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Where Christian and Revolutionary Meet?

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Recommended Citation

Haker, Hille. (2003). "Where Christian and Revolutionary Meet?" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Volume 32, Issue 1: 28-29.

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Where Christian and Revolutionary Meet?

by Hille Haker

The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity

by Slavoj Žižek

(The MIT Press, \$16.95)

This small book will not comfort us. It will not give us a new orientation in a world of “religion lost” and “religion regained,” as the latest turn to religion and religious topics might be described. Instead, Slavoj Žižek, far from being a believer in the simple meaning (is it ever simple, though?) but rather an “atheist believer,” makes two claims.

The first claim is not just “that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach.” He continues: “My thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.”

With this claim, echoing the title of the book, a reminder of Walter Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history, Žižek refers to the difficult relationship of historical materialism and theology. Benjamin used an allegory for it, comparing a chess-playing puppet operated by a hidden expert dwarf to historical materialism and theology. Whereas Benjamin saw historical materialism as the puppet winning only with the aid of the hidden dwarf—that is, theology—Žižek switches the positions: At present, religion has become the puppet who will win all the time but can win *only* if it “enlists the service of historical materialism.”

The second claim of the book is not at all surprising, if we take the first claim seriously. At the end of an intriguing review of central topics of Christianity, Žižek pleads for a “heroic gesture” of Christianity: “In what is perhaps the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, it is possible today to redeem this core of Christianity only in the gesture of abandoning the shell of its institutional organization (and, even more so, of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacri-

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“The Virgin and Child,” by Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio (1467-1516), as it appears on the jacket cover of Slavoj Žižek’s “The Puppet and the Dwarf.”

fice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge.”

What is the “core of Christianity”? Generations of Christian theologians have worked on this, offering as many answers to this question as there are schools of thought throughout history. Freshly, creatively, and in no way impressed by this history of Christian wisdom and scholarship, Žižek draws his own picture. Parts of his book must be read as an addendum to *On Belief* and *The Ticklish Subject*, which were published in 2001. But where the earlier books reflected upon religion and Christianity more or less following its symbolic meaning, especially when held against a psychoanalytic background, the new book goes far beyond this.

His work is still informed by Lacanian theoretical psychoanalysis, as well as by a Hegelian gesture of having to “sublate” whatever is there in order to find oneself, one’s identity having been shaped by a modern, secular, capitalist, and liberal society that coaxes us to be satisfied with our private, secret belief, whereas its public presence can only be

tolerated as “suspended belief.” Against this “virtual” reality, Žižek holds an identity that is torn apart and reshaped on a different level *without* closing the gap. This gap is not only true for identity itself—its perfect image may be seen in the Christian God itself: God *revealed* the gap in becoming human in Christ; God *is* the gap. God is not the “great Other”; quite to the contrary, God is “one of us.” Human identity, then, is the gap, too, for in our “immanence,” we can sense “transcendence.” We cannot be satisfied with ourselves as ourselves; we strive to reach the Real, but it is not to be found out there, beyond. The Real is within; oneself is—to put it in Ricoeur’s term, although this important author is not quoted by Žižek—another. No need, then, for the big, “spectral” Other of the Levinas and Derrida tradition of Jewish thought. And mentioning these two authors, we have mentioned partners in dialogue, as if they were present in a persistent subtext of the book.

Žižek the materialist, however, does not stop with subject theory, which only serves as the condition for shaping the

figure of the “believer”/“revolutionist.” There is no Christian identity, Žižek warns us, that could be satisfied with the insight of immanent transcendence, thus remaining on the level of individual and subjective experience.

As St. Paul struggles with the Jewish heritage, the struggle of Christianity with Judaism in our time is present throughout Žižek’s book. He accuses intellectuals following Levinas’s and Derrida’s appraisal of the Other as being shortsighted. In both authors’ approaches, he holds, the Other is conceptualized as sameness, “the boring, monotonous sameness of Otherness itself.” In this concept, the other is either God (as the ultimate Other) or, as just another human, loses the ultimate position of being God as the ultimate being. In the Christian concept, however, God is, so to say, no longer a God as the Other; his becoming human constitutes a “gap” in God itself. And, according to Žižek, this is exactly what has not been seen: “... what is ‘repressed’ with the established Christian doxa is not so much its Jewish roots, its indebtedness to Judaism, but, rather, *the break itself*, the true location of Christianity’s rupture with Judaism.”

St. Paul has lately become the focus of philosophical essays and, indeed, was in 2002 the main topic of a UCLA symposium, “Paul and Modernity,” to which Žižek refers in passing. Thus, starting with a reading of St. Paul, Žižek evokes the dangerous, false antithesis of Judaism as the religion of “obedience to the Law” and Christianity as the religion of “love.” Žižek’s point, however, is to show not the superiority of the latter against the first, but the entanglement of the two concepts.

Following Lacan (and Bataille) in this aspect, Žižek dismisses the concept of unconditioned love, a permissive love, love without engagement. The flattening of love (and the loss of subjectivity, for that matter) can be seen in contemporary Western societies’ degeneration of love into lust. On the other hand, it is represented, too, in Buddhism’s all-encompassing compassion *without* being torn apart as a person. Turning to St. Paul and his “Leninist” striving to establish a church while knowing that it would only be accomplished as suspended reality before the actual presence of the Messianic time, Žižek offers a radical interpretation of what love (of God) is about. Love needs a striving independent of the other in order to be “true” love. This means that love in itself cannot be the highest value or highest goal; St. Paul knew this when

capitalist culture: radical self-liquidation (as an institution) in order to save the Christian idea. This is Zizek's somehow cynical, deconstructive reading of St. Paul: In order to live, you have to die.

If there is knowledge the revolutionists have and that the historical materialist acknowledges, it is the insight into love as non-indifference, as bothering about something or someone other than oneself, a goal to be fought for. Christian love of God resembles the revolutionist's striving for the idea in its engagement: "Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others ... violence is already the love choice as such."

What would it mean to face the repressed knowledge leading to the Christian break from Judaism? To face this would mean to acknowledge the loss of the "big Other" (Lacan), the Law, the Creator, the Almighty God who is finally accountable for all that is happening in the world and to the world. As is true for all repressed knowledge, however, this loss will not just show up but be blocked on the way to consciousness. Therefore, "perversion" is a strategy, says Zizek, to counteract the loss that inevitably took place, either by installing the law artificially (the church interpreting the "Law of God"), or by codifying the very transgression of the law in the theology of sacrifice: Adam and Eve *had to sin* in order to enable God to *sacrifice* his son in the great redeeming act of the cross. The question, however, is whether there is another, non-perverse reading of Christianity.

Zizek follows up on well-known antitheses present in St. Paul: the Old and the New, life and death, law and love,

As much as the revolutionists, Christians strive for a "better world." But if they attempt to take the direct way, they both may fail. The approach to what Zizek calls the "Thing" or the "Real," evoking again Lacanian theory of the Symbolic and the Real, is not like looking for a "real thing"; rather it is a shift in the perspective. Truth, then, is not an abstract idea we have to follow or grasp; truth is accessible only from "within," from the partial perspective of the "interested," engaged person. The truth of Christ lies in his being a "gap," a "passage" between the Old and the New, and being both Old and New at once: "the extreme point of the Old (the culmination of the logic of sacrifice, himself standing for the extreme sacrifice, for the self-relating exchange in which we no longer pay God, but God pays for us to Himself, and thus involves us in debt indefinitely), and its overcoming (the shift of perspective) into the New."

Of course, for every philosophy of history, this necessary shift has caused problems insofar as the figure of sacrifice is repeated on the theoretical level; to achieve historical progress, generations of people, and ultimately the past, are lost. Only if it is possible to take a Hegelian and Kierkegaardian perspective at the same time, "sin" is already its own salvation, or, to put it in Kierkegaard's own words: "Evil is Good in becoming." It is this shift in perspective, necessary and realized in Christianity, that identifies the Fall with freedom, Adam with Christ. The truth of this internal connection of the extremes must be referred to God, too. Christian experience, then, is radical separation from God: "Only when I experience the infi-

law. Love, on the other hand, is more than just filling this position "beyond the law"—for in demanding the beloved as a vulnerable, imperfect, mortal being, it challenges all other systems of thought striving for perfection. Christian experience is exactly this revolution: God is the imperfect, and only as such can be loved. Love, then, is not the "fulfillment" of the Jewish law but rather its realization insofar, as it sustains the interconnection of law and sin (as transition of the law) and law and love (as rupture, as suspension of the ethical).

What, then, would Christian love of God have to look like? Job seems to show a way out, because he is the central person in the radical struggle with the image of the perfect and almighty God: He does not accept any interpretation, any meaning, for his suffering. The more God tries to re-establish himself as the Almighty, the more silent Job becomes. For the reader, however, God's boasting followed by Job's silence cannot disguise "God's utter impotence," a silent knowledge that is *revealed*, i.e., disclosed and made "public," not in Judaism but in Christianity.

I am not so sure whether this shift from Judaism to Christianity must, or should, be conceptualized in this way. What seems to be clear, however, is the fact that the image of the Almighty God had much more influence on Christian tradition than Zizek's interpretation suggests. In this way, the book's subtitle is correct: Historically, Christianity has been caught in the repression of the knowledge that it broke with any form of established religion. Therefore, Zizek might be right that theology today can only win by "en-

urge to bring about the Messiah, to "coerce the kingdom of God into being," in Rosenszweig's words. But this, Zizek holds, is also true for the revolutionist who must believe in the possibility of the revolution *hinc et nunc* while knowing well this might be pure illusion. Thus, for both, the Christian as much as the revolutionist, the relation toward this "Messianic time" is crucial; it does not just come by—we cannot just sit and wait for it to happen—we have to make it happen. In God's "stepping into His own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing Himself to the utter contingency of existence," the perspective is turned: God takes the risk on us, so to say, with no guaranteed outcome. So, to make redemption *actually* happen, we must *help God*, not vice versa.

And this, in a way, is the goal of Zizek's book: to go beyond the liberal, permissive, and ultimately indifferent approach to the present historical situation with the attitude of suspended belief. If theology is the "puppet" of the present time, then it must be reminded of its "real" operator, the dwarf, urging for change, urging for rupture of time, urging for St. Paul's attitude of ongoing presence, in a revolutionary suspension of historical time. What are held against liberalism and the culture of "suspended belief" are the Messianic time and our engagement in our historic present.

Maybe neither Christianity nor historical materialism can take the risk illustrated by Kafka: that the Messiah will come, but at a time when nobody cares, when nobody is waiting anymore. The worst that could happen, Kafka and Benjamin, and now Zizek, remind us, is that the "Messiah" comes too late. ♦

Kevin Madigan: Rediscoverer of a Medieval Innovator

*Kevin Madigan has been Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity at Harvard Divinity School since 2000. His specialty is high-medieval scholastic biblical exegesis and theology, which is the topic of his most recent book, *Olivi and the Interpretation of Matthew in the High Middle Ages*, published by the University of Notre Dame Press. HDS Staff Writer Wendy McDowell sat down with Madigan recently to talk about his book, his other scholarly interests, and his teaching.*

What interested you in this topic, Olivi's interpretation of Matthew?

Well, I suppose there are at least two answers to that question. First of all, I was interested in the ways in which Matthew and, for that matter, each of the four canonical gospels, was being exegetically exploited in contexts very different than the one in which it was originally produced and with interpretive results which the original author

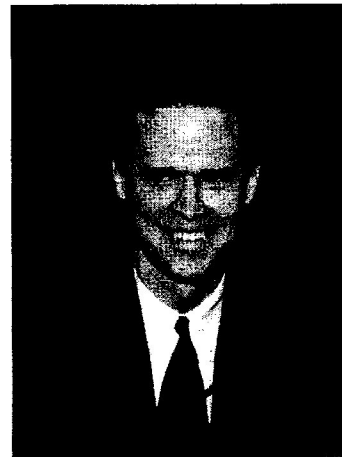
often would not have recognized and which he would not have approved. I was struck and continue to be amazed at the distance, the untraversable distance I'm tempted to say, between what the text meant in the first century, or what it might have meant, and how it was received and appropriated in the much different context of the high and late Middle Ages.

Second, I was also interested not just in any interpretation of Matthew but very particularly the one that I wrote this book about, the one written by the thirteenth-century Franciscan Peter Olivi. So far as I know, he was virtually the only exegete in the thirteen centuries of commentarial history on the gospel who read the text as a prophetic text, in the sense that, read correctly, it predicted the events and apocalyptic prodigies and calamities occurring in his own day. In addition to that, his was virtually the only product

of high-scholastic classroom culture to have attracted the attention of the Roman curia and, ultimately, to have been condemned by the papacy in the early fourteenth century. So that attracted my interest right away and made me want to see what in it made it dangerous, and what context made it dangerous.

What in it or what context did make it dangerous?

Basically, the context that made it dangerous was a very complicated dispute about the nature of poverty in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries within the Franciscan order. Olivi certainly agreed with the central Franciscan conviction that Christ and the apostles possessed absolutely no property individually or in common, and he expresses his agreement repeatedly in the Matthew commentary. Unfortunately for him (not to mention his fel-



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low friars), this was a position condemned by the papacy in the early fourteenth century.

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