

Marcus Pound

Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction.

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As Pound observes in this book, Slavoj Žižek has become more and more engaged in questions of theology in recent years. As long ago as 2000, in *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek was asking ‘what in the Christian legacy was worth fighting for?’ In his 2003 *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, he examined, as he put it, the ‘perverse core of Christianity’. And just last year, he engaged in an extended debate with ‘red Tory’ theologian John Milbank in their jointly authored *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Indeed, Milbank and his Nottingham Centre of Theology and Philosophy are explicitly credited in the acknowledgements of Pound’s book, and in many ways it can be seen as a continuation of the exchange in *The Monstrosity of Christ* over whether Christ is to be understood as a ‘monstrous exception’ (Žižek) or a form of ‘infinite reciprocal love’ (Milbank).

Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction is made up of five brief chapters by Pound and a—decidedly non-reciprocal—Afterword by Žižek himself. In his section of the book, Pound addresses such things as Žižek’s understanding of Christ’s abandonment on the cross, his notion of the political act, his conception of sexual difference, and his analysis of the relationship between belief and ritual, not only in the church but in society more generally. Pound’s essential argument, following his mentor Milbank, is that Žižek’s conception of Christianity is too negative, not in any simple irreligious sense but in the sense that what Christianity is said by Žižek to reveal is that there is no meaning to the world, or at least that there is no Big Other standing behind the meaning humans attribute to it. Typical of this for Pound is Žižek’s reading of the crucifixion where, in Christ’s moment of doubt on the cross, Žižek sees the necessity of faith, insofar as there is no certainty of resurrection, no outside recognition of or compensation for Christ’s sacrifice (26). This is consistent for Pound with Žižek’s theorization of the political act, where what is required is a violent breaking with the existing symbolic co-ordinates, so that there can be no guarantee of a successful or even ethically justifiable act (78). And this negation is what for Žižek characterizes Lacanian psychoanalysis, with regard to which Pound cites Žižek arguing against Badiou’s reading of St. Paul in terms of a necessary ‘wiping of the slate clean’ that precedes and makes possible any ‘new harmony’ or political identification (84).

In all of these ways, Žižek and Lacan, for all of their drawing upon the tropes and figures of Christianity, are guilty of the same ‘nihilism’ (54)—the seeing of something as nothing—that marks Western modernity. It is because of this nihilism, this emphasis on violence for its own sake and the real as unknowable, that Žižek is unable to envisage any

coherent political project, that he remains stuck in a repeated cycle of law and its transgression (75). For all of Žižek's criticism of the empty messianism of someone like Derrida, his own conception of the divine remains equally formal and empty, still tied to a worldly logic of sacrifice (93). As opposed to this apophatic negativity, Pound proposes a positive logic of the gift, which emphasizes 'not abandonment *from* but abandonment *to* God' (49), and the overwhelming 'superabundance' (140)—not lack—of the world. It is only by working within this logic, which Pound aligns with a new Catholic feminism, that Žižek would be able to think the feminine not-all and build a really-existing socialism.

At its (very) short length, Pound's argument cannot but be—forgive the word—dogmatic. And although he gestures towards the protocols of a properly philosophical reading—that it is always a matter of reading texts in their own terms—he cannot resist putting forward interpretations that take off from biographical facts. (For example, from Lacan's Benedictine brother and the fact that he once tried to organize a meeting with the Pope, Pound implies a fundamentally Catholic theology in Lacan's text.) More seriously, there are a number of philosophical inaccuracies, or at least simplifications, that complicate immensely the argument Pound wants to make. To take just one instance, it is not true that Žižek concludes his theorization of the political act with any justification of divine violence. His consistent argument is that it is bureaucracy—or even, let us say, the 'church' (92)—the day after that is the real revolution. Indeed, his critique of Badiou's St. Paul, which Pound cites, concerns what Žižek sees as Badiou's too-close identification with the political Event.

What is most ironic is that when Pound quotes fellow theologian Scott Stephens' argument that we must read Žižek 'theologically' (3), this would be to prohibit the questions of intellectual sources, external circumstances or personal opinion entering into our consideration of Žižek. Stephens is arguing that Žižek's work is theological to the extent that it is self-contained, unmoved by anything outside of it and untroubled by matters of religious belief. Žižek's work has its most profound effect, Stephens asserts, in its pure 'form' or logic (18), in which the actual existence of God is irrelevant. Žižek's work is nihilist, then, in the sense of having nothing to say, which is not to be understood in the pathetic, all-too-human sense of despair and resignation. Rather, the greatness of a nihilism like Žižek's is that it is neither positive nor negative, but a thinking of how human values and beliefs come about. And in a supreme paradox, it is a nihilism of which God is the ultimate expression and guarantor.

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