

Slavoz Žižek and John Milbank

The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?

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In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, his contribution to a series of Lacan-based studies, Žižek examines Christianity. The book has three parts: an essay by Žižek on his Hegelian/Lacanian view of Christ and Christianity; then a critique of this view by John Milbank; and finally a further reaffirmation of the broadly Lacanian position by Žižek in the light of Milbank's criticisms.

Žižek is self-consciously Lacanian and materialist, a critical thinker writing on Christianity, and writing, as one would expect, against the religion's illusions. Milbank, while having radical thoughts on Christian history and theology, responds to Žižek as a representative of the orthodox view. Both thinkers are united in an antagonistic relationship to global capitalism, and their essays express ethical and moral attitudes intended to confront today's political and economic situation.

The most obvious ground for disagreement between Milbank and Žižek is the issue of logic (as the subtitle of the book indicates). Žižek considers the logic of reality to be dialectical and progressive so that when thinking of the Christian God one must consider the Father and Son as superseded by the Holy Spirit in a Hegelian way. God and the Son are dead, but the Spirit is the result of their sublimation (and the body of the Father/Son remained dead, like 'a squashed bird' left over after a magic trick). In his rejoinder, Milbank is at pains to show that reality is on the contrary governed not by this murderous dialectic, but by a paradoxical or *metaxological* logic of harmonious contrasts in which contradictory elements compete but do not negate each other. One cannot tell how sincere Žižek is in his position, since he seems to imply that God did *once* exist, but is now dead; or, to put it another way, Christ really was the redeemer, and his role was to create human subjectivity and to set us free. Because of his death, we must now be atheists. We are more skeptical about Žižek's faith because his Hegelianism means that he views history as necessarily passing through Catholicism toward Protestantism and finally to atheism. It is as if he believes in Christ because the time in which he writes has inherited belief in Christ, and since history gave birth to our era, the beliefs of the historical past must be accepted as a gift. His 'atheism' means simply that: 'there is no big Other' (297).

Žižek writes with the urgency of new insights and thoughts regarding Christianity, of 'a new field emerging' which finds the respect for Otherness shown by the main thinkers of the old schools, Habermas and Derrida, problematic. The main figures of the new century are Badiou, Agamben, and himself (254). For them, 'democracy is not to

come, but to go ...' (255). The new field in which he finds himself is one in which there is no 'big Other', and it announces an ethics which does not respect either God as the big Other, nor other people as faces of this metaphysical transcendence. It is a cold and passionless thought without regard for Otherness, but insists on a selfless absolute freedom. As part of that emerging field, Žižek considers the resurrection of Christ to have been a fraudulent piece of bad magic devised after the death on the Cross, something to hide the true monstrosity of the event (286-7). The monstrosity is that God himself sought to give freedom to others, irrespective of their gratitude or their Otherness, and he held nothing back when he appeared on earth.

One wonders why Žižek would go to these lengths to give his approval to the Christian religion after so much of its traditional character has been subverted or denied, and given that the odds are not good that the total annihilation of a once existence Father and Son actually took place. But he believes because reality is too strange for there not to be something religious (240) and the necessity of religion is 'an inner one'. Related to this query, one wonders why Žižek chooses precisely the Christian religion and not some other. Žižek holds that in the default of a big transcendental signifier to justify any claims we make, it is necessary simply to make up convincing narratives; moreover, Žižek implies that no other religion can account for our subjectivity and our corporeality in so convincing a manner as the one in which God suffered incarnation and then total self-effacement. Finally, he cannot conceive of a God who does not quarrel with himself: the death on the cross is proof that the Father fights with himself; He is a rebel against himself, and hence his command to us is to rebel against prevailing conditions. (Žižek refers to GK Chesterton to make this point [51].)

Ethically, Christianity is the religion of love or Agape, and it is here that Žižek's account involves Lacan: the ethics of Lacan and of Žižek's Christ/St Paul coincide in the demand that personal desire should be restrained. And while desire is illusory yet structurally constitutive of human subjectivity, Agape is a selfless love imposing service and love as a duty. The desires of others should be met just as God sacrificed himself for us without recourse. In an ideal polity, therefore, the community of the global world would not be capitalist or hypocritical regarding desires, nor would people seek to appease their own illusory needs, but they would be spiritually capable of recognizing desire on principle and meeting the desires of others in the spirit of love. The community thus formed is the community of the Holy Spirit, and its acts of love are performed by command of the Law of love: coldly, without regard to personal advantage, and without requiring the proximity or gratitude of others. 'With more people like this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold cruel passion' (303). This, Žižek shows in his wry and entertaining style, is a reading of St Paul and an interpretation of Christ's incarnation which, in a rather *Da Vinci Code* manner, has been covered up by a Church which may have intentionally domesticated Christ's true teachings and the meaning of his death at Calvary.

Milbank's commentary on Žižek's Christian atheism fixes on the logic of the Hegelian dialectic which Žižek uses to understand the Trinity. Casting himself as the orthodox theologian and Catholic by contrast with Žižek's Protestant-atheist, Milbank holds that Christ was resurrected, and that God did *not* conclusively die in the Incarnation. God subsists still, and indeed, a specific human personality should aim to become identified with God in a sort of Catholic Whole. This is possible by way of the logic of paradox and its power of mediation. Milbank argues for his paradoxical logic which mediates between God and man, moving on to characterize our existential situation *vis-à-vis* God to be so little able to articulate the meaning of our relation that we appear to be stuck in the Medieval period. Trying to find a way out beyond typical ways of thinking of God, Milbank advises the Christian community to appeal to Eckhart more than to Aquinas (213). It was for Eckhart that God and man were in the paradoxical situation of needing each other.

Milbank seems to consider Žižek and particularly Hegel to be locked inside medieval thoughts typical of the Gnostics (another *Da Vinci Code* sort of influence on early Christianity which has skewed the true teaching). His hope for a fuller and still new Christianity contrasts so starkly with what he sees as the hypocritical and sterile dialectics of Hegel and Žižek because he has the unconventional view that history could have been otherwise, and has not followed any sort of path toward the progress or the purification of Christianity (182). We have not, he thinks, progressed since the centuries just before the Reformation. It is not coincidental that his ideal Christian utopia for our times is a hierarchical society along medieval lines in which the inequalities of people do not affect their spiritual equality or their enjoyment of living and work (so that Martha, for Meister Eckhart, was the more blessed than Mary [208]).

In his concluding essay, Žižek writes of Milbank's utopia as 'fascism' and calls him a 'Red Tory' (250), stressing in particular the absence of any notion of human freedom. He also writes of the God imagined by Milbank, who cares for the Christian community, as a sort of pagan deity, and Žižek again reaffirms his own atheism in the face of these pagan tendencies in his opponent. Žižek spends his reply to Milbank examining the arguments made, often accusing Milbank of misreading him, claiming that the latter's Catholic position obscures the crude meaning of Christ's incarnation. The core of their disagreement is that they conceive of Christ's incarnation and death in two ways: the one brutal, final and real; the other as symbolic and temporary.

This is an entertaining book, collecting essays by two writers determined to give full vent in a passionate way to their thoughts on a complex and important matter.

Jason A. Powell