio Negri, who all employ materialist theological themes to radically critique modern democratic capitalism (Žižek 2009b: 254).

In this essay I aim to survey the use Žižek has made of Christian theology in all the major areas of his thought. The three main areas of his concern appear to be *philosophy*², where he is influenced by G. W. F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Schelling, G. K. Chesterton, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche; *psychoanalysis*, where his primary reference is Jacques Lacan, but he also draws on Lacan’s predecessor Sigmund Freud and pupil/son-in-law Jacques-Alain Miller; and *Marxism* – both in the sense of ‘interpreting the world’ (social theory) and ‘changing it’ (radical left politics) – where he draws upon Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Ernesto Laclau, Alain Badiou and Fredric Jameson as well as Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong. Of course, these bleed together to a large extent³. But in different ways in these three areas, Žižek has begun to regularly draw upon Christian theology in sometimes novel, often unexpected ways.

God is dead: Philosophy (and theology)

Walter Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history, composed in 1940, referred analogically to an illusion whereby a puppet could beat any opponent at chess, seemingly on its own, but actually controlled by a dwarf hiding in the apparatus. He Benjamin states that the ‘puppet’ of historical materialism will triumph, but to do so it must make use of the ‘dwarf’ of theology, “which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight” (Benjamin 1940). In this ‘post-secular’ and ‘post-communist’ century, Žižek observes that fashions have changed; theology is back with a vengeance while Marxist historical materialism cowers. Žižek believes that these developments warrant a reversal of Benjamin’s thesis: “The puppet called ‘theology’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight” (Žižek 2003: 3).

To some extent, this reversal sums up Žižek’s use of theology. He laments as strongly as anyone the growth of religious fundamentalisms, New Age navel-gazing and post-secularist obscurantism⁴ (Žižek 2000: 1). But rather than desperately trying to hold back the return of the spiritual, à la Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, Žižek pits theology against theology; advocating a specific version of Christian theology which is firmly led by historical materialism. Yet this brief explanation could appear too similar to Friedrich Engels’ championing of the peasant revolts in Reformation-era Germany. Engels all-too-quickly writes off the genuine religious element of these

¹While references to Christianity appeared sporadically in his earlier work, usually as illustrative examples as with his references to films and novels, Žižek’s more active interest in Christianity began with a chapter in 1999’s *The Ticklish Subject : the absent centre of political ontology*, where he responds, largely sympathetically, to his friend Alain Badiou’s book *Saint Paul : the foundation of universalism* (1997). His first lengthy treatment of Christian themes came a year later with *The Fragile Absolute : or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (2000).

²For ease of classification I will include theology in this category. The theologians Žižek draws upon tend to more accurately fit the description of ‘Christian philosopher’ than ‘biblical scholar’.

³As two examples, the influence of Lacan is present in the way Žižek reads Hegel, Jesus and Marx; and, as we will see, Žižek’s influence from Badiou is philosophical/theological although it reinforces their shared Marxist politics.

⁴“One of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so-called ‘thought’” (Žižek 2000: 1).

struggles as a contingent, strategic expression of material class interests in “the only language [the people] could then understand” (Engels 1850: 117). Žižek takes theology far more seriously. Not only does he see materialism as necessary for Christians to unearth the subversive kernel of their faith, he also believes that “the Christian experience” is essential for true dialectical materialists (Žižek 2003: 6).

The dwarf: ‘incomplete’ materialism

This dual advocacy leads Žižek to summarise his position as being a “Paulinian materialist” (Žižek 1999b: ix). Identifying as a materialist is customary for a Marxist, and despite his high regard for German idealists, Žižek follows Marx, Bakunin and the classic materialist critique of religion in insisting upon a materialist ontology against idealist religion (Bakunin 1882, Torres 1992: 3). However, Žižek endorses a specifically *theological* version of materialism which takes on board “the basic insight of religion, its premise that our commonsense reality is not the true one”, while rejecting the theistic following step that there is therefore “another, “higher,” suprasensible reality” (Žižek 2009b: 240). Central to Žižek’s materialism is a sense of “*the ontological incompleteness of reality*”⁵, which is neither complete in itself, as in vulgar materialism, nor supplemented by a separate spiritual/ideal reality, as in dualist idealism (Žižek 2009b: 240).

Žižek theorises this ontological incompleteness using Lacan’s formulae of sexuation, which are two different ways of conceptualising incompleteness, and thus two different ways of denying the suggestion that ‘material reality is all’. The ‘masculine’ mode involves completeness being made possible by a sustaining exception, as with a dualist ontology, where “material reality isn’t everything, there is another, higher, spiritual reality” (Žižek 2009a: 95). The ‘feminine’ mode is far more radical in that the incompleteness “goes all the way down”; “the “All” itself ... is non-All” (Žižek 2003: 79). Applied to ontology, this formula allows us to say that material reality is ‘non-All’, inconsistent and open; yet there is *nothing but* this material reality which is non-All, inconsistent and open. Žižek finds an unlikely ally for this “breathtakingly weird ontology” in quantum physics, which is beginning to see the “principle of uncertainty” not just as an indicator of the limits of our “conceptual apparatus”, but also as a sign of incompleteness inscribed into reality itself (Žižek 2009a: 89).

For Žižek, true Christianity and true materialism embrace the feminine mode of exception and posit a non-All material totality, even if both Chesterton and Lenin fall into the trap of reverting to the masculine mode (Žižek 2009a: 88,100). Žižek agrees with many orthodox Christian theologians in observing that Christianity uniquely values the material world; particularly in its doctrine of the incarnation, which for Žižek involves God not descending, but *ascending* into temporal, material reality (Žižek 2000: 96, Žižek 2003: 13-14)⁶. But unlike most orthodox theologians, Žižek believes that this must be taken to the point of atheism to be ontologically consistent⁷. Žižek thus affirms Jean-Luc Nancy’s suggestion that what is needed today is a specific form of atheism that is both a completion and a negation of Christianity, just as Christianity completed and overcame Judaism (Žižek 2009b: 287-288).

This also leads Žižek to propose Heidegger’s concept of “*Geworfenheit* ... “being-thrown” into a concrete historical situation” as the basic human condition (Žižek 2001: 6-9). This opposes standard humanism and materialism on the one hand, and Gnosticism and idealism on the other.

⁵All emphasis is original unless otherwise noted.

⁶For example, Žižek may be surprised to observe even so institutional a figure as Mark Strom, former principal of New Zealand’s evangelical theological institute Laidlaw College, advocating what could very easily be called ‘Paulinian materialism’ against the Greco-Roman idealism, abstraction and elitism that Paul held at bay during his life, though it has subsequently infiltrated the church (Strom 2000).

⁷Žižek is opposed here by several of the other contributors to *Theology and the Political : The New Debate* (Davis, Milbank & Žižek (eds.) 2005), who assert that a theological materialism is able to be *more* materialistic than Marx’s atheist materialism (Davis and Riches 2005, Milbank 2005, Blond 2005).

While the former posture claims that humans are completely at home on this earth and disdains any sense that this world is ‘fallen’ or incomplete, and the latter disdains the material world and body as a “foreign and inhospitable environment” for the Soul, both assert that there is a place where the human being is fully and properly at home (Žižek 2009b: 264-265). *Geworfenheit* instead claims that “our constitutive, primordial condition” is not a home *from* which or *into* which we are thrown, but *the very state of being ‘thrown’*; we are always and by definition “dislocated”, “out of joint” (Žižek 2009b: 265).

This incompleteness in which we are (dis)located is also inscribed into Žižek’s anthropology; his view of humanity (and of *inhumanity*). Rather than a ‘masculine’ definition of inhumanity, which defines humanity in relation to an inhuman other (gods, animals, barbarians), Žižek follows Freud and Lacan in positing the ‘feminine’ concept of a non-All humanity, where an inhuman kernel or excess is inherent to humanity itself (Žižek 2005: 159-160,175,183n.). This inhumanity is our monstrous divine spark, the “bone in the throat” which blocks our becoming fully human, yet it is also paradoxically the essence of true humanity (Žižek 2001: 90). Here Christian theology becomes specifically relevant, as for Žižek, Christ represents this “monstrous surplus”, this divine “noncoincidence of man with man” that is also the archetype of humanity “as such”; in the words of Pontius Pilate, “*ecce homo*” (Žižek 2003: 80,143).

The puppet: Pauline theology

The designator ‘Paulinian’ in Žižek’s “one-line description of where I stand” (Žižek 1999b: ix) reinforces the importance Žižek gives to Christian theology, particularly that of the apostle Paul, whose name warrants a mention where others such as Hegel, Lacan and Marx do not. Žižek has picked up several important themes from his friend Alain Badiou’s “path-breaking” book on Paul (Žižek 2000: 1).

Important for Badiou is the idea of life and death as “way[s] of being in the world” (Badiou 1997: 61-62). Contra Nietzsche, who castigated Paul for abolishing life to the beyond, Badiou insists that Paul’s project revolved around the assertion of life against death. Resurrection introduces the alternate “existential attitude” (Žižek 1999a: 146) of life, defeating and overriding the natural human state of death⁸; a focus Nietzsche himself should have affirmed (Badiou 1997: 71-72). Žižek, too, affirms a Nietzschean-Pauline answer to the question of what it means to be really alive. Žižek opposes the post-modern attitude of rejecting all higher causes as totalitarian and focusing on the pursuit of minor pleasures, saying that this is not an assertion of life against transcendent Causes, but a retreat from true life. For Žižek, “what makes life ‘worth living’ is the very excess of life” for which we would be willing to die (Žižek 2002: 88-89).

More important for Žižek is Badiou’s identification of Paul as the founder of universalism. Badiou stresses that for Paul, the individual’s salvation from death is only meaningful insofar as it is universal (Badiou 1997: 96). Paul’s ‘life’ is lived in universal communities where all class, status and particular identity is rendered irrelevant; “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). This is a radical enough thought today; it was “a genuinely stupefying statement” in the ancient Roman context (Badiou 1997: 9)⁹. Paul’s universalism involves a call to “not be conformed” (Romans 12:2) to the dominant discourses of the world; the discourses of the Father and of mastery. Jesus “filiates all of humanity” into a discourse of the Son, where we are “God’s coworkers” (1 Corinthians 3:9¹⁰),

⁸“The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). Biblical quotations, when not quoted from secondary sources, are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁹The orthodox Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas affirms this identification of the early church founding the idea of universalism, even going so far as to say that it is *only* by contrast to the universality of the church that the world can identify the arbitrariness of its divisions (Hauerwas 1983a: 375).

¹⁰Badiou’s translation.

participating in a “shared egalitarian endeavour” (Badiou 1997: 42,59-60).

Chief among these discourses of mastery in Paul’s world are Jewish law and Greek wisdom (Badiou 1997: 28)¹¹. For Badiou, these represent the particularism of the Jewish ethnic community and the abstract universalism of Greco-Roman philosophy. Paul resists both of these discourses, as well as a tidy synthesis, cutting diagonally across them with his message of “universal singularity” (Badiou 1997: 13,43,46). This universalism is opposed to all communitarian particularism – whether Jewish ethnic solidarity, fascist nationalism or today’s identity politics and tolerance (Žižek 2001: 142-144). For Paul and his communities, “ethnic roots, national identities, etc., are not a category of truth” (Žižek 2009c: 104).

Yet Paul’s universal singularity is equally opposed to the prevailing universalisms of Greco-Roman philosophy and citizenship (Badiou 1997: 13-14). Paul’s world was being relentlessly globalised by the Roman empire, whose Pax Romana was ideologically maintained by elitist, idealist Hellenistic philosophies (Horsley 2003: 95-105, Strom 2000: 36-37,58-69)¹². Paul rejects this universal, centralised subjection for a de-centred universality rooted in the universal call to all believers; short-circuiting all earthly mediation between singularity and universality (Badiou 1997: 19, Žižek 2009b: 294). This is why Paul’s message is folly to Greek wisdom as well as a scandal to Jewish law (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Žižek expands upon Badiou’s conception of universalism, which he prefers to call “singular universality” (Žižek 2009b: 295) or ‘concrete universality’, paralleling the Marxist call for concrete freedom (Žižek 2008a: 19). Žižek rails against post-modern liberalism’s inherent distrust of universality (Žižek 2001: 142-144), and even endorses George W. Bush’s criticism of Muslim theocracies for their repression of dissidents and women. Žižek denies the liberal critique of such a stance as ‘cultural imperialism’, claiming that Bush’s real problem is his failure to apply the same universalist stance to his own politics (Žižek 2008b: 115).

Yet at the same time, Žižek and Badiou see the profound ambiguity of universalism as such, and the way that Paul’s message cuts across the dominant universality of capital (Badiou 1997: 13). Žižek believes it is time to go beyond the postcolonial (and, previously, Marxist) critique of liberalism and capitalism for housing covert Eurocentrist particularism; true though this has been, it misses what is truly and horrifyingly universal about global capitalism (Žižek 2008b: 144-157). Post-modern capitalism is severing its “umbilical link” to Europe in order to colonise not only societies but new frontiers of culture, worldviews, and ‘private’ life (Žižek 2008b: 156). Yet while such ‘abstract universality’ unites, Paul’s concrete universality is necessarily divisive when it enters the dominant unity; into the Pax Romana or Pax Capitalista, concrete universality brings “not ... peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34, Žižek 2009b: 294, Wengst 1987: 61-62).

In Badiou’s reading of Paul, universality is inextricably linked to grace¹³. True universality cannot develop from a particular situation, but must proceed from a gratuitous act appearing out of nowhere as “pure and simple *encounter*” (Badiou 1997: 66). The importance of grace for Paul springs from his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Nothing “[led] up to” Paul’s conversion; he was not won over by the gospel, nor did he seek confirmation of his conversion from the incipient Christian leadership (Badiou 1997: 17). His conversion came about as a result of a

¹¹Badiou’s explanation of the Jewish discourse is in actual fact a lot more complicated than can be explained by the word ‘law’, also involving the demand for signs and an affirmation of the power of God, however this is tangential to the current study. See Badiou (1997), especially chapters 4 and 7.

¹²A significant development in Pauline studies in recent decades is the discovery of the ‘counter-imperial Paul’ and the – often covert – ways in which Paul challenged the Roman empire and its philosophy. Badiou and Žižek show little familiarity with this scholarship although it could enhance their accounts of Paul and Christianity. See especially Horsley (ed.) (1997), or for further references, Anderson (2011).

¹³Or divine gift; *charisma* (Badiou 1997: 77).

direct interpellation¹⁴ from the risen Jesus, and completely reversed the trajectory of his particular life, which at that point had him zealously repressing the Christian heresy (Acts 9). Žižek notes that Badiou reverses the usual understanding that law is universal and grace is particular. For Badiou, no matter how universal law may strive to be, it is necessarily tied to particular roots and definitions; only grace can be truly universal by “addressing all humans independently of their race, sex, social status, and so on” (Žižek 1999a: 147).

Thus Badiou “extract[s] a ... wholly secularized conception of grace from the mythological core” (Badiou 1997: 66) to explain how universality can penetrate the particular. His preferred term for this act of secular grace is ‘Event’¹⁵. The event of Paul’s call on the road to Damascus mirrors the true event of the Christian message; the Resurrection of Jesus¹⁶. These events furnish Paul with the insight to universalise truth by extracting it from its particular situation, “provok[ing]—entirely alone—a cultural revolution upon which we still depend” (Badiou 1997: 15). Žižek is influenced by Badiou’s concept of Events (Žižek 2008a: 115-116), and agrees that what is Real (in a Lacanian sense) is not the event proper but people’s subjective perception of it; in the Event of the French Revolution, “the reality of what went on in Paris belongs to the temporal dimension of empirical history; the sublime image that generated enthusiasm belongs to eternity” (Žižek 2008b: 52-53).

However, in his understanding of the Christ-event, Žižek parts company with Badiou, and ends up following Lacan and Hegel more than Badiou (Žižek 1999a: 127-170, Žižek 2009a). Badiou has no time for Hegelian dialectical understandings of the death and resurrection; for him, Paul’s understanding of the Christ-event is “antidialectical” (Badiou 1997: 66). This means that the Event in the Christ story is the resurrection; his death is merely the immanent “evental site” and in no way carries its own “redemptive function” as a stage in a dialectical process (Badiou 1997: 66,70-71). This reading of Paul leads Badiou to downplay the significance Paul gives to Jesus’ death. Badiou and Žižek are right to observe that Paul is not interested in incidental details from Jesus’ life (Žižek 2003: 10), but the fact and nature of Jesus’ death are far from incidental details. “Christ crucified” is Paul’s message, and this material occurrence, rather than Badiou’s philosophical idea of ‘universal singularity’, is what is folly to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). In ignoring the crucifixion, Badiou completely misses the political significance of Paul’s championing a lord executed for sedition by the Roman and Jewish political-religious authorities in the manner reserved for slaves and insurgents (Elliott 1997)¹⁷.

Žižek largely follows Badiou in neglecting to appreciate Jesus’ political death. While Žižek appreciates Chesterton’s observation that Jesus was “a rebel as well as a king”, this is explained by Chesterton and Žižek using ahistoricist philosophical reasoning, devoid of any concrete political analysis that could render such a point more potent (Žižek 2009a: 48). However, Žižek does put far more emphasis on Jesus’ death than Badiou, and assigns it a dialectical significance alien to Badiou’s account. For Žižek, the death and resurrection are “one and the same event viewed from different perspectives” (Žižek 2009b: 292); perspectives which reveal different stages of God’s

¹⁴The Althusserian term is deliberately used; Žižek notes that Badiou’s description of the event of grace “bears an uncanny resemblance to Althusserian ‘ideological interpellation’” (Žižek 1999a: 128).

¹⁵Žižek renders it as “Truth-Event” (Žižek 1999a: 146).

¹⁶Badiou acknowledges the irony that this ‘truth’-event is one that, in his account (and Žižek’s), did not actually occur. Yet he does not believe this is ultimately a problem, as what is important is “the subjective gesture grasped in its founding power”, which must in any case be sequestered from its historical conditions (Badiou 1997: 6). John Milbank believes that in downplaying the material, historical event, Badiou betrays his own theory of universalism arising from a material Event, exposing it as actually a simple idealism where the event is nothing but the arrival of an Idea (Milbank 2005: 411). The irony of Badiou and Žižek’s denying the material resurrection of Jesus is that this is precisely the stance of the Gnostics, whom Žižek detests, and precisely what enabled them to betray the subversive legacy of Christianity (Wright 2003: 333-338, 548-549). The early orthodox Christians were remarkably unanimous in affirming the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, as well as hope in their own future bodily resurrection; and this was inextricably tied to opposition to the ruling authorities (Wright 2003: 209).

¹⁷Crucifixion was the first-century equivalent of a one-way ticket to Guantanamo Bay; a representative example is the six thousand crucified for participating in Spartacus’ slave revolt in 71 B.C.E. (Elliott 1997: 167-169).

dialectical self-transformation. Žižek believes that this Hegelian reading is the only way of truly embracing the Christian message of God made human (Žižek 2009a: 26), and that such a dialectical interpretation of the Trinity is essential to understanding the very nature of God.

The monstrosity: the Trinity as dialectic

The concept of the Trinity is vital for Žižek's theology¹⁸. The Trinity is partly a way of conceptualising a non-All monotheism. Not only is God the inhuman gap in humanity or the non-being gap in being, which could be conceived as a 'masculine' constitutive exception; this gap is "transposed" into God himself, displayed in the Father's (self-)abandonment of the Son (Žižek 2003: 24, 88). Humans are therefore paradoxically united with God precisely in our separation from God, in our solidarity with Christ's despairing cry of "Father, why have you forsaken me?" (Žižek 2006: 106). In this internal antagonism, God "*stumbles on the limits of his own omnipotence*", a "self-limitation" which makes human freedom possible, as God "opens up the space for [free people] in HIS OWN lack/void/gap" (Žižek 2001: 146).

This goes some way to an explanation of why God must exist in multiple persons, but the roles of the persons themselves must be understood dialectically. Žižek rejects the orthodox Christian understanding of the Trinity, which posits a (single) God eternally (co-)existing as "pure relationship" (Milbank 2009: 185-189). For Žižek, following Hegel, the Trinity represents three separate and sequential substantiations of God, "a process in the very heart of God himself" (Žižek 2009b: 254). The birth of Jesus is the death of the Father, and the birth of the Holy Spirit is the death of Jesus (Žižek 2009a: 33).

The first stage of this dialectical process is the Incarnation, where God abandons his transcendent position as a "hidden Master pulling the strings" and "throws himself into his creation" (Žižek 2009a: 25); thus singularising the universal (Žižek 2003: 80). Žižek asserts that Hegelian dialectics is the only philosophy that takes the 'monstrosity' of the Incarnation seriously; orthodox theologies still cling to their transcendent God (Žižek 2009a: 26,31-33). The monstrous and deeply comical message of the Incarnation is that "the universal Essence" is no longer 'up there', but is fully and exclusively situated in a miserable and ridiculous "clown-king" (Žižek 2009a: 80-81, Žižek 2006: 105).

God's self-abandonment reaches its culmination at Christ's death; "when Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?": the hope that there is a father who has abandoned me" (Žižek 2003: 170)¹⁹. The death of Jesus is not only the death of God's "earthly representative", but the death of "the God of beyond itself" (Žižek 2009a: 29). Here Žižek endorses "death-of-God" theology (Žižek 2009b: 260), especially that of Thomas Altizer. Altizer is "the most obvious theological predecessor to Žižek's work" with his Hegelian mandate to take Nietzsche literally and assert that God is not merely a dead theory, but a real being that has really died (Boscaljon 2010: 4)²⁰.

The Lacanian name for this transcendent God who throws himself into a singular individual in order to be killed is 'the big Other', the "symbolic Order" which "guarantees the meaningfulness of our acts" (Žižek 2001: 109-110, Žižek 2009b: 296). The big Other is also discernible in secular worldviews where reified concepts such as "the people" or the market function as a big Other

¹⁸Literally: discussion of God.

¹⁹Thus, while Žižek insists that the death and resurrection are one and the same event, it makes more sense from a dialectical perspective to combine the *incarnation* with the death as the beginning and end of the same gesture; "the point of Incarnation is that ... God is dead" (Žižek 2009a: 31).

²⁰It seems unlikely that Žižek himself would acknowledge that there was a God who has died, except rhetorically. He is more likely suggesting that the 'Christian experience' of the death of God is the only way of convincing ourselves that there is not (and never has been) anything like a God.

(Žižek 2008a: 227,453). A genuinely atheist stance is where one “accept[s] that the big Other doesn’t exist, and act[s] upon it” (Žižek 2009b: 299), and insofar as Christianity is the only religion in which God dies, “it is only Christianity that opens up the space for thinking this nonexistence” (Žižek 2009b: 287). The “Christian experience” (Žižek 2003: 6) a materialist must undergo is to repeat the gesture of the abandoned Christ²¹, and confront our teleological masters with the utter meaninglessness of suffering. In solidarity with the dying, doubting, despairing Jesus we abandon once and for all any notion of an omnipotent Master who can provide a meaning to “cover up the brutal reality” of the crucifixion, ecological catastrophe or the Holocaust (Žižek 2008b: 180-181)²².

In dying, Christ thus becomes the “vanishing mediator” (Žižek 2009a: 29) between God-as-big Other and – what? The death of Jesus opens up the space for the birth of the Holy Spirit, which for Žižek is the “community deprived of its support in the big Other” (Žižek 2003: 170). The Holy Spirit represents the (only) Real site of the “virtual entity” of Spirit; which is actualised insofar as it is subjectively believed in and followed (Žižek 2009a: 60). This is substantiated in the spirit of love that exists in the collective of believers. Žižek suggests that Christ’s statement “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20) should be taken literally; “God as the divine *individual* (Christ) passes into the purely *nonsubstantial link* between individuals” (Žižek 2006: 80).

The concrete outworking of this love²³, which is a fully material, ‘non-big-Other’ God²⁴, is not to be found in the institutional church and religious experience; forms that must be abandoned in order for the essence to survive (Žižek 2003: 170). Instead the Holy Spirit finds its primary expression in “authentic psychoanalytic and revolutionary political collectives” (Žižek 2000: 160). This is the opening through which Žižek can draw aspects of his theological philosophy to enrich these other two central areas of his thought.

The traumatic ‘leap of faith’ – and psychoanalysis

Žižek draws some unusual comparisons between Christ and a psychoanalyst; both gain their authority not through what they say and do, but through who they *are*; the former as the son of God and the latter as someone occupying the analyst role (Žižek 2006: 98-99). Moreover, in Žižek’s accounts of both the ‘Christian experience’ and of psychoanalytical treatment, the end goal is the same; for the patient to “accept[] the nonexistence of the big Other” (Žižek 2003: 169-170). The psychoanalyst achieves this breakthrough by acting as “the ideal listener ... the very opposite of the Master-figure that guarantees meaning” (Žižek 2003: 170), while Christ must die to reveal the death of the big Other (Žižek 2006: 99).

Christian theology has typically theorised the saving significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection in three main ways: as a cosmic victory over death, as a sacrificial or judicial payment, or as a moral example of the means to our healing (Marshall 2002). Žižek’s account of the atonement fits most easily within this third category; he rejects ideas of a guilt payment or legal ransom (Žižek 2008a: 432) as well as belief in a literal resurrection. In his account, what we need to be set free from is the inhuman surplus of life which functions as our “paradoxical wound” (Žižek 2001: 104). Žižek interprets the story of the Fall of humanity (Genesis 3-4) as the account of “how the human animal

²¹The gesture of Christ is, in turn, a repetition of the stance of Job in the Hebrew Bible, who confronts God with “the utter *meaninglessness* of his suffering”; and a transposition of this antagonism into God himself (Žižek 2003: 124-126).

²²Christian disavowals of God as a controlling master of history are not exclusive to the ‘death of God’ paradigm. Žižek acknowledges that the notion of divine Grace denies “Providence ... the ultimate balance between virtues and happiness guaranteed by God” (Žižek 2003: 177n.). Other Christian theologians have understood this as a characteristic of God, rather than something only possible once God is dead (eg. Ellul 1986: 122-123, cf. also note 34 below).

²³*Agape*, which Žižek, following Terry Eagleton, translates “political love” (Žižek 2009b: 246).

²⁴Cf. 1 John 4:7-21 which states that “God is love”.

contracted the excess of Life which makes him/her human” (Žižek 2001: 105). The insight of Christ is that the way to overcome this excess and heal this wound is through the paradoxical gesture of “directly identifying with it”; as Christ does when he “freely assumes, contracts onto himself, the excess (“Sin”) which burdened the human race” (Žižek 2001: 104-105).

Consistent with the ‘moral example’ paradigm, Christ’s act does not achieve our redemption for us, but he “opens up the possibility” for us to free ourselves through a ‘leap of faith’ whereby we “REPEAT Christ’s gesture of freely assuming the excess of Life, instead of projecting/displacing it onto some figure of the Other” (Žižek 2001: 105). This is necessarily a traumatic gesture; referring to novelist Graham Greene, Žižek observes that “religious belief, far from being the pacifying consolation, is the most traumatic thing to accept” (Žižek 2001: 85). But Christ sets us free from fear of this monstrous gesture, by showing us the way; “confronting him, we become aware of our own freedom” (Žižek 2009a: 82).

This ‘excess of Life’ contracted at the Fall can also be termed ‘sin’. In psychoanalytical terms, this enslavement to sin can be framed as a “vicious cycle” inscribed into the superego when we withdraw from “the dizziness of freedom” into Law (Žižek 2006: 89). Law offers only one ‘freedom’, the ability to “free oneself” from the Law by transgressing it; but this desire in turn provokes the “desperate strategy” of fighting against our temptation by obeying the law more vigorously (Žižek 2006: 89). Neither obedience nor sin are ‘natural’, each is engendered by the other; and neither can overcome the other. Trying to escape from guilt or entrapment by following the paths provided by this cycle merely strengthens it.

Paul clearly sees the futility of the standard Jewish prescription of law to overcome sin, and that to truly escape from one we must also escape from the other (Romans 7:6-7). Lacan and Žižek follow Paul in suggesting that we must break out of the vicious cycle through the experience of love (Žižek 2009b: 270). If the vicious superego dialectic is ‘masculine’, involving sin as the constitutive exception to the universal law, the alternative dialectic of love and law is ‘feminine’ (Žižek 2000: 146-147). Since “only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love”, love denotes the incompleteness that is paradoxically higher than completeness²⁵. Unlike sin, love is a radical split from law and does not reinforce it (Žižek 2009b: 273).

Of course, Christian love can be received as an even more rigorous demand than law, if it is understood as a Kantian categorical imperative, a “self-suppressing *duty* to love neighbours ... accomplished through the strenuous effort of fighting and inhibiting one’s spontaneous ‘pathological’ inclinations” (Žižek 2000: 99). This can appear to be the case in some of Jesus’ extensions of the law; anger is already murder, lust is already adultery, and to love the neighbour we must also love the enemy (Matthew 5:21-48). Such insatiable superego demands mirror the debt Christians can never repay to God for his free act of mercy in saving them; “I don’t want anything from you! ... *except your very soul*” (Žižek 2003: 170). This would make Christianity “the very opposite of psychoanalysis”, rendering infinite our obligation to this biggest of Others, the “supreme superego agency” of Mercy (Žižek 2003: 170, Žižek 2001: 144).

However, Žižek maintains that “at the very core of Christianity, there is another dimension” (Žižek 2003: 170). Rather than intensifying it, Pauline agape allows us to “cut ... the Gordian knot of the vicious cycle of Law and its founding Transgression” (Žižek 2000: 99). The miracle of Christianity is that we can *undo* the “primordial decision” of the Fall precisely by repeating it, recreating ourselves “from the zero point – in short, *to change Eternity itself (what we “always-already” are)*” (Žižek 2001: 148). The Christian term for this reinvention is to be ‘born again’ (John 3:3). This is in stark contrast to the New Age exhortation to “(re)discovery of one’s true Self”; Žižek paraphrases Marx here; the point of Christianity is not just to discover your true Self, but to change it (Žižek

²⁵As Paul says in his famous passage on love; if I have all, do all, and know all, but do not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13).

2001: 148-149). Žižek believes that this Christian gesture – which is also the first formulation of Kierkegaard’s “religious suspension of the ethical” – is today “more precious than ever” from a psychoanalytical point of view (Žižek 2001: 149-151).

Psychoanalysis, in turn, can shed light on how exactly an ethics of love can work; specifically, it can help us understand the biblical injunction²⁶ to love our neighbour (Žižek, Santner & Reinhard 2005: 10). For Žižek, it is vital to take into account the inhuman core of humanity, which makes the encounter with a neighbour inherently traumatic. This explains the Freudian-Lacanian conception of the Neighbour as “the monstrous, impenetrable Thing ... that hystericizes and provokes me” (Žižek 2005: 162). We should vigorously resist any attempts to “gentrify the neighbor”, which Žižek accuses Emmanuel Levinas of doing (Žižek 2005: 162). Particularly dangerous are references to the “richness of inner life”: enjoying the music of Beethoven, showing tenderness to a child; these can function ideologically to distract from the activity of the outer life: orchestrating the Holocaust, killing and displacing children (Žižek 2009c: 39-41). Žižek declares that the “first lesson of psychoanalysis ... is that this “richness of inner life” is fundamentally fake”, a screen to protect “my imaginary narcissism” from “my true social-symbolic identity” (Žižek 2009c: 39). Rather than these shallow humanist attempts to “reduce the Neighbor to a fellow man”, Žižek commends the shocking acts by which someone we thought we knew appears as a total stranger; in these moments, the fellow man becomes a Neighbour (Žižek 2009c: 46).

However, despite this acknowledgement of the neighbour’s traumatic identity, the commandment urges us to *love*, not *fear* the neighbour²⁷. Žižek notes that today’s ‘post-politics’, which shuns any higher causes than life itself, can only mobilise people through fear (Žižek 2008b: 40). This encompasses not only fear of criminals, immigrants and terrorists, but also concern for the “vulnerable Other ... constantly exposed to a multitude of potential “harassments”” (Žižek 2008b: 41-42). Thus political correctness and the willingness to use torture are paradoxically united as the left and right wing forms of the politics of fear; the inevitable result of a reductive conception of life. Unabashed belief – in truth, and in the other – is required to genuinely respect others as people; rather than liberalism’s pathetic substitute, a patronising and hypocritical “respect for beliefs” (Žižek 2008b: 139).

So what does it mean to *love* the Neighbour? Here Žižek once again draws on the formulae of sexualisation. “Universal love” as an ethical maxim relies on the masculine constitutive exception; such as Stasi head Erich Mielke’s desperate defence “But I love you all!” which obviously relied on the exclusion of the “enemies of socialism” (Žižek 2005: 182-3). A proper Lacanian alternative is not universal hatred, but universal *indifference*; only if I treat others in their totality as “an (ethically) indifferent multitude” can I make the choice to love one (Žižek 2005: 182). The ‘non-all’ nature of love shows that it is not a simple opposite to hatred: “love emerges out of universal indifference, while hatred emerges out of universal love” (Žižek 2005: 183).

Selecting the one out of this indifferent multitude is thus a properly violent act; as Chesterton notes, love “desires personality; therefore love desires division” (Žižek 2009a: 39). Christian “intolerant, violent Love” is to be opposed to Buddhist or Hindu “all-encompassing Compassion”; love is a “violent passion to introduce a Difference ... to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others” (Žižek 2003: 32). This violent love has “divine rage” as its necessary obverse (Žižek 2006: 110). As Che Guevara at different points insisted on both love and hatred as necessary for the revolution, if a Christian is to be able to love her enemy, she must – in the words of Kierkegaard – “*hate the beloved out of love*” (Žižek 2008b: 203-204).

For Žižek, this violent love for the traumatic Neighbour is the key to breaking free from the superego cycle of law and sin, to living life fully and genuinely, and to acknowledging the death of

²⁶Leviticus 19:18, Luke 10:25-37.

²⁷As in Žižek’s satirical chapter title; “Fear thy neighbour as thyself!” (Žižek 2008b: 40).

the big Other in all its psychological consequences.

The utopian ‘Holy Spirit’ – and Marxism

The predominant Marxist view of Christianity has been that it is ideological²⁸, functioning to support status quo power distributions; expressed most memorably in Marx’s statement about the “opium of the people” (Marx 1844: 42)²⁹. Focus on the emancipatory potential of religion has been considerably less forthcoming within Marxism (Torres 1992: 105). In Žižek’s account, modernity is characterised by the autonomy of religion from particular cultural forms, and there are two possible ways for religion to relate to this now-separate social order: ‘therapeutic’ and ‘critical’. Žižek identifies the increasingly hegemonic New Age spiritualities as fulfilling the ‘therapeutic’ function, but Christianity can become a genuinely critical force; “a space for the voices of discontent” (Žižek 2003: 3).

Žižek sees post-modernity as a vital time for Christianity to perform this critical role. Christianity is a potent weapon “much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks”; at times Žižek even says that materialist Christianity is *necessary* to “resuscitate an authentic radical position” (Žižek 2000: 1, Žižek 2001: 1). Amid the unprecedented global dominance of capitalism³⁰ and its uncanny ability to make use of any culture or worldview (Žižek 2009c: 25), the traditions of authentic Marxism and Christianity are increasingly alone, and should “fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms” (Žižek 2000: 1).

Burning bridges - Critique of ideological religion

Applying his ideology critique to the field of religion, Žižek identifies a plethora of new spiritualisms that need combating today. Firstly, he is resolutely opposed to existing forms of Christianity, and not just the ‘fundamentalist freaks’, whose fascination with taking away the Other’s enjoyment and forcing one’s particular culture on them is more akin to fascism than genuine fundamentalism (Žižek 2001: 68-69, Žižek 2000: 129). He is also opposed to liberal Christianity which is in reality the Christianisation of the ‘post-political’ rejection of transcendent causes. Žižek eschews the disavowing stance of “I don’t really believe in it, it’s just part of my culture”, as if one believes in God like one believes in Santa Claus; and particularly disdains the arrogant assumption that this is a modern insight (Žižek 2003: 6-7). In reality, believing ‘at a distance’ has always been the norm; traditional cultures did not directly believe their ‘primitive’ myths, but mediated them through rituals and politeness; exactly like today’s ‘enlightened’ liberals and Christmas shoppers. What is modern, on the contrary, is the dangerous *fundamentalist* stance of taking our beliefs seriously (Žižek 2003: 6-7). Ironically, in shunning ‘literal’ belief in God, miracles and the Resurrection, while attempting to make some use of Christianity, Žižek has much in common with liberal Christians, but this is the last thing he would want; he seeks to be a genuine fundamentalist for materialist Christianity.

This involves a profoundly illiberal attack on the fashionable ‘new age’ spiritualisms that present themselves as the solution to the frantic, materialistic, industrialised Western world. The most obvious target is the Western fascination with Buddhist, Taoist and Hindu spirituality. Žižek

²⁸Within the Marxist tradition the term ‘ideology’ has often been defined negatively as discursive support for dominant power distributions, rather than simply a system of ideas as in popular usage (Eagleton 1991). Žižek’s definition of ideology is any (true or false) discourse, practice or belief which covertly supports a relation of domination (Žižek 1994: 7-10).

²⁹This analysis is in turn adopted from the classic materialist critique of religion as found in French materialism and the pre-Hegel German Enlightenment (Torres 1992: 3). Such materialistic critiques, inside and outside Marxism, have usually taken aim at the Platonised spiritualist/anti-materialist version of Christianity that has all too often been the ‘Really Existing Christianity’ since the Middle Ages (Wright 2003: 49-50).

³⁰Neo-liberal capitalism in the US [and the English-speaking world], (limited) welfare state capitalism in Europe, authoritarian capitalism in Asia, populist capitalism in Latin America, etc. (Žižek 2008a: 362)

observes how the meditative focus on maintaining an “inner distance” from the ‘unreal spectacle’ of the outer world actually functions as the “perfect ideological supplement” to capitalism, allowing the participant to fully participate in capitalism and manage the resultant stress; all the while assuring oneself that the outer engagement is a mere game (Žižek 2001: 12-15). This leads Žižek to quip that “if Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his *Protestant Ethic*, entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*” (Žižek 2001: 13). Western fetishised appropriations of Buddhism to deal with the ‘spiritual lack’ of the West are nothing new, dating at least as far back as the 19th-century (Horsley 2003: 13-25), but Žižek observes that it is no longer even possible to distinguish ‘Western Buddhism’ from ‘authentic’ Oriental Buddhism; with modern Japan overrun with “corporate Zen” managers spearheading “capitalism with Asian values” (Žižek 2003: 26, Žižek 2009c: 131-132). Ultimately, these spiritualities are as Platonist and as ideological as Gnosticism; the early Christian heresy which retreated from the humanity of Jesus and its radical implications (Žižek 2009b: 262, Wright 2003: 534-551).

Another target of Žižek’s scorn is ecological reversion to pagan Wisdom and its notion of ‘cosmic balance’. In such a view, each of us must act “in accordance with [our] special place in the social edifice”; respecting nature and obeying our benevolent superiors so as to avoid disturbing the sacred balance (and, perhaps, provoking the hubris of the nature-gods) (Žižek 2000: 119-121). This worldview is most obviously displayed in the Hindu cosmology and its accompanying caste system; it also resembles the Greek focus on balance and moderation (Strom 2000: 36). Similar tendencies appear in John Milbank’s utopia of the paternalistic Catholic “global harmony”, which Žižek diagnoses as a “soft-Fascist vision” (Žižek 2009b: 250). Most of all, however, this mind-set lends itself to the increasingly hegemonic vision of a “socially responsible eco-capitalism”, more attuned than crude industrial capitalism to the oneness of life and our natural limits (Žižek 2009c: 34). The divisive universality of genuine Christianity throws all such hierarchical pagan Wisdoms out of balance.

Less obvious a rival to materialist Christianity are the properly spiritual aspects of the ‘secular’ modern world itself. Marx’s use of a religious term for commodity *fetishism* is not lost on Žižek; he observes that the “theological mad dance of commodities” (Žižek 2008b: 12) functions as “the necessary fetishistic supplement to the ‘official’ spirituality” (or lack thereof); no matter how Christian (or secular) a capitalist society claims to be, its actual spiritual foundation is “the idolatry of the Golden Calf, money” (Žižek 1994: 18). The religious nature of commodity fetishism is a passage into Walter Benjamin’s notion that capitalism itself is a religion (Žižek 2006: 118). It is a ‘disavowed’, “second nature” religion more akin to traditional beliefs than today’s sequestered spiritualities, but certainly no less powerful because of it. The market is made Real in its spectrality (Žižek 2008b: 13); it functions as a big Other because we treat it as “an objective system confronting us”, despite the fact that each of us knows that there is no ‘real’ market beyond individual interactions (Žižek 2008a: 453).

Indeed, the ‘secular’, non-religious nature of capitalism is precisely what allows it to exercise many of the functions attributed to ‘traditional’ religion by structural-functional analysis (Horsley 2003: 112-113)³¹. We are so used to the sequestration of religion from public life that we miss the spiritual nature of ‘secular’ institutions, such as state bureaucracy; “all-powerful ... omnipresent and invisible” (Žižek 2006: 116). With the rare exceptions of Franz Kafka and Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*, few of us appreciate that bureaucracy has become “our only true contact with the divine” (Žižek 2006: 116). Likewise, science today fulfils the ideological need for certainty once fed by the church; the ideological institution of science names orthodoxy and shames heretics, and becomes a

³¹Horsley also observes that secular nationalism has taken over many of the “key functions previously understood as religious” (Horsley 2003: 129). This calls to mind Althusser’s description of how the bourgeoisie has “wrest[ed] ... [the] ideological functions away from” the church (Althusser 1970: 116). Of course, as a Marxist, Althusser proposes the more critical concept of ideology in place of functionalism’s neutral/positive ‘functions’.

“refuge from uncertainties” (John Gray, cited in Žižek 2008a: 446). Ironically, in this configuration the churches become “sanctuaries for doubt” and potentially “sites of resistance” (Žižek 2008b: 82).

Political belief-systems can also function religiously, as we stage scenes for “the nonexistent Gaze of the big Other” (Žižek 2005: 177). This can be expressed as “Historical Necessity” as in Stalinism (Žižek 2008b: 135), or a reified vision of “the people” who believes ‘on behalf’ of individual persons, as in the State of Israel (Žižek 2008a: 227)³². Even in liberalism, where there is “no such thing as society”, a big Other exists in the network of rules facilitating individual exchange (Žižek 2009a: 76). We are left on the one hand with the guarantee of meaning provided by science or Stalinism; on the other, the acknowledged meaninglessness, yet nonetheless absolute control, of the market or bureaucracy. Both are equally potent big Others functioning as the gods of the secular world.

This renders an atheist stance more problematic, as well as more political. The formula for atheism moves beyond simple disbelief to the somewhat more cumbersome “I no longer have to rely on a big Other who believes for me” (Žižek 2009b: 297). It is not enough to reject religion, or simply state that the big Other does not exist; an effective ideology critique must also acknowledge the Real sense in which big Others do exist in our ideologies and our actions, understand that these big Others are not for us but against us (Žižek 2009c: 154), and work to radically undermine them (Žižek 2008a: 35). Thus while Voltaire said that if there was no God, it would be necessary to invent one; and Bakunin said that if there were a God, it would be necessary to abolish him (Bakunin 1882: 28,79-80); Žižek’s theology says that *to the extent that the big Other does exist, it is necessary to kill it*, and only Christianity provides the tools for that³³.

Bringing down the house of cards - Pauline/Leninist ‘subtraction’

Žižek’s inspiration for the use of Christianity as a critical force is once again the apostle Paul. Paul has been much-maligned as the “great institutionalizer” of Christianity; superficially regarded as the

³²The irony of the state of Israel is that although its existence is justified on religious grounds, it is the most irreligious country in the world; around 70% of its citizens do not believe in any divinity. Žižek observes that the attitude of the average Israeli citizen to their homeland is a “fetishistic disavowal”; “I know very well that God doesn’t exist, but I none the less believe that he gave us the land of Greater Israel” (Žižek 2008b: 124).

³³Considering that ‘death of God’ theologies are a severe minority within Christianity, it is worth asking where this leaves orthodox Christian theologies which are not willing to kill God. It is unclear how much of Žižek’s endorsement of Christianity would also apply to its non-atheist versions, or whether he sees much hope of his version of Christianity being expressed within orthodox Christian theology and biblical studies. Suffice it to say there could be interesting dialogue between Žižek and a theologian such as Stanley Hauerwas, who shares Žižek’s disdain for the liberal-democratic status quo, his concern to avoid ideological activity (which Hauerwas calls “reinforcing the powers that Christ defeated” - 1991: 527), and his sense that the radical Christian community bears the utopian hopes of the world. Both contributed to *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11* (Hauerwas (ed.): 2002), and both have debated with John Milbank, but they do not appear to have engaged in direct dialogue with one another. An obvious point of divergence would seem to be that Hauerwas is a pacifist while Žižek glorifies violence, even to the point of saying that Hitler was not violent enough (Žižek 2008a: 151). However, to clarify this outrageous comment, Žižek explains that by violence he means “dar[ing] to disturb the basic structure of the modern capitalist social space”; in this sense, he notes, Gandhi was more violent than Hitler (Žižek 2009d). This ‘violence’ is perhaps not irreconcilable with Hauerwas’ pacifism. Ultimately the major difference between the two comes down to the death of the big Other, which seems to sharply contradict not only Hauerwas’ continued belief in God, but his notion that the Christian community must learn to “live out of control” (Hauerwas 1983a: 380-382). Perhaps the way to some reconciliation between Žižek and orthodox theology is to reject both John Milbank’s reduction of the revelation in Jesus to the eternal “immanent” Trinity-as-idea (Milbank 2009: 188), but also reject Žižek’s reduction of the eternal Trinitarian God to Hegelian dialectics alien to Jesus or Paul. Instead, we would view the eternal Trinitarian God through her revelation in Jesus, and say that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection do not kill God, but they *reveal* her true nature. This stance places us closer politically to Žižek than Milbank, as God’s self-revelation in Jesus shows that she is *not* the big Other Žižek portrays (the Christian God is not “the one who directs history and is the motive power in politics” - Ellul 1986: 122-123), but the weak, humble anarchist king put to death by the big Other of Jewish and Roman authority, and entirely consistent with the Holy Spirit enacted in the love of radically universalist communities.

creator of Christian orthodoxy and the betrayer of Jesus' more radical movement (Žižek 2003: 9). Badiou and Žižek affirm that Paul can be considered the Lenin to Jesus' Marx, but they believe that this type of "party militant" figure and strategy is precisely what is needed (Badiou 1997: 2, Žižek 2001: 1-5). Žižek specifies even further, saying that Paul, with his "already, but not yet" eschatology, represents Lenin "between the two revolutions, between February and October 1917" (Žižek 2003: 9). What we now need is a return to this "unique moment when a thought already transposes itself into a collective organization, but does not yet fix itself into an Institution"³⁴; we need to repeat Paul's gesture towards the "global "multiculturalist" polity" of the Roman Empire, in and against today's Empire of capitalism (Žižek 2001: 4-5).

This gesture has two aspects, mirroring the dual perspectives of the Event of death and resurrection. The first aspect, represented by the death of the big Other, is the 'unplugging' from all particular loyalties and the undermining of the ruling power under which one finds oneself. Žižek believes that the failures of communist approaches to the state teach us that we should neither distance ourselves from it, nor take it over in the same form; but seek to "make the state ... work in a non-statal mode"; radically transforming it from within (Žižek 2009c: 130). This requires us to undermine the field in which we find ourselves by subtracting ourselves from it in the same way as a house of cards can be brought down by the removal of just one (Žižek 2008a: 409-410). How exactly this is to be done is difficult, particularly today; it may start with simply doing nothing; we should avoid the lure of "pseudo-activity" that ultimately functions to lubricate the system (Žižek 2008b: 7,216-217).

Even so, genuine subtraction is an inherently violent act, consisting of "laying bare [the] true coordinates" of the order from which the subject is subtracted, reducing it to "the minimal difference of part(s)/no-part, 1 and 0, groups and the proletariat" (Žižek 2009c: 128). From the perspective of today's 'identity politics', the most violent aspect of this is the requirement to 'unplug' from all particular identities (Žižek 2000: 128-129). Žižek notes the hypocrisy of political correctness by which the closer we are to "the notorious white heterosexual males", the less we are encouraged to assert our particular identity with pride; this also has the ironic effect of universalising the disavowed dominant identity as the default "universal-neutral medium" (Žižek 2005: 156). Žižek's politically incorrect Pauline response is to seek the standpoint of genuine universality which unites us with the exploited in every culture; rather than joining hands in 'tolerance' of other cultures; he enjoins us to join hands with the excluded of all cultures in *intolerant* struggle against the barbaric kernel of each particular civilisation (Žižek 2008b: 156-157,176-177).

This 'unplugging' is not to be confused with the Romantic notion of an idealised world where "all concrete social differences magically disappear" (Žižek 2000: 127). Paul's 'uncoupling' has nothing to do with the Gnostic stance which treats material-social reality as "ephemeral appearance"; this stance is what enabled the Bhagavad-Gita to be Heinrich Himmler's favourite book (Žižek 2003: 32). The Christian stance is the exact opposite of "inner peace" amid outer conflict; it is a stance of 'outer peace' which acts antagonistically upon the social order³⁵ (Žižek 2006: 99). Christian 'unplugging' is not an internal subtraction but "the active *work* of love which necessarily leads to the creation of an *alternative* community" (Žižek 2000: 129-130).

*The Holy Spirit as the new proletariat*³⁶

³⁴Strom confirms that, for all his 'community organizing', Paul did not establish anything like the institutional church we now know; "Paul's letters provide no model of church structure or lines of authority. He has no "doctrine" of church or leadership ... Paul ... did not appeal to leaders to solve the thorny and nearly intractable problems of the Galatians or Corinthians ... The leadership that Paul endorsed *stopped* the body from centralizing ministry" (Strom 2000: 180).

³⁵As in 'turn the other cheek' (Matthew 5:39).

³⁶The idea of a political-spiritual emancipation of the world through the creation of an alternative community is also a common theme among modern orthodox theologians. For Hauerwas, for example, salvation is not an individual

This creation is the second aspect of the gesture; not just mirroring, but directly *enacting* the birth of the Holy Spirit, the community of these “‘uncoupled’ outcasts from the social order” (Žižek 2000: 160). Žižek explains this Holy Spirit as “the self-organization of believers who drew from Christ’s nonreturn after his death the correct conclusion: they were awaiting the wrong thing, Christ already had returned as the Holy Spirit of their community” (Žižek 2009b: 282-283). For Žižek, all that remains of God after the death of Jesus is “the unfathomable aura of Christ” which has passed onto the community that remembers him (Žižek 2001: 90); but this serves to “transubstantiate” (Žižek 2009b: 290) in the community a “transsubjective” Spirit that “organizes itself” in them (Žižek 2009a: 75-76)³⁷.

Žižek considers this the supreme example of what could be called ‘the ghost of Tom Joad’, the immortal dimension of an individual that continues as an active subject after that individual’s death; in the words of an old union song, “what they can never kill went on to organize” (Žižek 2009b: 289). The betrayal of Christianity was not this organisation, as championed by Paul, but the shift from Paul’s “apocalyptic community of believers which lives in the emergency state of a “permanent revolution”” to the institutional church’s “ideological apparatus” (Žižek 2009b: 283).

This ‘apocalyptic community’ is an expression of a genuine utopia, “enacting what, *within the framework of the existing social relations*, appears as “impossible”” (Žižek 2008a: 310); to be distinguished both from dreams of abstracted impossibilities and from the false consumerist utopia of capitalism (McMillan 2011: 14). Genuine utopia requires a “state of emergency” which was first articulated in Paul’s sense of living in the “end time” (Žižek 2002: 107-108). One way of conceiving the difference between Christian and Jewish politics, both of which are oriented around the Event of Messianic redemption, is that with Christianity, the Event “*has already happened*”; the Messiah has already arrived, yet the “gap which sustained the messianic promise” remains (Žižek 2003: 135-140). This unusual sense of historical locatedness is the result of the Christian ‘already, but not yet’ eschatology (Hauerwas 1984: 419-420). Although the act of redemption has already taken place, the Christian community is left with “the real hard work [that] awaits us on the morning after”; the task of enacting their redemption (Žižek 2003: 135-137, Hauerwas 1983a: 376)38.

The other vital element of Žižek’s discussion of the Christian apocalyptic community is the classic

experience but “a political alternative to the way the world is constituted” (1991: 533). However, the equation of this community with the Holy Spirit is largely unprecedented outside of Hegel’s “eccentric” dialectical understanding of the Trinity (Milbank 2009: 177). For Hauerwas, the Holy Spirit gives birth to the Christian community at Pentecost (Acts 2); “creating a new people where there was no people”, but it is not the community itself (Hauerwas 1986: 143-147). The Christian community is referred to in the New Testament with various images such as ‘body of Christ’, ‘the Way’, and of course ‘church’, which is itself an image borrowed from politics (*ekklēsia*; a Greek citizens’ assembly – Horsley 1997: 8) (Hauerwas 1986: 371). Hauerwas provides an account of human participation in the divine work of redemption which, like Žižek, draws on the Trinity, but unlike Žižek, does not require a dead God or the direct identity of the Holy Spirit with the community of believers (1986: 148).

³⁷Hauerwas opposes such “subjectivistic theories of the resurrection” as a misinterpretation of scripture (1993: 259), but this is as far as Žižek’s atheist theology can go in describing the Real of the resurrection or the Holy Spirit.

³⁸This revolutionary ‘inaugurated eschatology’ has been one aspect of early Christianity which the institutional church has had to deal with in order to become an ideological apparatus (Mannheim 1936: 190,195). Popular Christianity has tended to abandon it altogether, preferring a Platonist/Gnostic ‘going to heaven after we die’ (Wright 2007), while official theology has often been more subtle in reinterpreting inaugurated eschatology so that the ‘not yet’ can be used as a bulwark against enacting the ‘already’ (Hauerwas 1984: 417-420). Anglican theologian (and then-Bishop of Durham) N.T. Wright strongly denounces the former tendency, but falls into the latter temptation in his Augustinian appraisal of the state as the enemy of Christ, a product of the fallen world that is doomed to destruction, yet nonetheless a necessary remedy against that fallenness (Wright 2005: 68-69). Church hierarchs, whether Anglican, Orthodox (Augustine – Hauerwas 1984: 410-411), Catholic (Hauerwas 1984: 417-420) or Methodist (Hauerwas 1988: 436-439) bishops, seem particularly drawn to this downplaying of the ‘now’ of eschatology; perhaps they are aware that the very existence of their position is dependant on a compromise with the ‘not yet’ redeemed order of the world.

Marxist notion of the oppressed as the engine of revolutionary change. For Marx these oppressed were the proletariat class; Žižek prefers Jacques Rancière's phrase "part of no-part" as it captures the essence of Marx's idea³⁹ without the historically contingent identification with a particular class (Žižek 2009c: 99, Žižek 2008a: 413-420). These are the people excluded from a particular place in the social order; they can therefore directly represent universality, and must abolish all domination in order to liberate themselves. Žižek thus endorses the Marxist notion of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", which he designates as "the power of universality where those who are the "part of no part" set the tone" (Žižek 2008a: 413). This mirrors orthodox theologian Stanley Hauerwas' suggestion that the church needs to listen to "the weakest brother or sister" as a special witness to Jesus (1991: 527-528). In the early church, Paul was able to refer to the entire Christian community as "the shit of the earth"⁴⁰ (1 Corinthians 4:13). The concept of the proletariat as the vehicle for universal emancipation is arguably prefigured in Jesus' "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20), although not systematically outlined.

Indeed, Jesus' and Paul's utopia – the 'kingdom of God' – is considerably vaguer than Marx's and other modern utopias, referencing backward to Jesus' life and death which the community must 'imitate', rather than forward to a clearly articulated social order (Hauerwas 1983b: 128-129, Philippians 2:1-8). This is arguably a strength, however; giving the concept more staying power than the traditional Communist utopia of "pure unleashed productivity *outside* the frame of Capital", which has already been revealed to be a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself (Žižek 2000: 17-21). Žižek, too, tends to avoid concrete descriptions of the utopian hope (McMillan 2011: 5-6,15). He is more drawn to the Messianic mode of revolution portrayed in the film *Children of Men* than the more concrete political mode glorified in *V for Vendetta* (Sinnerbrink 2010: 16-20,21n.). Considering that a major innovation of socialist-communist utopianism from the earlier Anabaptist 'Chiliasm' was the move to a stronger sense of determinateness (Mannheim 1936: 218-219), Žižek and his return to messianic openness are more Christian than Marxist here. This opens up the question of what concrete forms are today being taken by what Jesus calls the kingdom of God and what Žižek calls the Holy Spirit.

Finding the Holy Spirit today

The utopian community Žižek advocates is a dialectical advance on the Jewish nation, which was born out of slavery in Egypt to become the world's first expression of a universal community⁴¹. The Exodus is "the withdrawal from the hierarchized (Egyptian) Order under the impact of the direct divine call"; it already contains the ingredients of the Christian unplugging from the Cosmic/social Order and direct plugging into universality (Žižek 2001: 126-127). As the outcast from all nations, Israel can stand for universality to the precise extent that it has been rejected from "the order of particular races" (Žižek 2001: 127-128). However, by the time of Christ and Paul, the Jews had become a nation proper, with all the associated trappings. For Paul, the Christian community is the new incarnation of the Jewish "chosen people", which severs all particular links in a community that by definition "suspends all ethnic divisions" (Žižek 2003: 131). It is not inaccurate to say that "Christianity *is* Judaism" (Žižek 2005: 190); but it needed to extract itself from the form of Judaism to rebirth the latter's subversive content (Hauerwas 1984: 420-421).

It is in this context that we must read Žižek's suggestion that the true Holy Spirit is not found in the

³⁹For Marx the hope of emancipation lies with "the formation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society ... a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it" (Marx 1844: 56). Žižek suggests that today's closest equivalent is the rapidly growing population inhabiting the slums of the world's megalopolises (Žižek 2008a: 424-427).

⁴⁰Terry Eagleton's translation (Eagleton 2005: 16, Žižek 2009b: 289).

⁴¹Likewise, the figure of Job is the prototype of Christ's confrontation of the big Other; in his insistence upon God's impotence to create meaning out of his suffering, he provides the first recorded instance of ideology critique in history (Žižek 2003: 125).

institutional church, which has performed the same betrayal as the Jewish nation, mutating itself into a particular order. If we are to reclaim “the disruptive aspect of universality” that is the essence of Christianity, we must look outside of the church that has abandoned it (Žižek 2009b: 251)⁴². Žižek suggests “psychoanalytical and revolutionary political collectives” as its two main contemporary expressions (Žižek 2000: 160); and he recently told the Occupy Wall Street protesters that the Holy Spirit was among them, while the bankers are worshipping “blasphemous idols” (Žižek 2011). The essential lesson of Christianity according to Žižek is that we must take the traumatic step of killing the big Other of control over us, if we are to give birth to the Spirit of love among us. We may have to search for this traumatic, liberating Christian experience in unexpected places if we are to resuscitate it and use it to resist the ever-expanding hegemony of capitalism.

- Caleb Anderson, 21/10/2011

⁴²This mirrors theologian-sociologist Jacques Ellul’s suggestion that genuine Christianity is all-but-impossible within the church (Ellul 1986: 206). He even uses a separate term, “X”, to indicate the genuine movement of the body of Christ, against the corruption that is (Really Existing) Christianity; “X is subversive in every respect, and Christianity has become conservative and anti-subversive”, deserving all the criticisms lumped upon it by Voltaire, Feuerbach, Marx and Bakunin (Ellul 1986: 6,11-13).

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