

Chapter One

The Slovenian and the Cross: Transcending Christianity's Perverse Core with Slavoj Žižek

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Abstract

This introductory chapter addresses the questions of why Slavoj Žižek is engaged in the project of creating an atheist or “decaffeinated” theology and of how an atheist materialist thinker can be acutely interesting for Christian theology and theologians. It provides an outline of Žižek’s intellectual pursuits, particularly his employment of Lacanian categories of thought in matters political and theological, and focuses on a presentation of Žižek’s multifaceted engagement with Christianity in his works: of the different ways in which he engages with Christianity and of the different strategies one may employ in order to examine his engagement with Christianity, mapping out the theological reception of Žižek’s thought up to now. The chapter also draws attention to Žižek’s political Pneumatology, i.e. to the role of the Holy Spirit in this “decaffeinated” or “atheist theology” as the community of those that have interiorized Christ’s sacrifice, as well as to Žižek’s appropriation of early Christian heresies in his version of Hegelian dialectics. This introductory chapter concludes with a presentation of this volume’s architecture, of its authors and chapters, of the problems and issues they address and of the different strategies they employ, closing with a hint on the scandalous possibility of “caffeine.”

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This volume¹ explores aspects of Slavoj Žižek’s work *on* Christian theology, the relevance of that work *for* Christian theology and his dialogue *with* Christian theologians. The assumption behind this volume is not that Žižek *does theology* as such — for this would require, well, faith — but that his insights on Christianity are of acute interest *for* theology, either in a straightforward or indirect and “perverse” way. For one might assume that an atheist, materialist, Marxist communist thinker cannot but be dismissive of Christianity — however, this would be gravely erroneous in a case as distinctive as Žižek’s, who may indeed offer valid insights through treading the seemingly paradoxical territory of *atheist theology*. His reading of Christianity as expounded in his voluminous and ongoing *oeuvre*, uniting

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elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian philosophy as well as modern and contemporary philosophical currents, has a rightful claim to originality. Far from being an outright rejection of Christian thought and intellectual heritage, Žižek's work can be seen as involving its perverse (or "decaffeinated") affirmation, arguably including elements of interest to Christian theology itself.

Žižek's interest in Christianity begins mainly with *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), in which he engages with the theology of Saint Paul. After that he writes three books which have Christianity as their main subject, namely *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (2000), *On Belief* (2001) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (2003). Christianity is also one of the important subjects in *The Parallax View* (2006) which recapitulates many of his main interests. Žižek is also the co-author of books on theology in which he has collaborated with noted theologians such as John Milbank of the Radical Orthodoxy movement—in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (2009) and *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (2010), both edited by Creston Davis—as well as with Boris Gunjević (*God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*, 2012).

Žižek's idiosyncratic approach to Christianity is such that he could be described as an "atheist Christian," in the sense that he does not believe in the existence of God, nor in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet he regards the "Christian experience" as extremely important. He further links Christianity with psychoanalysis and the communist idea as the three great traditions of emancipatory importance, which are more timely and relevant than ever precisely in their interconnection within our postmodern world. In order to understand Žižek's philosophy, we have to realize that in it there is a continuous passage from religion to psychoanalysis and to politics and back, with continuous correspondences between the three levels. His implicit claim is that everything that applies to religion applies in a certain similar way to psychology and to politics. To take a most important example to which we will return later, what Žižek perceives as the community of the Holy Spirit after the Resurrection of Christ can be illuminatingly likened, as will be shown in this volume, to certain psychoanalytic communities as Jacques Lacan conceived them, as well as to the political subject of communism, as Žižek himself perceives the true meaning of the term. Correspondingly, historical and institutional Christianity is perceived as a perverse form of Christianity (taking account of the psychoanalytic content of the term "perversion") in a similar sense in which Stalinism is a perverse form of communism, with psychoanalysis showing similar tendencies.

Slavoj Žižek was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1949, where he studied philosophy and sociology, completing his Ph.D. thesis on *The Theoretical and Practical Relevance of French Structuralism*. During his youth he participated in intellectual circles critical of the establishment and in magazines such as *Praxis*, *Tribuna* and *Problemi*, known for an alternative version of Marxism to the official one of the Yugoslav regime. In 1985 Žižek received a second Ph.D., in psychoanalysis, from *Université Paris VIII* under the supervision of the well-known psychoanalyst Jacques Allain-Miller. His international reputation began with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, in which he analyzed the use

of ideology, drawing on his experience of the establishment ideology in Tito's Yugoslavia. In the late 1980s, Slavoj Žižek took part in the struggle for Slovenia's democratization and even ran as the Liberal Democratic Party's candidate for the Slovenian presidency.

This first phase of Žižek's itinerary is characterized by the critique of "actually existing socialism's" totalitarian ideology and a certain proximity to liberalism, from which he has since distanced himself. Gradually, his critique became directed more against nationalism and, ultimately, its association with liberalism, despite the widespread common impression to the contrary. An early critique of the connection between nationalism and liberalism is already to be found in *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993). A turning point for Žižek was his philosophical encounter with Alain Badiou, with whom he came to share many philosophical themes, particularly on the theology of Paul the Apostle and Christianity in general, as well as on the need to conceive of the communist hypothesis anew, although in a way different from that encountered in "actually existing socialism," on the need for a re-interpretation of Lacan, and so on. The encounter with Badiou is located mainly in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), where Žižek is in dialogue with Badiou's work *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. In many ways Žižek can be considered as a disciple of Badiou, since on these important issues the older Badiou will set an agenda and a terminology with Žižek following and adding to the debate in a distinctive manner. Žižek's dialogue with his French colleague and comrade is, however, a critical one. Their great difference lies in the fact that Žižek insists on a dialectical perspective, following Hegel in a progress through contradictions where negativity plays the main role. Badiou, on the other hand, focuses on the notion of the *event*, i.e. of an occurrence that takes place in spite of the absence of its apparent preconditions, something which has a certain positivity. We could say, then, that in his interpretation of Christianity Badiou articulates a "theology of the Resurrection" or a "theology of Glory," while Žižek formulates a "theology of the Crucifixion." Badiou sees in the Apostle Paul the great visionary who began his journey through the vision of the resurrected Christ, "meeting" Him on the road to Damascus. The rest of Paul's life consisted in a faithfulness to this event, and in this sense "crucifixion" paradoxically follows the resurrection as a "testimony" to the event. In Žižek's interpretation, on the contrary, "salvation" comes from the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, which is not understood literally, and is identical to the Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We will return to this later in this volume.

Slavoj Žižek positions himself in the interpenetration of the multiple traditions to which he belongs. The two main ones are dialectical Marxist thinking and psychoanalysis. Dialectical Marxist thought, however, originates from German idealism, which in turn is connected to modernity's general program, the latter having roots in a certain Christian tradition which also sometimes presents dialectical elements. In contemplating Žižek's intellectual lineage and heritage in a chronological sequence from the earliest to the most current, we would say that the thinkers who have defined him and constitute recurring reference points are the Apostle Paul from the period of the Christian *Urkirche*, Augustine of Hippo from the patristic period, and German religious thinkers such as Meister Eckhart and Martin Luther, while he draws on John Calvin's understanding of absolute predestination. Beyond this, Descartes as the founder of the program of modernity, Kant, Schelling and

Hegel from German Idealism, but also at the same time Kierkegaard, Feuerbach, Marx, Lenin and Althusser from the communist tradition, Freud and Lacan from psychoanalysis, Walter Benjamin, Hans Jonas, and Theodor W. Adorno from the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, as well as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière from his contemporaries. Arguably, each of those thinkers has contributed a certain building block to the dialectical thinking of Slavoj Žižek, which, being dialectical, also constitutes a kind of recapitulation of the history of philosophy through an acutely original interpretative perspective. In this process, each previous element is interpreted by a later one. For example, the Apostle Paul's theology of the universality of love that goes beyond the Jewish Law is considered in the light of Martin Luther's Protestant emphasis on absolute individuality. Augustine's thought is contemplated in the light of its evolution in René Descartes' program of modernity, while in Meister Eckhart we can see a great German thinker, a precursor of German Idealism. Immanuel Kant, of course, is considered to be the philosopher of the Thing, from a viewpoint that is not only Hegelian, but also Lacanian, as we encounter in Lacan the distinction between the Real and the Symbolic somewhat as we encounter in Kant the distinction between the Thing(in-itself) and phenomena. German idealism is considered in the light of its materialist interpretation. And Žižek's perhaps most crucial gesture is his reading of Hegel *through* Lacan, and vice versa, of Lacan *through* Hegel. It should also be noted that Žižek is strongly opposed to Levinas and to the interpretation of the Jewish tradition he represents, while he distances himself from Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler as far as their own combination of Judaism with elements of postmodern poststructuralist thought is concerned.

Let us consider an example of how Žižek is inspired by such sources. Žižek inherits from the theological tradition of German idealism the question of what was God doing before the creation of the world. And he responds by resorting to Schelling in particular.² His answer is that, before the creation of the world, God *was becoming God*. We could thus say that before the creation of the world there was an abyss of primordial freedom, i.e., of an absolute freedom as an undifferentiated potentiality for everything and anything. The differentiation came about when God changed from not wanting anything, in the sense of anything *particular*, to wanting *nothing itself*. This latter object of volition signifies a kind of contraction in the triple sense of reduction, condensation, and contracting a disease. The fact that God desires *a* nothing, *the* nothing entails that, suddenly, a zero is set next to God. This entails an emptying of God, a *kenosis*, a reduction of Him, so as to “fit” this zero, this nothing, next to Him. This emptying, however, is also a condensation of God in the sense that God is “transformed” into Being, or, as we could say, in the double meaning of the word contraction, God “contracts” Being as a disease, as Being can be considered to be a disease or even a reduction compared to the previous condition of absolute free will. From now on we will have a tug-of-war between the contraction and the expansion of Being, to which Žižek will give a name derived from Freudian psychoanalysis (as Lacan interprets Freud but even more as Žižek interprets Freud building on Lacan's intuitions): *drive*. The next stage is that in

² On a comparison between Žižek and Schelling on this matter, see Adam Kotsko's *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 51–55. Since the present chapter is of an introductory character to a volume that studies particular aspects of Žižek's engagement with Christianity in the chapters that follow, we have opted for approaching and commenting on Žižek's work as a whole rather than focusing on particular passages of relevance to our inquiry here.

which God as Word, as *Logos*, creates the world. According to Žižek, this moment of creation *represses* the drive, which turns into the repressed past of the world. In this psychoanalytic reading, what the *Logos* represses is in essence the very founding act of creation. The *Logos* thus constitutes temporality, as the distinction between past and present emerges for the first time, with the past being the repressed drive and the present being the Logical creation.

However, in order to better understand this aspect of Žižek's thought, which draws from Lacan and Schelling, we have to also take into account a distinction between male and female that Lacan makes and which Žižek employs to its utmost potential³. What Žižek refers to as the male model is what he calls a "constitutive exception." This means that any symbolic system is based on the fact that the very moment of the symbolic system's creation violates the rules that govern it. This founding moment of the symbolic system is repressed as a kind of repressed exception that dictates the norm. We do possess, however, a dialectic concerning a totalizable symbolic system and its exception that constitutes it without belonging to it. In contrast to this, the female model signifies a "whole" that is *a priori* non-totalizable. Cosmogony, as Žižek describes it drawing from Schelling and Lacan, signifies a passage and transition from the female model to the male one. Prior to the advent of the *Logos* we have a female model, that is, a non-totalizable All. This female model "vanishes" in order for a world of the male model to emerge and thus becomes a "vanishing mediator." When we find ourselves in the ratiocentric world, we bear a repression of the founding moment of the symbolic system, which is categorized by Žižek as a *drive*. We could describe the same in Schelling's terms by claiming that God is trying to escape either from hell or from madness. This theogony–cosmogony resembles Neoplatonic theogonies–cosmogonies or even certain traditional Christian cosmogonies — but it has some key differences. Firstly, we encounter here a process of God's own generation, a becoming within God himself, i.e. a process theology, which finds itself at a certain distance from traditional, orthodox theology. Secondly, temporality is not seen here as a reduction and degradation, as in Neoplatonism, but as a mode in which God Himself is becoming complete.

This leads us to a radical reconfiguration of temporality and history which is consistent with modernity's program of configuring modern subjectivity and history as the *locus* of self-realization — not only of man, but of God Himself as well. Moreover, in contrast to Neoplatonism where the main and primary division is between the One and Being–Nous, here the primary division is between Will–Freedom and Being. We have here, therefore, a voluntarist philosophy which accords to the importance of the will in the program of modernity in German idealism. This process is also perceived as an emptying, a *kenosis* of God, in order for zero/nothing to emerge, out of which Being will arise. This is in contrast to traditional and orthodox Christian theology, where we do encounter the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, yet the eternally Triune God remains an eternally absolute presence and the creation of the world from nothing means that the world is contingent and that God exists independently of the world, which could have never existed. In the theogony–cosmogony, however, which Žižek refers to, God is initially an abyss of free will, followed by an emptying, a *kenosis*

³ Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 46–51.

towards the emergence of nothing/zero and then the emergence of Being in opposition to nothing/zero, with God Himself being then self-realized through the creation of the world and within history, which emerges together with temporality.

Žižek develops this theogony–cosmogony connecting it to the emergence of the subject and culture. The subject is constituted by the symbolic system. And here we may remember Louis Althusser seeking to demonstrate how the subject is constituted precisely by the dominant symbolic discourse that, in a Godlike gesture, calls it forth to existence. The establishment of the Symbolic entails the repression of the Real in the Lacanian sense. The Real is at the same time what lies beyond the Symbolic, i.e. what cannot enter the symbolic order, something which the Symbolic cannot reach. The Real is also an inner core of the Symbolic that makes its appearance as a crack, a hole, an internal failure and subversion. What remains from the Real is the so-called “*objet petit a*,” according to the Lacanian terminology, which is an object, since it is external to the Symbolic and the subject that has been constituted as a subject by that Symbolic. And it is *small*, because it is that which is left from the repressed big Real. And it is “*a*” from “*autre*,” as opposed to the Big Other. The *objet petit a* mobilizes the desire of the subject, which attempts to reach a Real that is simultaneously beyond the Symbolic but also in its inwardly subversive inner core. Since, however, the Real is perpetually beyond reach, desire operates permanently through substitutes. When a subject’s desire is fulfilled, the subject understands that this is not what it wanted but a mere substitute. Thus it has to desire something else, and this cycle takes place perpetually. Žižek juxtaposes the notion of desire operating through substitutions to the *drive*, which concerns the founding moment of the symbolic system and is repressed. The drive is more associated with the subject’s fundamental fantasy. The fundamental fantasy defines the subject by being itself repressed and unconscious. It is a kind of founding act that constitutes the symbolic system by being itself its repressed exception. Žižek names this fundamental fantasy the “ultimate predestination” of the subject, reminding us of the term used by John Calvin and inspired by Augustine of Hippo. The paradox is that the fundamental fantasy may be a pre-conscious “absolute predestination” of the subject, but it is also the precondition for the exercise of the subject’s freedom. It is, of course, distinguished from the primordial, abyssal freedom of the theogony before the subject’s genesis. As a contributing factor to the constitution of the subject, however, the fundamental fantasy constitutes a freedom that is interwoven with what Žižek calls “absolute predestination” as it directs the subject to a horizon that has been chosen by it on a pre-conscious level while subsequently the subject’s freedom is being exercised in view of this horizon rather than in a vacuum.

It is worth examining how Žižek analyzes a variety of cultural traditions in relation to this process that constitutes the subject. He sees the Jewish tradition in relation to the Law. The Law forbids and thus, according to Žižek, creates the illusion that it is because of the Law that the Thing is inaccessible, while the Thing is inaccessible anyway. In this way, the Law mobilizes the desire, which is intensified by the prohibition dictated by the Law. This interconnection of Law and desire that Žižek formulates in Lacanian terms is also the psychoanalytic truth of the connection that the Apostle Paul makes between the Law and sin. The difference between the Jewish Law and law in general as we encounter it in other cultures, including pagan cultures like the Graeco-Roman one, is that Jewish Law excepts the

Jews from the other nations and makes them special. It is a law that is neither utilitarian nor a social contract, but a law that constitutes an exceptional community. By extension, it does not have some features that law has in other systems as constitutive of a certain ideology, such as the obscene superego supplement, i.e. the categorical command to enjoy according to Lacan. The Jews are fully identified with their Law without the obscene superego supplement and without the false ideology we encounter in other ideological systems; their Law, however, exists in a dialectical relationship with the desire that it intensifies, hence Judaism is in a sense a religion of desire.

When Žižek analyzes Judaism, the primary figure he focuses on is not Moses —as was the case with Freud— or David, but Job. Correspondingly, Christ is not so much a new Moses or a new David but rather a new Job. As we have seen, the relationship between Law and Thing is that the Law creates through its prohibitions the impression that it is the Law that makes the Thing prohibited and thus inaccessible, while the Thing is inaccessible anyway. Thus the Law intensifies the desire and leaves it unfulfilled, in spite of the fact the desire would not be able to conquer the Thing regardless of the Law's prohibitions. In Žižek's theology, which is influenced here by Hans Jonas, God is weak. This would be the difference between Žižek and a properly Schellingian theogony. While the world of the Symbolic is created by the Word/Logos, and it is with this that we are incorporated in temporality, the Thing of religion that is repressed is rather the weakness of God or the absence of the divine Thing. This is what the story of Job implies. The story of Job comprises, according to Žižek, the first critique of ideology, since the theological reasons that the theologians invoke to account for the pain of Job are denounced by God Himself as false. Job is not, as in the cliché, the one who endures his misfortunes; on the contrary, he protests at any opportunity against these misfortunes and God's answer, according to Žižek, is a void boasting that ultimately confirms his weakness. The crucial element for Žižek is that while Job perceives the Divine weakness, he is silent. Since then, according to Žižek, the attitude of the Jews consists in silence concerning the weakness of God. This is their secret and their apophaticism, which has made them into a community that has endured through the ages. And Christ is the new Job because He reveals the weakness of God where Job remained silent.

The truly important element for Žižek in this context is Christ's cry on the Cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46) — a central point which will be considered more fully later. For Žižek, the silence of God in the face of this question is the disclosure of God's absence. Therefore, according to Žižek, Christianity is the religion of revelation and disclosure, primarily in the sense that it reveals and discloses the non-existence of the divine Thing. And if in Job we had a relationship of man with God, where man honors the weakness of God in his silence, in Christ we have an internal dialectical evolution of God where the Son of God is in pain and is dying, and God is weak and incapable of saving Him. In this sense, Christianity is for Žižek the religion of exiting religion, it is the last religion, and Crucifixion, likewise, is not exactly a sacrifice, but it is the sacrifice of exiting all sacrifices, the sacrifice which abolishes the sacrificial logic in its very depth, the last sacrifice. Žižek is a theologian of the Cross, thus for him salvation is identified with the Crucifixion. We could say that the Crucifixion is equated in Žižek with the

Revelation, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Pentecost. Salvation is the revelation of God's non-existence, and the resurrection is the coming of the Spirit, which is the interiorization of the sacrificed, which constitutes the community of the ones left behind, so that the Crucifixion coincides with the foundation of the Church at the Pentecost.

The community of the Holy Spirit, to which we shall return in greater detail shortly, is for Žižek a very special community. It is the community of those who are absolutely unique and special in the sense that it is the community of those who cannot belong to any community. This is because in this atheist theology the revelation of the absence of the divine Thing on the Cross allows all those who desire ultimate freedom and responsibility to create each one's life for herself. The salvation offered on the Cross is defined by Žižek as "traversing the fantasy." With the revelation of the void in the place of the divine Thing, the Law is abolished because it can no longer render the Thing inaccessible to desire. Desire then no longer strives for the unattainable but can be invested in the wholly specific and particular. Desire turns into love. If desire in the pre-Christian world is an endless and perpetual hunt, Christian love denies this futile hunt and constitutes an insistence on the very specific and particular, an investment on the particular with an absolute value. This is the meaning of love for one's neighbor or even for one's enemy. The object of our desire is not the *perfect* or the *ideal*, so that we would constantly pursue substitutes of the Thing, abandoning the one for the other. When desire becomes love, the neighbor is the wholly contingent, any random person, whom we invest with the value of the divine Thing.

The moment of the Crucifixion, where the absence of the divine Thing is revealed, is a moment of vertiginous freedom. Žižek reformulates traditional theological visions in an arresting way via psychoanalysis. He considers the Crucifixion as the revelation of the absence of the divine Thing as a "traversing" of the fundamental fantasy, which "predestines" the subject. This means that the subject may be "re-pre-destined."⁴ That is, if we consider the traditional doctrine of absolute predestination as it has been formulated e.g. from Calvin with St. Augustine as its precursor, then we could say in an original modification of their insights that this predestination is not final, but that thanks to the Crucifixion there is the possibility of a new "predestination." Thus the theological notion of predestination is adopted by Žižek in the sense that freedom is not freedom of choice in the void, but comes together with a pre-conscious fundamental fantasy. At the same time, Žižek thinks that this is a predestination that can be re-pre-destined *but not at will*, through a conscious choice. What is required for this is a "crucifixion" in the theological idiom, which, psychoanalytically, we may term deconstruction of the subject. For Žižek, the experience of "crucifixion" is not a velvety one, it is a symbolic death. "Resurrection" after "crucifixion" is for our atheist theologian not a literal physical resurrection, as in the traditional Christian faith. It is, however, a "rebirth" with the possibility of a new predestination in terms of our fundamental fantasy, which only arises when we have recovered our primordial and abysmal freedom at the crucifixion, i.e. at becoming aware of the absence of the divine Thing. Rebirth is then identified with love, which is built on desire and orients it towards the absolutely specific, unique and particular

⁴ Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 65–69.

object irrespective of its value — hence the love for the humble, the sinner or even the enemy.

The authentic community of love, which has emerged after the traversing of the fundamental fantasy and the vertiginous freedom of the crucifixion as a community of the utterly unique ones that cannot belong to any community, can be likened to a particular community of psychoanalysts in the Lacanian sense or with an authentic communist collectivity. The important aspect in the community of psychoanalysts is that they themselves have passed through the stage of analysis, transfer and counter-transfer, and that is why they can be the *objet petit a* for their own analysands. We could say in a Christian idiom that this is a community where everyone is the “treasure” for his or her neighbor. The community among psychoanalysts is, according to Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan, a community beyond the desire and towards the assumption of the drive. This satisfies Žižek’s criteria for naming it a community of the Holy Spirit, that is, a community of the wholly unique, as it is a community based on unique relationships. Likewise, the communist community can be considered to have a similar relationship to capitalism as that of authentic Christianity to Judaism. Just as authentic Christianity is thought to be taking the momentum of the Jewish desire that is intensified by the Law and to be directing it towards love for the absolutely particular neighbor, so does the communist community assume the canalizing of desire that is a primary element of capitalism which works by substitution (i.e. by utilizing the desire of subjects and setting unattainable and constantly changing consumerist goals for them) and channels this momentum to real relationships with an emphasis on political particularity. And in the same way that we say that Christianity could not have existed if Judaism had not prepared its advent and preceded it, in a similar Marxist sense we could say that communism cannot exist unless capitalism prepares it in a dialectical manner. In both cases love is built on a dialectical modification of desire. In certain cases Žižek speaks of this communist community as if it is comprised by the ones that have been rejected by the capitalist world, by the ones who have no place in it. As a general observation, in Žižek the criterion of *exclusion* is an important criterion for asserting that we have here a real communist subject.

In all three cases the emancipatory subject is by no means historical institutional Christianity or communism or, perhaps, any institutional community of psychoanalysts. On the contrary, historical institutional Christianity is analyzed by Žižek in terms of “perversion,” and we could say that Stalinism and “actually existing socialism” (including non-Stalinist forms such as Titoism, to which young Žižek was opposed) follows institutional Christianity as a perverted version of communism. Historical institutional Christianity restores the Big Other of the Symbolic. This means that not only does historical Christianity fail to capture what Žižek considers to be the great message of emancipatory atheism in Christ’s cry on the Cross, but it also builds a faith in a personal God, Who is indeed articulated with the wisdom of the Graeco-Roman world. We must, of course, observe that it would be too far from Žižek’s logic to point out a certain particular moment after which the alienation of Christianity began, e.g. Pauline theology, or the Hellenization of Christianity, or Constantine the Great, or the Vatican, or the Crusades, or the Holy Inquisition and so on. On the contrary, according to Žižek’s logic alienation exists from the very beginning together with what is assumed as authenticity, and it is probably authenticity itself that is the exception

or subtraction of an ever-existing alienation. On the other hand, we may also point out some elements that constitute the perverted core of historical institutional Christianity according to our atheist theologian. One of these is the coexistence of Christianity with the Graeco-Roman world: Christianity may have conquered the Graeco-Roman world, but ultimately it became united with it in a hybrid that retains the characteristics of the latter, such as cosmic order. Medieval Christian thinkers compose a Christianity with a certain particular cosmology where the position of man prevails in the cosmic and natural order, which constitutes a regression of Christianity to paganism. Here Žižek's critique of the Middle Ages (East and West) has certain Protestant elements, as does his theological thought in general. It is worth noting that while Žižek considers Christianity as a transcendence of Judaism, which necessarily leaves Judaism behind, at the same time he would assert that in order for a Christian to become an *authentic* Christian he or she has to be Judaized or re-Judaized, i.e. to abandon the cohabitation with paganism that was the historical fate of Christianity and to return to the Jewish roots, as some Protestant communities to some extent actually did.

The main core of historical Christianity's perversion is its sacrificial logic, which took the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross as another sacrifice among many sacrifices, repeating in its interpretation elements characteristic of paganism. Theories such as that Christ is offered as ransom to the devil for the redemption of a captive human race, or, on the contrary, to God the Father in order to satisfy His divine justice according to the teaching of Anselm of Canterbury, constitute a regression in a logic of sacrificial exchange, which is a symbolic system with a powerful divine Big Other and with all the features that such a system has, such as false ideology and the obscene superego supplement. One could even say that Christianity became the archetype of ideology with an obscene superego supplement, followed later by Stalinism as a perverted modification of communism with the same characteristics of sacrificial logic, and so on.

It is important to understand how a "perverse" core is to be defined. Certain fundamental psychoanalytic terms are interpreted by Žižek in relation to ideology and its Big Other. In this context, the "perverse" is the one who is identified with the (presumed) desire of the Big Other.⁵ The "pervert" obeys the obscene superego supplement which is defined after Žižek's interpretation of Lacan with the categorical imperative "Enjoy!" The "pervert" draws an excessive pleasure from obedience to the orders of ideology as well as a certain shame, which is but the proof of having previously experienced an excessive enjoyment. Besides, what is characteristic of ideology is its "inherent transgressions," namely the fact that ideology leads to the psychological need for transgressions which are somehow tolerated by those who participate in it. In Christianity the "pervert" is the one who follows the sadomasochism of the sacrificial interpretation of Christianity which is turned into an ideological religion hiding its subjacent emancipatory content. In a similar way, a Stalinist ideologist is identified with the symbolic Big Other and draws excessive enjoyment from the obscene superego supplement by participating in the inherent transgressions of Stalinism.

Žižek belongs to a tradition of thinking which distinguishes emphatically between the institutional religion on the one hand and a deeper emancipatory meaning or ontological

⁵ Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, 62.

reality of Christianity on the other. The service that Žižek's view offers to Christians and atheists alike is in this context multiple. Firstly, Žižek offers psychoanalytical intuitions on the "pervert" character of institutional Christianity and its evolution. It is then possible to develop an analysis of both Christianity and the cultures that have resulted from it. This is valuable for a Christian because it offers the possibility to distinguish between on the one hand some authentic elements and, on the other, its regression into paganism, the sacrificial logic, ideology and perversion. (Even though we would be more precise if we were to say that this is actually not a regression, but a novel hybrid reality).

Secondly, Žižek enables us to see how Christianity is a symptom of wider cultural evolutions, both material and psychological. In this perspective, the atheist can witness in Christianity the archetype of ideological alienation, which mirrors evolutions in the material and psychological conditions. Thirdly, and perhaps most distinctively, Žižek proposes Christ as an exit from ideological alienation. The event of Christ is thus more actual than ever in our ideological era. The theologian can find in Žižek's thought a version of Christ who is part of the solution and not of the problems of our post-modern world. Žižek thus offers a very distinctive Christological and theological vision. And fourthly, this vision is linked to psychoanalytical and communist collectivities in a version of contemporary soteriology which combines both communitarianism and absolute individualism in a fascinating *coincidentia oppositorum*.

In Žižek's thought, Christ is placed in the very avant-garde of modernity's program. It is true that there have been in the past thinkers who have linked modern emancipatory currents of thought to Christianity, such as Christian existentialists, thinkers following Liberation theology, etc. However, what makes Slavoj Žižek unique is the fact that he links the particularly atheist emancipatory avant-garde of modernity with Christ, for example he links atheist existentialism or communism, as well as the anti-ideological elements in psychoanalysis, with Christ. One could say that it is Slavoj Žižek who truly realizes the famous diction of Fyodor Dostoevsky "If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth." What in Dostoevsky is only a hypothesis aiming to prove his love for Christ through a *regressio ad absurdum* becomes something meant quite literally by Žižek, even though the latter's version would rather be "if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the existent God of theism and that in reality the existent God of theism were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the existent God of theism." Or even better: "if Christ proved to me that the God of theism is outside truth and that in reality the truth were outside of the God of theism, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the God of theism." Žižek thus puts Christ at the avant-garde of emancipatory atheism and shows in a very original way how one can be an atheist together with Christ. Žižek's version of the famous diction by Saint Paul, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22) would be "to the atheists I have become an atheist, to win the atheists."

Christ thus becomes a liberator not only from every system of oppression, as is the case in Liberation theology, but from every system *as such*, from every ideology and from

every quest for positivist knowledge, including the sort of positivist knowledge promoted by Christian theistic systems, such as for example certain forms of dogmatics or scholasticism. Thus, Christ is presented as the liberator from every dogmatism, including the dogmas about His own nature.

One could add that what Žižek realizes is a combination of the figure of Christ not only with existentialism —this was already performed by Christian existentialists— but with *properly atheist* existentialism. Žižek’s Christ guarantees the absolute freedom of an absolutely singular individual —or of some version of subjectivity which would be even more singular than the individual— the absolute uniqueness and non-repeatability of such singularities, or even a sort of rebellion against the “heavens” and against any kind of metaphysical certainty. In a sense, Žižek’s Christ also realizes the Nietzschean *Übermensch* not as a Superman, but as an “Overman” who has gone past man.⁶ It could be said that such a Nietzschean “Overman” is in Žižek a complement of the Chalcedonian formula “fully God and fully man.” In Žižek’s interpretation, the divine element of Christ is the fact that he overcame man. What is more, Christ is an ally of man in his struggle against religious alienation as denounced by Ludwig Feuerbach, as well as against religion as an “opium of the people” criticized by Karl Marx. Žižek’s Christ is thus present in all the emancipatory programs of modernity, especially in those which take place against religion or against the traditional God of theism. Žižek’s Christ is the perpetual ally of man in his endeavor to be liberated from oppression, including the oppression he imposes upon himself in the guise of ideology and totalizing knowledge. Žižek links Christ with what is particularly human, namely the death-drive as a quest for vertiginous freedom. The fact that Christ is the universal man means that he represents the drive as such, or the human excess that this drive entails. Chalcedonian Christology is reformulated in a radical way by Žižek. The faith in the full divine and human nature of Christ is seen by Žižek in relation to the Crucifixion. The Crucifixion entails a removal of the gap between God and man (human nature), which is an internal gap inside God. God is thus reconciled with Himself and His catholicity (divine nature) is applied to humanity. Furthermore, the “community of the Spirit” —to which we shall return shortly— constitutes a Christological combination of the two most important programs of modernity, namely communitarianism and individualism, i.e. the emphasis on the liberation of the individual in its singularity or even solitude.

Okay — but can Slavoj Žižek be counted among the theologians?

No (i.e. not in the *strict* sense) — and it is precisely this that renders him exceedingly interesting from a theological point of view. One may assert that a theologian is, for all intents and purposes, someone who speaks and theorizes about God and religion, but arguably one of the truly *defining* characteristics of the theologian is that she *actually believes*, that she *has faith in God*. Žižek’s engagement with theological topics presents us

⁶ See Frederick Depoortere’s analysis in *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 121.

with all the characteristics of a theologian — a theoretical discussion about God, God’s nature, the Christian religion, the Christian church, even a Christology and a Pneumatology⁷— yet he explicitly lacks the very defining characteristic of a theologian: *faith*. The totality of Žižek’s engagement with Christianity rests on the premise that *God does not exist*. Fortunately, it is Žižek himself who has provided us through his writings with a terminology in order to describe someone that bears all the *external* characteristics of something, but certainly without having the *defining* characteristic thereof, the one characteristic that makes it what it is: *decaf*.⁸ Slavoj Žižek is a decaffeinated theologian.

To respond to our titular question anew: *yes*, Slavoj Žižek can be counted among the theologians — as an *inverted* or, more accurately, *decaffeinated* version of a theologian. And one whose insights are in many ways, as we shall see, acutely interesting to full-caffeine theology — to a theology that, well, would assert the existence of the Christian God. For it may be the case that, so far as theology is concerned, Slavoj Žižek is, as it were, *on the outside looking in*; what he sees, however, might at times be more discerning and rich than what the intellectuals who are already “inside” are able to make out.

It is certainly the case that not everybody is convinced that such a dialogue would indeed make sense, i.e. that there is anything of actual theological significance in the dialogue between Christians and atheist theology such as Žižek’s. To cite an example, one might recall John D. Caputo’s review of the Milbank-Žižek dialogue as encapsulated in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, where Žižek is portrayed as trying to create a Trojan horse in order to sack Christianity from the inside:

Furthermore, we all know that Žižek can very well make his main case with no mention of Christ at all, that he can use the seminars of Lacan, the films of Alfred Hitchcock or the novels of Stephen King just as well. His whole point, as he says elsewhere, is subversive: to build a Trojan-horse theology, to slip the nose of a more radical materialism under the Pauline tent of theology in order to announce the death of God. ... For truth to tell, Žižek doesn’t think there is a God himself who dies. Never was. The treatment is over when we realize that.⁹

Our concern with this critique lies in Caputo presenting the fact that Žižek does in no way whatsoever assert the existence of God or the divinity of Christ more or less as a concealed *secret* — a secret which at the precise moment it becomes revealed renders the whole treatment and discussion redundant. This, however, could not be farther from the truth: the explicit *starting point* of Žižek’s engagement with Christian theology is that the vantage point of such an engagement consists in a conscientious atheism — something, of course, which is primarily declared *to the Christians*. In our understanding, no Christian theologian

⁷ The reader wishing to take a closer look at Žižek’s views on the Holy Spirit beyond our analysis of Žižek’s core idea of the role of the Holy Spirit as the community of those that have interiorized Christ’s sacrifice, could consult Žižek’s *The Parallax View* (2006), 80, 99, *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003), 9–10, 130, pages 28–29, 32, 61, 148, 281–83, 291–95 from Žižek’s chapters in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), as well as pages 55, 104, 172 from Žižek’s chapters in *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (2012).

⁸ See, for example, Žižek’s “Passion in the Era of Decaffeinated Belief,” in *Religion and Political Thought*, ed. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (London, New York: Continuum, 2006), 237–42.

⁹ John D. Caputo, review of *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, by Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, edited by Creston Davis. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 2009.09.33, 30 September 2009.

would look to Žižek on Christianity with precisely the same expectations of insights *from within* the faith with which she would approach a celebrated theological thinker: *one is never served decaf by mistake*. Of course, Caputo’s position is much more nuanced than what we present here — but it remains the case that the thesis that Žižek attempts to “trick the Christian out” of her Christianity is indeed its core:

“Christ” for [Žižek] is a nickname for a way to contract the void, and the Passion story is an allegory or *Vorstellung* of a philosophical point he can make in any number of ways. [Žižek] discusses Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Crucifixion the way an analyst talks with a patient who thinks there is a snake under his bed, trying patiently to heal the patient by going along with the patient’s illusions until the patient is led to see the illusion. Žižek agrees with Chesterton the way the analyst agrees with the patient, where the whole question is, how do we deal with this snake, as he is obviously quite large and growing larger with every day. Then at some precisely timed and strategic point, the analyst softly asks, “Do you think perhaps it is something else disturbing your sleep?”¹⁰

Rather than the treatment coming to a conclusion, it is in our opinion precisely when Žižek sets the frame of his *atheist* theology that the discussion with caffeinated theologians may take off. The question, then, is precisely *what* a dialogue *on this basis* may bring, and we hope that the present volume attests to the fact that it can prove to be quite an auspicious dialogue. In an indirect response to the question concerning the possible fruits of such a “Trojan-horse” theology, allow us to digress and, adding Triadological insult to the theological injury, briefly present Slavoj Žižek’s Christological and Pneumatological insights, along with taking a closer look at the influence of Alain Badiou on Žižek and at their creative engagement with the Apostle Paul as a symbol of *political* universalism.

Paul, Žižek, Badiou, the Holy Spirit, and the Cross

If Alain Badiou can be described as an “atheist theologian,” Slavoj Žižek self-identifies as an “atheist Christian” in an attempt to exhaust Hegelian dialectics. His rationale is that History in the Common Era progresses through contradictions and extensions, which according (not exclusively) to Žižek have been inaugurated by Christianity as a religion constituting an exit from religion. Painting with a broad brush, we would say that a (Western rather than Orthodox) Christian Triadology, in which the Son is juxtaposed to the Father and is sacrificed on the Cross while the Spirit is the loving link between them, is the archetype of the Hegelian dialectical position of thesis, antithesis and synthesis — or, more precisely, the *Aufhebung* of the *Aufhebung*.

But it would also be an archetype of Marxist dialectics, where the position of the sacrifice of the Son can be assumed by the revolution and the position of the community of the Holy Spirit can be assumed by the classless society.

¹⁰ Caputo, review of *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

In this Triadology, the Son and Christ is not the “Right Hand of the Most High,” as many Christians like to remember it, but is instead as it were the “Left of the Most High,” the “Revolutionary of God,” and it is up to the Spirit to constitute universality.

Žižek’s purpose is to demonstrate that the true dialectical materialist cannot but be the heir of Christian civilization, but also that the true Christian is one who through Christianity has transcended religion itself in the direction of dialectical materialism. In this reasoning, Žižek vigorously defends the Christian heritage and Paul in particular within a postmodern world of late capitalism that is turning to spirituality, alternative religions such as Zen and Buddhism, and New Age syncretism — or regresses into an apophatic (deconstructionist) Judaism without the Incarnation of the Messiah.

In referring to dialectics, we refer to an understanding in which concepts are not static and self-defined but rather opposed to one another in a dynamic motion, in which a third sublates both of them at once and transforms them into a continuum at a higher level. Being, for example, cannot be defined *by itself*, but only in contrast to non-being, while both are sublated but also made complete in the *becoming*. In this, Žižek follows dialectical thinking to its most extreme paradoxes. What is particularly striking is that he contemplates the history of Judaism and Christianity, and Paul par excellence, with an acutely piercing and discerning psychoanalytic gaze and connects them to the modern realities of capitalism and communism as well as psychoanalysis itself — all these seen as generated from the Christian heritage through a historical dialectical itinerary.

It is Žižek’s insistence on dialectics that opposes him, as noted earlier, to (his otherwise comrade, philosophically and otherwise) Alain Badiou, who paints an anti-dialectical portrait of Paul.¹¹ In theological terms, Badiou is a “theologian of the Resurrection,” while Žižek a “theologian of the Crucifixion” — since dialectics emphasizes the inherent need for the Crucifical sacrifice for the advent of the Resurrection and the Pentecost of the Spirit. Despite his “heretical” interpretation of Christianity as a religion with a perverse core, Žižek is a valuable interlocutor for theologians, as he focuses on how Paul’s Christianity is a way out of the “Judaism” of globalized capitalism in towards a new “communism” of love (one that would be different, of course, from “actually existing socialism”).

In his analysis of Paul, Žižek follows a number of insights by Badiou and especially Agamben, who is more dialectical, and incorporates them into a kind of Hegelian dialectical process.¹² In Badiou we encounter the wholeness (“Greek”), the part and exception (“Jew”), and the subtraction (*soustraction*) of the universal from them both (the Christian fidelity to the *event*). In Agamben we encounter the triad of *whole*, *part*, and *residue* as a non-non (the Christian: non-non-Greek and non-non-Jewish). Žižek reformulates this with the help of the Hegelian paradox of a *genus* that has only one species, whereas the residue that remains is

¹¹ See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 108–112, 129–133.

the very universality of the *genus*. In a way, Žižek intends to maintain both a concept of universality along the lines of Badiou and a concept of residue along the lines of Agamben. Thus we encounter a triad of *genus*, *species* and *residue* in which the latter ultimately assumes the nature of a universal genus.

This takes place within a dialectical movement. An initial universality is introduced. Its species may act as “the disgraceful,” “the abhorrent.” Žižek observes playfully that usually, when we refer to something as “special,” this is because of its abhorrent nature — for example when we refer to “special measures” in state repression, or to “special conditions,” and so on.

Ultimately, the residue forms an excess which helps the *genus* to reflectively find its own self within its species, in accordance with Hegelian dialectic. Following the (by now familiar) switch from Paul’s time to ours, Žižek employs the conclusions of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who analyzed the new order of globalized capitalism in terms of “empire” — precisely such as, as it happens, the Roman empire.¹³ However, he also links those conclusions and tools to the thought of Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière, according to whom the only truly democratic subject is the *residue*, i.e. that element of the Whole that does not have the particular characteristics that would grant it a place within the Whole, thus being temporary excluded.

By not being able to assume a certain ontic position, this residue becomes an ontological embodiment of universality. In other words, when each particular group asserts its particular interests, only the excluded are those who may embody universality. We may recall here the term *égaliberté* (liberty/liberté and equality/égalité together) of Etienne Balibar, which can only be embodied by the “non-existents,” the “nobodies” such as the *liumang* (tramps) of modern feudal-capitalist China, who, by not participating in any existing class, “are displaced, and float freely, lacking work-and-residence, but also cultural or sexual, identity and registration.”¹⁴ It is with such a notion of reflective dialectical incarnation of universality within the residue that we can understand Paul’s dictum: “God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are” (1 Cor 1:28).

Žižek adds a dimension that is not stressed adequately in the two thinkers at hand, namely that this community of the non-existents is the community of the Holy Spirit. We will need to develop here Žižek’s dialectical Triadology in its relevance to the capitalist context and psychoanalysis. If, according to Sigmund Freud, God the Father is the slain archaic father, for Žižek He is the absent Father who resembles the Thing of Lacanian psychoanalysis — that is, as we have said, that which remains unsymbolized and ineffable. We are here in the terrain of Judaism, which, with the terminology of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is based on the contrast of the Real and the Symbolic.

¹³ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 64–65.

In referring to the “Symbolic” we are primarily referring to the Judaic Law, which, with the great detail of its provisions, is always lifting up obstacles and curtains in order to hide a uniconizable and uniconizable God such as the iconoclastic God of Judaism. St. Paul, however, in a spectacular psychoanalytic (*avant la lettre*) insight reveals that desire is caused by the Law (just like sin). Judaism is, therefore, the religion of desire, where the Symbolic, which in the form of the Law conceals an uniconizable God “behind a curtain,” as it were, intensifies our desire indefinitely and establishes the subject itself as the desiring subject.

Thus we arrive at the Žižekian interpretation of Pauline Christology,¹⁵ a Christology that can be extended beyond Paul as well.¹⁶ In Christian soteriology there are two primary ways of contemplating salvation. The first and more Eastern one consists in seeing it as divinization, as *theosis*. The second and more Western one is to see salvation as a path towards the perfect man. Žižek conjoins the two, however in a rather “downward” direction. That is, according to Žižek Christ is God *precisely in the sense that He embodies what is particularly human*: the excess in nature, that which is rejected from the natural world. We are situated here within a Hegelian Triadology, where everything that is the case in the relationship between God and man applies to the *interior* of God. The fact that Christ embodies the chasm between man and nature is identified with the chasm between God and man, but also between Father and Son. In contrast, however, with every individual human person, Christ fully embodies the rejected excess from nature that is humanity. It is for this reason that he is the human person *par excellence* (the *ecce homo* of Pontius Pilate), but also the “man without qualities” (the latter Christological title is derived from Robert Musil’s homonymous novel, which reminds us of the dogmatic position —of a pending status within theology— that the human nature assumed by Christ is universal and “without properties”). This is why Christ is also the *Übermensch* in the Nietzschean sense of the term. Ultimately, Christianity is for Žižek the religion of revelation because Christ reveals the death of the divine Thing. This is particularly the case in the cry of God’s abandonment on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The result is that Judaism is left behind as a religion based on desire seen as the dialectical contrast between Real (the uniconizable God the Father) and Symbolic (the Law) because, according to Žižek, of the revelation of the divine Thing’s absence, which is defined by Žižek as the traversing of the fantasy. In Hegelian terms, Christ is the second part of a dialectical triad, a part that disappears (through the Crucifixion, but we would add to this the Ascension as well), so that the Spirit may enter the equation as the third term of the dialectical triad.

The Spirit is the constitution of the community of the “non-existents,” the “non-beings” who have interiorized the sacrifice of Christ and have made the transition from the religion of the Law and desire to the religion of love.

¹⁵ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 80–82.

¹⁶ See also Žižek’s *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (New York: Verso, 2008) and *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

What exactly does this mean? Alain Badiou underscores an absolute (non-dialectical) contrast between Law and love, as also do many Christian Orthodox theologians of the '60s generation such as Christos Yannaras,¹⁷ among others. Žižek, on the contrary, seems to contemplate love dialectically as opposed, of course, to the Law, yet in the sense that it results from an extreme absolutization and radicalization of the Law. For example, if the Law encourages you not to commit adultery, Christianity urges you not to commit adultery *even "in the heart."* Love is, as it were, a subversion of the Law by extending the Law to its most extreme consequences.

To this, however, the following should be added. The fading away of Judaism as a religion of the Law and desire (which are mutually supported by their antitheses) means that love has arrived as a focus on the absolutely particular that is the neighbor. In psychoanalytic terms, Judaism is based on the omnipotent desire which is metonymic, i.e. it flows infinitely from one object to another. Christianity, on the contrary, is founded on love as a drive (*Trieb*) that is addressed in a perpetually circular motion to a particular object.

Why Paul, then? Because today's globalized capitalism relies on a planetary predominance of desire as metonymy, according to which we are called to turn our attention to an endless hunt for shifting objects–commodities where this desire is invested. For capitalism, in a sense, sprang out of the quasi-neo-Judaizing roots of Protestantism. Today, Žižek is skeptical of neo-Judaizing theologies such as, for example, the deconstructionist philosophy of the (early) Jacques Derrida, which are compatible with capitalism rather than subversive of it. Against these, Pauline Christianity offers love as a non-negotiable focus on the absolutely particular neighbor. A love that is by definition violent, not so much because of its unwanted potential side effects, but in its very act of giving absolute value to the neighbor. In this sense, Žižek approaches Christian love as a kind of communism or socialism which, however, is not to be identified with "actually existing socialism." Rather than that, as we noted earlier, it is the community of the excluded who interiorize the sacrifice of Christ: the community of the Holy Spirit.

However, this is but one way to approach Žižek's atheist theology. What different routes could one take?

Theistic ways into an atheist theology

Among the potential strategies that could be employed in order to approach elements of Žižek's thought with theological relevance one can mention the following. (i) It is illuminating to examine the cases where Žižek's psychoanalytic analyses could serve in the direction of a fruitful cultural critique of institutional Christianity and Christian societies. This issue is important not only from a sociological point of view, but also for every Christian intellectual who would wish to take account of the cultural consequences of her

¹⁷Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. by Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), first published in Greek in 1970.

religion, and Žižek offers a very interesting narrative. (ii) Religion can be plausibly understood as a symptom of dialectical material relations. The study of religion as such a symptom can thus offer insights not only into the deeper material relations of the society, but also into the symbolic which supports it. What is crucial is that a given religion provides a coherent narrative which could thus make explicit what is more difficult to discern at the level of material relations. Both atheists and theologians may thus be interested in how Žižek relates religious narratives or even dogmas to civilizational paradigms.

Furthermore, (iii) for a theologian Žižek's thought can be seen as of fundamental importance through the use it makes of its distinction between historical institutional Christianity on the one hand, and the emancipatory message of Christ on the other. The latter leads to a quite distinctive soteriology, indeed a remarkably radical soteriological vision. A theologian could be interested in such a vision as an original interpretation of the traditional soteriological one, which is an interpretation that brings traditional soteriology into relation with the avant-garde of modernity, including psychoanalysis, Marxism, but also existentialism, as well as some values of secular Enlightenment in general. (iv) Žižek's work is of special interest for someone concerned with apologetics and with the dialogue between the Christian religion and the sciences, since he has articulated his anthropology in an original dialogue both with religion and with scientific findings and theories such as quantum mechanics or the theory of evolution.

Apart from this, (v) what is urgently needed is a critical dialogue between theologians and Žižek's thought, putting the specific question of what could survive from Žižek's interpretation if one believes in the Resurrection of Christ and in the Holy Trinity as a Trinity of Persons coexisting in an eternal loving relation. The crucial question is whether the dialectical vision of Christianity that we find in thinkers such as Hegel and Žižek could be combined with a true faith in the Resurrection. Similarly, what could survive from the program of dialectical immanence, were one to believe in a transcendent God? Can the cry of the divine dereliction be read next to "Father, into your hands I command my spirit" (Luke 23:46)? The general sense of such questions would be whether faith in the actual resurrection of Christ, in the eschatological bodily resurrection of humanity and in the eternal loving coexistence of the Persons of the Trinity, simply annuls Žižek's theory about Christianity as revealing an emancipatory message of dialectical immanence or whether something can be kept from these profound Žižekian insights, even if one is faithful. In this way, Žižek could be brought into dialogue with Christian thinkers who do believe in the Resurrection and endeavor to thematize it in their thought, even if in an apophatic manner. The latter possibility constitutes one of the main aims of our volume.

It is to be noted that the response of theologians to Žižek's thought has already lasted in time. One can mention representatives of the Radical Orthodoxy movement who have had a very fecund interaction with Slavoj Žižek. Graham Ward,¹⁸ for example, thinks that a genuine theology can only be based on the notion of analogy, the latter being the correct response to a dialectics that leads to Hegelian immanence and Žižekian "Christian atheism."

¹⁸ Graham Ward's engagement with Žižek's thought begins in his *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), *passim*.

And we have already referred to the extensive Žižek–Milbank dialogue, so far including two books.¹⁹ It will be helpful to pause at this point and see John Milbank’s own response to the question why Žižek is relevant for theology proper in spite of his determinedly decaffeinated status:

You write of Slavoj Žižek, “In an important sense, he bears a theological witness.” How can a self-described atheist bear a theological witness?

John Milbank: In Dostoevsky’s novel *The Devils*, one character, Kirillov, speaks of both the necessity to believe in God as the reality of infinite goodness and the impossibility of doing so. His resolution of this dilemma is deliberate, meaningless suicide on the grounds that, in an atheistic world, he himself is now God, as possessor of a sovereign will, and that suicide is the highest demonstration of this will. Žižek tries to escape this dilemma in another way—by pointing to the figure of Christ, whom tradition has taken to be the incarnation of God in a single human life. Although, for Žižek, God is *only* present in incarnate guise and otherwise does not exist at all, he still insists that outside this Christian legacy we would not have had the sense of an absolute demand, exceeding all human law and custom. Indeed, the notion of incarnation sustains for Žižek the idea that this absolute demand, which orients our humanity, is more than human, even though it comes, he says, from “nowhere.”

Against Žižek, you insist on the necessity of theism. What do you think are the prospects for a philosophical encounter with theology that doesn’t assent to a transcendent deity?

John Milbank: I think that, in the end, the prospects are non-existent. Dostoevsky saw further than Žižek, because he dramatized the alternative existential stances in the face of nihilism, even a Christological nihilism. Kirillov tries self-assertion, but logically concludes that the only irrefutable act of “divine” self-assertion is self-slaughter. Stavorogin, in the same novel, adopts instead a malicious indifference, which he deploys seductively to derange the lives of others. But in the end, this leads to a suicide of mere despair. Žižek’s Christ is merely a clown, the excreted everyman, the dross of the world. “The Good” is here reduced to the instance of that which exceeds reality, which finds no home. This places love beneath being, even if in a sense it is beyond being for Žižek, as the impossibility of realized desire. But at the end of *The Devils*, Dostoevsky suggests through the mouth of the dying Verkhovensky that love exceeds being in the sense that the real is orientated by the Good. Here, loving faith alone closes the circle of the ontological argument. The highest, which would include existence, must indeed exist. Without this idea of a perfect happiness for all of reality, which the most extreme misery cannot perturb, Dostoevsky contends that human beings lose their defining orientation. The final episodes of the novel try to depict scenes of disclosing recognition and forgiveness between people, which show how we can authentically participate in this infinite perfection and thereby transfigure the world.

Atheistic philosophy still finds itself caught in a theoretical version of the nihilistic *aporia* depicted by the 19th-century Russian novelist. Either, like

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), as well as John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek and Creston Davis, *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010).

Kirillov, it can assert human reason or freedom against the power of the void—but then this seems like self-vaunting wishful thinking; or else, like Stavrogin, it can deny the final reality of any human suppositions against the background of an indifferent nature. But in that case, the reality of reason itself is threatened. The atheistic logos will always lack either being or reason, without which there is no philosophy, no exercise of the love of wisdom.²⁰

Of course, a *believing* theologian might engage in that most enriching dialogue with the atheist theology of Slavoj Žižek purely in order to understand, either *with the help of Žižek's* insights or *a contrario*, aspects and implications of her own tradition. One may not *necessarily* have the “ulterior motives” that John Milbank so succinctly, deliciously even, confesses to in that same interview:

Do you see your participation in this dialogue as evangelization? What do you hope to accomplish?

John Milbank: Yes. Victory.²¹

Žižek's dialogue with Boris Gunjević concerning Christianity, Judaism and Islam in *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* should certainly be mentioned here as well.²² Other theological responses include the aforementioned John D. Caputo, among an ever-increasing number of scholars. Currently, at least two works present Žižek's relation to theology and study it, namely Frederick Depoortere's *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*²³ and Adam Kotsko's doctoral thesis published as *Žižek and Theology*.²⁴ In light of all these we cannot but conclude that Žižek's dialogue with theology and theologians is a given, the only open question left being where this dialogue leads.

The world's most interesting heretic

To say that an atheist theologian such as Slavoj Žižek is, when considered from the perspective of historical orthodox Christianity, a “heretic” would be a redundant tautology which of itself brings little to the discussion. Such a proclamation, taken by itself, would be liable to give the impression that the one proclaiming it has not quite understood the context of the discussion and is at a certain dissonance with it, “not getting it,” as one might say.

²⁰ John Milbank, “Orthodox paradox: An interview with John Milbank,” interview by Nathan Schneider, March 17, 2010. Retrieved on March 17, 2018 from <https://tif.ssrc.org/2010/03/17/orthodox-paradox-an-interview-with-john-milbank/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević. *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories, 2012).

²³ Frederick Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, particularly 92–142.

²⁴ An exhaustive account on *what* can be found *where* as far as Žižek's engagement with Christianity in his labyrinthoid corpus is concerned will not be provided in our chapter, as this can be largely found in Kotsko's aforementioned *Žižek and Theology*, particularly in pages 1–3, 71–128, as well as 129–154 on theological responses to Žižek up to the book's publication date. The present book operates on the assumption that *Žižek and Theology* marks territory already explored, thus providing both takes on issues *beyond* that book and *alternative* readings to the ones there offered.

However, in Slavoj Žižek’s case there are more, and more interesting, sides to considering him as a “heretic” — as a number of his intuitions and insights (from an external point of view as these might be) on the Christian God are based on premises that are readily identified in certain heresies of early Christianity, articulated at the time by people who did not, of course, consider themselves as atheist theologians, but whose confessions ended in their clash with the ecclesial community of the faithful and their exile from it. The fact that those same theological premises, particularly so far as the intra-Trinitarian relationships are concerned, appear in the 21st century in the work of atheist theologian Slavoj Žižek is, in our opinion, a particularly delicious coincidence or conjunction.

Anyone well-versed in the study of heresy (heresiology), which is also a favorite pastime of the Orthodox, can recognize in Žižek’s thought a series of heresies of the early Church, which may be applied to Hegel as well. Sabellianism, theopassianism or patripassianism, supersessionism, epochalism, the heresy of the Son’s Fatherhood (νομοπατορία), are only some of the names of interrelated Christian historical heresies with which one could compare this extreme form of dialectical thought.²⁵ (It is certainly the case, however, that other non- Žižekian forms of dialectical theology may be both orthodox and Orthodox).

Our main point is that Žižekian thought is indirectly derived from forms of theology and Triadology in which it is not only the case that the divine Persons are contrasted (rather than just being related, as is the case with the Cappadocians), but also that the One disappears for the Other to come forth — as would be the case in the heresy of epochalism, in which history is divided into the ages and epochs of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit. And also in the heretical doctrine of the Fatherhood of the Son (νομοπατορία), where the sacrifice of the Son is inherently related to the death or disappearance of the Father (with the Žižekian addendum of the Son’s death which is interiorized thanks to the Spirit).

To blame Žižek as a heretic is, of course, a futile enterprise, as one would be essentially preaching to the already converted, if not to the choir — no one is contesting Žižek’s *unorthodoxy*. After all, it is he himself who has led dialectical thought to such a paradoxical form as to contend that only the heretic or even more so the *atheist* may embody today the truth of Christianity as a “Pauline materialism.” In fact, he asserts that Paul himself is not only a new Moses, but also a “new Judas the Iscariot,” namely a persecutor of the apostolic community who instead of committing suicide, repented and took the vacant position of Judas in order to “betray” the historical Jesus (of the micro-historical narrative) once more, so that through the interpretational “betrayal” the Christ of faith may emerge.

Furthermore, the fact that Žižek’s conceptualization of the Trinity is readily recognized in a number of the heresies of the early Church should not, of course, render a Christian theologian unwilling to engage with the Lacanian heretic’s thought, thinking that there is nothing of value therein — quite the contrary: the Christian should never forget that it is precisely in engagement with and contrast to “heresy,” however defined, that the church’s doctrinal formulations are actually articulated, that the church’s testimony takes shape.

²⁵ See the acutely accurate critique of Frederiek Depoortere in *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 139–41.

It is perhaps the case that a cultural relevance greater than that of heresiology, which Žižek himself would celebrate, lies in the observation that Žižek is born out of a Western Cross-centric mode of thinking, according to which the Incarnation of God the *Logos* is more or less identical to an “Indeathening,” in which salvation emerges almost automatically as a result of the Crucifixion so that we do not have to wait for the Resurrection — and in which our salvation does not consist in being deified (*theosis*)²⁶ but in becoming “perfect” human beings (either in the sense of a moral superhuman or in the sense of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, as is the case in Žižek). The question, then, of Paul’s timeliness for the atheists of today, seems to turn into a question of Žižek’s timeliness for the Christians of today, and for Orthodox Christians at that. Our answer is that on the one hand he offers an acutely perceptive psychoanalytic probe into the history of a Christianity — mainly in its Western version— that is globalized today and is particularly relevant to the peoples of Southeast Europe (let it be remembered that Žižek comes from Slovenia, the very border between East and West). Žižek is, therefore, a valuable interlocutor in the *a contrario* articulation of orthodox (and Orthodox) dialectical thought, such as the version based on Maximus the Confessor’s triad of *logos – tropos – telos*. And, on the other hand, Žižek offers a very moving vision in our contemporary context: the vision of a community of the Holy Spirit comprised of the “non-beings,” a community that breaks free from the perpetuation of capitalist desire, which circulates incessantly from one commodity to the other, in favor of a violent love for the concrete neighbor.

On the sublime object of this volume

To return to the contents of this book: following the present introductory chapter, the volume properly opens with Agon Hamza’s “Žižek and the Dialectical Materialist Theory of Belief,” which offers some crucial definitions relating to the subject of the volume. On the one hand, the chapter situates religion in terms of a philosophical tradition which has its roots in Hegel and Feuerbach, but also includes Marx and, arguably, Lacan, reaching up to Slavoj Žižek. On the other hand, it focuses on the importance given by the latter to the conception of a Christianity that is linked to dialectical materialism and to the claim that true dialectical materialism must pass through the Christian experience. Through these two questions of fundamental importance for our subject at hand, Agon Hamza endeavors to demonstrate why any thinker, i.e. not only Christian ones but also atheist ones, should take an interest in Christianity and in what the latter reveals. At a more specific level, the chapter points to the links between Christianity and dialectical materialism, and responds to the question of why someone involved in the latter should also confront the issues raised by the Christian tradition.

A number of Agon Hamza’s intuitions show the urgent character of this volume’s endeavor. Feuerbach’s fundamental insight was that religion is a redoubling of man’s

²⁶ Something which Žižek conveniently asserts in the *Afterword* to the present volume, where he criticizes the notion of *theosis*.

exteriorization in his creativity. In other words, man is externalized in his creations —such as his thoughts, dreams, imagination, feelings, beliefs, desires— and this exteriorization is redoubled by religion, which projects them to a transcendent realm. It is for this reason that Feuerbach’s critique of religion aims at the comprehension of the particularly *human* character of human creativity. Karl Marx assumes this critique of religion as human alienation but focuses on the particularly material relations which are redoubled by religion. For Marx, it is capitalistic individual property that alienates man from the products of his labor, being aided in this by the state and the relevant social institutions. Religion then constitutes a redoubling of this particular capitalist state as well as of the associated capitalist society, and not just any kind of redoubling. Religion is, thus, the inverted consciousness of a world which is already inverted, since it is based on the worker’s alienation. Religion can of course justify and confirm the social relations of power, but only because it mirrors them first. According to Karl Marx, on the one hand, religion is a superstructure which is determined by material and social relations, which means that the alienation caused by religion is but a reflection of the alienation that already exists in these material and social relations. On the other hand, Hamza focuses on the particularly Marxist conception of religion as a redoubling, i.e. as a reflection or a mirroring of society. In examining this latter point, Hamza also valorizes some psychoanalytic intuitions.

When one sees oneself in the mirror, one does not only see oneself, but one also sees the world with oneself inside it. What the mirror offers is basically a coherent image of the world including ourselves in it. Hamza formulates this intuition dialectically as an absence of absence or an alienation of alienation offered by the mirror. When I see the world directly without a mirror, I myself am absent. But when I do see myself inside the world, as it is offered by the mirror, then the absence of myself in the direct view is lost and I thus acquire an excess of presence and coherence of myself. What such a Lacanian view seems to imply is that what appears in the mirror is not “less than me,” it is not a deficient copy of myself. On the contrary, it is “more than me,” it offers greater identity and coherence, as it grants me the possibility to witness myself from the outside.

This combination of Lacanian and Marxist intuitions leads to a very subtle analysis of religion. By being a mirror, a catoptric redoubling of social reality, religion offers consistency and coherence to this reality. Religion is a sort of mapping theory of the world. It allows the worker to see herself from the outside and thus dialectically “alienate her alienation.” It is in this sense that religion constitutes, according to Marx, an encyclopedic compendium of the world. The redoubling of the world by religion offers to the “people” the possibility to “read” the relations which constitute its alienation. What in social reality is a *contradiction* (for example, the fact that the worker is not the owner of her products) becomes in religion an *opposition*, since religions are based on radical differences such as that between the Creator and the creature, and so on. Religion thus becomes a stage exposing the relations of social alienation to our gaze.

Hamza exposes the famous Marxist claim that religion is the “opium” of the people in its dual meaning, namely that opium is received by someone who is suffering and seeks a sort of anesthesia, but also a way out of reality in the realm of illusion. Hamza proposes, however,

that we focus on the phrases which precede the claim where Marx also characterizes the suffering of religion as simultaneously an expression of real suffering and a protest against this suffering. The second part is, according to Hamza, a repetition of the experience of the world, which in some cases could even become a transcendence of the world, since the alienated man can conceive of his reflection in the mirror of religion as non-alienated. Hamza focuses on a sort of “epistemological” value of religion, as the latter can constitute a “theory of the world,” offering man the possibility to see himself “from the outside” in a coherent narrative.

Whereas Feuerbach’s critique consists in the fact that religion alienates man from the products of his creativity, in a Marxist perspective religion is rather the redoubling of a condition in which workers are already alienated by being deprived of the products of their labor. The critique of heaven becomes thus a critique of the earth; the critique of religion becomes a critique of the law and the critique of theology turns into a critique of politics. In all such cases, abstract relations replace concrete lacks of relation. One could equally add that religion as a redoubling makes visible a certain reification of abstract relations that takes place in capitalism. It is to be noted that Marx criticizes not religion in itself, but the social structure which is redoubled as religion. Religion is thus less an object of critique and more a model of comprehension which clarifies the social relations of alienation as well as the phenomenon of reification of abstract relations. For Hamza the Marxist emphasis is not on how religion is an illusion which supports the capitalist system. On the contrary, it focuses more on how religion constitutes a stage where social relations become visible. It thus creates the possibility of interior critique to such relations.

And here is where the thought of Slavoj Žižek becomes exceedingly relevant. Žižek inherits a philosophical tradition in which immanence is the most crucial notion, and, what is more, a version of *dialectical* immanence, i.e. an immanence which evolves through interior contradictions. What we should stress is that although a certain type of Christian religion could serve as a redoubling of relations of alienation and reification inside capitalism, Christianity can also show the exit out of this ideology. After demonstrating how religion is important as a mirror reflecting the relations which are developed in capitalism, a second, more crucial part, follows in which Christianity’s dynamic can show the way out of such relations and their redoubling. The fundamental insight is here offered by Hegel, who stresses the significance of the divine dereliction in the Cross, i.e. the abandonment of Jesus by the Father. The theology of the Crucifixion leads Hegel to a “speculative Good Friday” which is tantamount to the “vanishing of the mediator.” What “dies” on the Cross is the abstract character of the divine Being. If Christianity is the “religion of the Revelation,” what is revealed is the abolition of the Divine Being in its abstract form. One could thus say that even if at a first level Judeo-Christian religion is mirroring the relations of the capitalist world, at a superior dialectical level this same structure of the theological mirror is “breaking” through the Christian emphasis on the Crucifixion and on the Sacrifice, by means of the latter being interpreted by Žižek as a dialectical abolition of the divine abstraction or rather as a revelation of the divine inexistence.

Judeo-Christianity presents two moments in dialectical tension: (i) a mirror which reproduces the alienation and reification of the world; and (ii) the possibility of disclosing this abstract conception of divine Being as abolishable, as the divine dereliction reveals. Žižek proceeds further than Hegel in that he insists on the material character of the abolishment of the abstract character of the divine Being. Whereas Hegel speaks of an objective Spirit that synthesizes the contradictions at a higher spiritual level, Žižek refers instead to the Spirit as the community of those who have interiorized sacrifice as the abolishment of the transcendent divine Thing. For Žižek, this community of interiorization of the abolishment of the divine abstraction can be not only an ecclesial community, a church, but also a community of heretics or even atheists. Such communities could nowadays include communities of communists, analysts, persons in love, and so on. Žižek is the latest interpreter of a long tradition which includes Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx and Lacan, among many others, in that he sees Christianity as a religion of dialectical self-transcendence in the direction of atheist dialectical materialism. The crucial point is the (self-negating) belief in the sacrifice and the consequent “Spiritual” character of the communities that have interiorized this sacrifice. Agon Hamza’s chapter demonstrates the basic point of this volume in a double sense: (i) religion is crucial because it is a mirror and a stage on which the relations of alienation and reification are repeated and reenacted in a more coherent and easily graspable way; the study of religion could thus prove fertile even for an atheist thinker. And (ii) what is offered by Žižek in particular is a dialectical comprehension according to which Christianity constitutes in its emancipatory core a possibility of exiting religious abstraction. The latter is achieved through the Crucifixion as divine dereliction and the community of the Spirit as an interiorization of the sacrifice. Žižek insists on a tradition of dialectical immanence in which Judeo-Christianity transcends divine abstraction from the inside in a way that nevertheless leads to atheist materialism. In the thought of Slavoj Žižek, the atheist will thus find the reasons for which it is Christianity itself which leads to the most authentic, heroic and profound form of atheism. Inversely, a believer will find in Žižek fascinating intuitions about the tensions within Christianity.

This volume thus properly begins with a chapter that touches upon the relation between the thought of Slavoj Žižek and Christianity in two crucial points: (i) the epistemological value of religion for whoever wishes to study our world in its social and material dimension, since religion offers a redoubling of this world as well as a reenactment of its relations with a greater coherence. This makes the thought of Slavoj Žižek especially relevant for an atheist. Further, (ii) in the context of a Hegelian-Marxist philosophical tradition of dialectical immanence, Christianity is not only a mirroring of social relations, but also a kind of emancipatory exiting from alienation and reification. However, by developing this subject from the point of view of dialectical immanence, Žižek insists that this emancipatory exit takes place from the inside and not from the outside. In other words, it is from the inside of the religion that one is saved from religion. This salvation from inside religion is achieved thanks to the two most important moments of Christianity as they are interpreted in a very distinctive way by Žižek. The first is the Crucifixion, i.e. the sacrifice of God in the person of Jesus Christ. And the second is the community of the Holy Spirit as an interiorization of the Crucified, and thus as a kind of Resurrection.

The volume aims to expose these two crucial moments of Christianity in the thought of Slavoj Žižek. The atheist will be able to witness in them an emancipatory exit from illusory ideology. But the faithful Christian will equally be able to observe an original interpretation of the two fundamental moments of Christian faith from the perspective of dialectical immanence. This exposition of Žižek's thought will not be a simple presentation, but rather a critical dialogue. Whereas Hamza's chapter touches upon Crucifixion and Resurrection from the point of view of an atheist thinker, in the continuation of the volume one may find papers by Christian thinkers who engage critically with Žižek's dialectical materialist interpretation of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. These papers explore the fecundity of Žižek's proposal for an interpretation of Christianity in the context of dialectical immanence and its very distinctive contributions, but they also pose the question whether a genuinely theological interpretation could be combined with dialectical immanence as an absolute demand. Žižek's thought is thus compared to that of Christian thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Falque, John Milbank, Thomas Altizer, Gabriel Vahanian, Gianni Vattimo and others, in order to examine different treatments of the same topics, and there is also a comparison with the Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas.

Some of the following chapters compare Žižek with thinkers who accept a communist or radical democratic stance, such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, whereas in one case there is a comparison with the psychoanalyst Jean-Claude Milner. Other chapters engage in a critical examination of Žižek's thought as part of a certain philosophical tradition which includes Georg Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan, but which also has Christian roots going back not only to modern thinkers such as Friedrich Schelling, Immanuel Kant or René Descartes, but also to more remote thinkers such as Martin Luther, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas or even Saint Paul. Such papers place Slavoj Žižek in the context not only of the modern philosophical tradition of dialectical immanence, but also of Christian antecedents which sometimes present elements either of dialectics or of immanence, before these notions became a primary philosophical demand in the context of modern dialectical materialism.

Certain chapters, thus, critically inquire whether Slavoj Žižek has been a just interpreter of this long spiritual tradition. They point to some possible oversights in his interpretations or to the possibility of alternative interpretations of this same tradition. Last but not least, this volume includes a paper that attempts a critical dialogue with Žižek's thought from the point of view of a Christian liberal thinker. For reasons of fullness, we have judged fit to include an exterior gaze on the tradition of dialectical materialism from a thinker who sees himself as belonging to the liberal tradition, namely Haralambos Ventis, who is nevertheless willing to converse with it, touching upon the same subjects of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The common ground between Christian liberals and Žižek is mainly the importance of the presence of Christianity in the public sphere in a post-modern world. In order to open and sustain a dialogue on the role of Christianity in the public square, it is vital to take account of the thought of different thinkers coming not only from the tradition of materialism, but also from that of liberalism, or supporting in general the ideals of the Enlightenment, as is the case, for example, with Jürgen Habermas.

The papers in this volume contribute to the above questions in the following ways. A critical dialogue between the thought of Slavoj Žižek and a properly Christian belief in the bodily resurrection and in the eternal existence of the Trinity takes place in the paper by Brian Becker, “From Psychoanalysis to Metamorphosis: The Lacanian Limits of Žižek’s Theology,” which undertakes a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue with psychoanalysis. Becker starts by outlining Žižek’s distinctive view that in the moment of the dereliction of Christ in the Cross, what dies is God as the Big Other, the One who pulls the strings of the historical drama. This could be seen as a “breaking” of the Symbolical in favor of the Real in the Lacanian sense of these terms. What is abolished is the sacrificial logic as a logic of exchange, in which *jouissance* is sacrificed in order to attain meaning. The Crucifixion is thus the last sacrifice, the sacrifice of existing sacrifices and the sacrificial logic. The Resurrection which follows does not have a literal character of bodily resurrection, but is rather the genuinely emancipated collectivity of the faithful without hierarchy or an ontological guarantee of symbolical meaning based on the Big Other.

Becker underscores the fact that Žižek indulges in a very serious study of finitude (or immanence, as we have preferred to term it). But he puts the question whether a genuine theology could be satisfied with finitude not only as a point of departure, but also as a *quasi* eschatological condition. He proposes to regard finitude both theologically and psychologically in the perspective of its transfiguration in the Resurrection of Christ. Becker is inspired by phenomenologists such as Emmanuel Falque and Jean-Luc Marion, maintaining however a dialogue with the key insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Falque, finitude is philosophy’s point of departure; it is the insurmountable horizon in which we confront suffering and mortality. Falque speaks of a primordial corporeal chaos which could be linked to a Nietzschean “unconscious of the body,” i.e. an unconscious which is more immediately corporeal than Freud’s psychological unconscious. In more Lacanian terms, this is the pre-symbolical flesh, the brute immediacy of the body, before it is inhabited by the signifiers of the Big Other. Falque speaks, just like Lacan, of a subject that is divided between raw corporeality and language, the primary difference being that in Falque this divide is in the version of oblivion and neglect, while in Lacan in that of the forced choice between either alienation or annihilation.

In Lacan, the primordial experience of finitude is tantamount to a forced dilemma between either meaning or the *jouissance* of the Thing. By choosing meaning, one is deprived of the *jouissance* and is alienated. By choosing being, one sacrifices meaning and is annihilated as a subject. This resembles a kind of “your money or your life” dilemma, in which if someone chooses her money she loses both and is thus forced to choose life. In the same way, one is forced to always choose meaning instead of being and thus alienation instead of annihilation, this forced choice being the drama of human freedom. This choice of the sacrifice of *jouissance* in order for someone to enter the symbolic realm is also known as “symbolic castration.” Falque remarks that in psychoanalysis this dilemma is formulated precisely as one between alienation and death. The only way to choose Being or the Real is thus to die like Antigone in the Sophoclean drama. Becker does recognize the importance of psychoanalysis as a means to avoid an imaginary illusion of wholeness, as well as to be able to become subjects through assuming both our forced alienation and the unconscious desire

that results after this alienation. However, he also formulates the question whether a genuine theology could go beyond this inherent division between being and meaning without envisaging a reconciliation between them.

Becker points out that Žižek's discourse on Christianity is integrated into the Lacanian forced dilemma. Thus for Žižek institutional Christianity promotes a perverted religion based on the logic of the masochistic sacrifice, in which the sacrifice continues to take place in order to produce meaning. Contrary to institutional Christianity, which constitutes a return of religion, the authentic message of Christ is the transcendence of the symbolic with the revelation of the inexistence of the Big Other. Christ's sacrifice is thus not the perpetuation of the sacrificial logic, but its abolition. Christ's sacrifice is the last sacrifice which abolishes all sacrifices. For Žižek, sacrifice consists in the concealment of the abyss of the Other's desire, of its lack and inconsistency. With His last sacrifice Christ frees us from the sacrifices, since He reveals in His dereliction that the Big Other to whom the sacrifice is addressed does not exist. Becker remarks though that even if Christ's sacrifice is defined as the "last" sacrifice, it is still included in a certain definition of sacrifice and thus leaves us with nothing else than absolute absence and nothingness after its completion. The supposed emancipation is thus the one of a desperate man who has nothing to hope for. Becker's question is how one could conceive of the sacrifice in such a way that the Crucifixion would not be just one last sacrifice on the way to revealing inexistence.

One could remark that Christ does not extinguish His relation to the Father in the moment of the dereliction but He rather intensifies it by saying "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" (Luke 23:46). From a theological point of view the dereliction does not entail the inexistence of God the Father, but the full reception of human psychology, contrary to the historical heresy of Apollinarianism. Christ receives even human ignorance, i.e. an ignorance about His future resurrection. He thus assumes psychological and intellectual suffering together with the corporeal one. Modifying Žižek, one could say that Christ does not exceed the Symbolic towards the Real, but He rather makes the Real speak through the Symbolic. One could speak of Christ's *lalangue*, in the Lacanian meaning of the term, as an excess of voice through which the unconscious Real enters speech. With His *lalangue* Christ assumes man's existential and unconscious suffering. For Becker this is not an abolition of the Symbolical God, but an opening of the way for the Symbolic, through transforming elements such as the Symbolic's inherent lack and alienation.

A theological exit from the sacrificial logic which would not itself be included in the same logic could be envisaged thanks to Jean-Luc Marion's notion of the gift. In the latter it is the Other who offers the gift thus breaking any sacrificial logic of exchange. The one receiving the gift can repeat the act of gifting through a repetition of the gift which exits the sacrificial logic of exchange. If there is a lack on the human side, it is a lack due to the excess of the presence of God Who gives the gift. Marion's theory of the gift is different but also complementary to Falque's theory of finitude. God's gift includes the finitude assumed by Christ also comprising the unconscious.

Becker formulates more broadly the relation between psychoanalysis and theology. Psychoanalysis is included in the horizon of finitude and the sacrifice one must perform in

order to become an (alienated) subject. Žižek might be right in following the Lacanian consideration of the forced choice. And any Christian should also admit that in the context of finitude it is impossible to evade the forced choice or to pretend that the latter does not exist. However, the theological outlet is not that of an exit from sacrifice into nothingness, but that of a transformation of both the real and the symbolical unconscious. And the latter transcends the realm of psychoanalysis. It happens in the Resurrection which is not the admission of the Big Other's inexistence, but God's gift, after which the sacrifice is turned into Eucharist, i.e. into a repetitive assumption of the gift and an offering of a gift back to the Giver. Brian Becker's chapter constitutes a theological response to Žižek's thought. A theologian cannot but take Resurrection literally as a salvation of both body and soul through transformation. In the latter, the Real is assumed and acquires a logical character by being referred to the Father, whereas the Symbolic is transformed from sacrifice into Eucharist.

The paper of Chase Padusniak offers a second critical approach coming from a Christian thinker, but its primary concern is with Žižek's genealogy and his position in a certain spiritual tradition. It deals with theological actuality in the present, but only after drawing valuable elements from the past. Padusniak follows Milbank in maintaining that Žižek's thought is closer to Protestantism than to other versions of Christianity. This is only to be expected from a Hegelian thinker who considers that Catholicism is the negation of Orthodoxy and Protestantism the negation of Catholicism (and Žižek's own thought arguably being the negation of theist Protestantism). Padusniak focuses on the subject of the Resurrection as a community of the Holy Spirit. After the "death" of the abstracted God on the cross, what remains is a community of persons who are all totally singular; a community of persons who have invested everything in concrete being, after having lost their faith in the institutions, in general norms, in the symbolic unification from above, and so on. One could wonder how persons who are thus absolutely singular could still constitute a community instead of taking each her own solitary road. But this is exactly the "miracle" and the work of the Holy Spirit. The sacrificed Messiah paves the way for persons who have but their complete uniqueness being deprived of any abstract or normative foundation. It is precisely the absence of God that binds together this paradoxical community. One could note that this notion of a community of totally singular and individualized persons is precisely the case in Protestant Christianity. The latter stresses the independent relation of each individual with Scripture but also the fact that the totality of these thoroughly individualized persons nevertheless constitutes a community. Žižek seems to be based on the historical experience of Protestantism with the difference that in Žižek one finds an even more radical Protestantism that is ready to even negate theism, i.e. the eternal existence of the Big Other, for the sake of the most profound individualization.

By placing Žižek at the peak of a Protestant and mainly German tradition, Padusniak searches for his genealogy and traces it all the way back to the Middle Ages and Meister Eckhart. The discussion has two parts: the first concerns doing justice to the thought of the great German mystic, whereas the second one engages the contemporary discussion on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. In what concerns the latter, Padusniak emphasizes that Judaism does have an element of moral violence, since the goal of the Law is not to make social coexistence easier, but on the contrary to subtract the Jewish community from the

pagan world. Violence is even greater in Christianity where we are summoned by the face of our neighbor. The neighbor of Christianity is not our double but the traumatic Thing, if one is allowed to use a Kantian expression interpreted along Lacanian lines. Žižek's difference from Lacan is that we should neither familiarize the neighbor, nor use the notion of "face" in responding to the summons. Whereas Levinas insists on Otherness and on the notion of "face," the emphasis of Žižek lies on the third party, who is in some sense "faceless." The third introduces us to the domain of politics. In the latter, the particularly Christian love aims at someone who is without familiarized face, or who is even a "monster."

The first part of Padusniak's critique, written from the perspective of a Christian thinker, concerns doing justice to the thought of Meister Eckhart. In the latter we find a certain tension between the scholastic philosopher and the mystic, the intellectual master and the monk who belongs to a mendicant order. In his ontology, Meister Eckhart is based in the notion of analogy like Thomas Aquinas, in the sense that only the Absolute is Being proper, whereas other beings have being analogically. What is more interesting is that this ontology, although fundamentally analogical in character, includes some dialectical elements, in that it presents God as a negation of negation. The rationale is that each predicate constitutes a negation, since it situates a concrete element in a being by excluding other concrete elements. God's absolute unity and simplicity results only dialectically through the negation of the negation of predication, i.e. through transcending every predicate. At a more existential level, reaching this higher unicity and simplicity entails a dialectical return of the faithful to God as to a co-ground of her own being. For Padusniak, this notion of a co-ground is very close to what one could name, in a Žižekian fashion, "monstrosity," since it is an excess from humanity. It is true that in Meister Eckhart this excess bears the name of "peace" and not that of "monstrosity," but Padusniak argues that the former assumes the latter. The command "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) entails recognizing in the neighbor one's own monstrosity and excess. In a very counter-intuitive interpretation, Meister Eckhart exalts Martha's crucial role over that of Mary, since Martha is the one who in a dialectical way transcends transcendence and thus returns to the world in order to engender love. In Žižek's terms, one could say that Martha returns to the concrete and invests it with absolute meaning.

More important for present purposes than historical justice to Meister Eckhart, is the possibility that aspects of the medieval Christian tradition may prove fecund for contemporary political theology. For Padusniak, Meister Eckhart's notion of peace, which includes both the positivity of the plentitude of divine Being and the monstrosity of the neighbor, might be more satisfactory than a simple reference to the latter. A fuller Christian dialectic would include the detachment from the concrete (Mary), the elevation (*Aufhebung*) to the full unity of the Absolute, which we recognize as the co-ground of both ourselves and our neighbor —whom we love recognizing in her an excess of monstrosity similar to our own— and, finally, our return to concrete being, which we invest with absolute meaning (Martha). Thus Padusniak's vision, based on Meister Eckhart, claims to represent a Christian worldview in a fuller way than that of the atheist thinker Slavoj Žižek. At certain points this seems like an endeavor in Christian apologetics, attempting to adapt Žižek to the great syntheses of the Middle Ages. It might be true that the latter present elements of an inherent dialectic, which were made more explicit by Hegel, but one has to bear in mind that what is

particularly interesting about Žižek is the way that he stresses the abolition of totality against any totalizing synthesis. In any case, Padusniak's paper shows the position of a Christian thinker who draws inspiration from medieval Christian thought in order to articulate a fuller and particularly Christian political theology in the present.

The question of the community of the Holy Spirit is also engaged with in Gabriel Tupinambá's chapter, developing it in relation to psychoanalysis and Marxism. The issue here consists in the different ways available in order to compose a collectivity, and the examination of the Christian Spiritual community in relation to those ways. Whereas Marx wished for a synthesis between the theoretical catholicity of philosophy and the material catholicity of the proletariat, Lacan criticized universalism in general. Žižek's endeavor can be understood as a return to Hegel and to the latter's Christology, so that we could at the same time satisfy Marxist demands and respond to Lacan's critique. Žižek's turn to Christianity is not just theological, but aims at a combination between Marxism and psychoanalysis.

In order to understand this project, Tupinambá turns to the psychoanalyst Jean-Claude Milner, who has written about three ways to compose a collectivity, corresponding broadly to the Lacanian triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. In the imaginary collectivity, individuals are united under a common property ascribed to them. The imaginary collectivity is thus based on the opposition between identity and otherness. The symbolic collectivity is constructed performatively: it is the interpellation by a signifier which of itself provokes the representation of some individuals with it, a very characteristic example being that of the insult. When people are called by an insulting name, what is crucial is not whether they have attributes that correspond to the insult, but the way they themselves react to it, how they try to evade it or what are the new questions that arise. A symbolic community is thus constructed in a performative way, in the sense that it does not previously exist, but is performed through the interpellation itself. The symbolical collectivities are composed through suspicion and purification, since the subject is called to be performatively purified from what does not correspond to the signifier of the interpellation.

The third type of collectivity corresponds to the Lacanian Real. This is a "paradoxical" collectivity according to Milner, which is founded on the singularity of each subject. The paradoxical collectivity is here provoked by the fact that each subject evades its name in an utterly unique way. A significant example comes from the domain of psychoanalysis, where the name "neurotic" shows exactly how different individuals evade being named in completely different ways. The paradoxical community shows how different subjects cannot be represented by their characteristic names and points to the Real of a desire. In Žižek's logic, one is truly universal only when one is singular in a radical way. This is a community that stands against any totalization, be it predicative or performative.

Tupinambá points out that Žižek is turned to a Christian Pneumatology inspired by Hegel in order to articulate the possibility of a community which would be close to Milner's "paradoxical community." In Hegel the community of the Spirit is based precisely on the internal split and conflict inside self-consciousness. The community of the Spirit is then composed exactly by its opacity, by its lack of knowledge as to what unites it. This is a

collectivity of those, whose failures to reach the universal idea constitute the only foundation for an indirect yet concrete existence of such an idea. Tupinambá observes that the paradoxical community is not beyond the symbolical one, but in between it as a non-coincidence with alienated social activity. In this sense, one could also conceive of the Kantian public sphere as a space in between social identities.

Žižek's program is thus a combination of Hegelian dialectic and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The Hegelian dialectic underlines the continuity between different moments in the evolution of an idea. Lacanian psychoanalysis rather points to the singularity in a dispersive and anti-universalist logic. What Žižek demonstrates through the notion of the community of the Spirit is not the passage from universality to absolute singularity, but rather the fact that we can have a new idea of catholicity that may even be different from or contradictory to the conventional notion of catholicity and which would be grounded on absolute singularity. The Marxist actuality of such a novel notion of catholicity could be very promising. It could entail the transcendence of an imaginary identification according to which we think of order only as a belonging to common properties of a precise social stratum. This new catholicity, to which Žižek refers as a "fragile absolute," enables a critique of the idealist form of imaginary universality of which historical Christianity has very often been the prey. At the same time this new catholicity of the "fragile absolute" also critiques the Marxist and Lacanian tradition. It judges the Marxist tradition since its concrete universality has often taken place only inside the imaginary or symbolical realm in an essentialist way. And it critiques the Lacanian tradition, because its critique of universality has often been unproductive. Žižek's conception of the community of the Spirit deserves thus to be studied as a critical self-reflection of the three main traditions that he inherits, namely the Christian, the Marxist and the psychoanalytic.

In Haralambos Ventis' chapter we find a critical dialogue with Slavoj Žižek's thought from the point of view of a Christian liberal. The paper refers extensively to the liberal critique of both Christianity and Marxism, examines Žižek's responses to this critique, and concludes with some questions from the point of view of someone who is friendly to the Christian tradition. In its first part it develops positions by thinkers of liberal political constructivism against Christianity and Marxism. The main concern of thinkers included by Ventis in this current of thought, such as Richard Rorty and Cornelius Castoriadis, is that the eschatological visions of both Christianity and Marxism put a predetermined end in history and thus abolish autonomy, the dialogical emergence of freedom, and the possibility of novelty. In the second part, Ventis presents communitarian thinkers who respond to liberal constructivism. William Desmond, for example, is concerned about the ontological minimalism and the phobia of liberal constructivists about eschatology; indeed Terry Eagleton has even spoken of "holophobia." The communitarians show that a certain normativity is necessary for the emergence of the empirical subject, but also for its coherence and the avoidance of its total deconstruction. Ventis notes the return of ethics by Neo-Aristotelians, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, whereas thinkers like Paul Ricoeur have even put into question the division between ontology and deontology articulated by David Hume. Moderate communitarians such as Michael Sandel note that liberalism, especially neo-liberalism, tends to champion a narrow emphasis on freedom and the importance of private

property, being thus deprived from any antidote to the excesses of the markets. Ventis also draws our attention to the theories of thinkers who have traced an emancipatory potential in Christianity, such as Marcel Gauchet.

Ventis examines Žižek's thought in terms of a response to the dialogue between liberal constructivists and communitarians, noting how Žižek insists on the political significance of truth. It is to be noted that Žižek does follow the association between Christianity and Marxism identified by liberal constructivists, but with the twist that he celebrates this link. His view is that Christianity and Marxism should be allies supporting a politics of truth in a post-modern age, which is characterized by relativism and religious pluralism leading to a new kind of Gnosticism, as well as by other types of spiritualism which are entirely compatible with capitalism. Žižek insists on the emancipatory character of truth, echoing the saying of Christ "then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In approaching such truth, Žižek makes use of a combination of dialectics and psychoanalysis, in terms of which he diagnoses the existence of a suppressed truth inside contemporary capitalism, namely the absolute inequality that it provokes. The complete abolition of equality is the unconscious constitutive exception which haunts the ideological superstructure of pluralism, tolerance and other liberal values. It is to be noted that Žižek is also a fervent anti-populist. The populist is presented as someone for whom it is always the intruder to the system that is to be blamed for its shortcomings and never the system as such. In this sense, the populist helps to preserve the capitalist system, sharing this desire with the liberal, and being the contrary of the genuine emancipatory communist who wishes the subversion of the system, or, at least, a profound diagnosis of its problems. A related anti-populist stance of Žižek is his distrust of majorities.

Ventis concludes that the thinkers of the New Left might have good reason to claim that equality is the suppressed constitutive exception of capitalism, but they nevertheless underestimate other potentialities offered by liberal societies, such as personal self-realization and the right to personal otherness, the possibility of novelty, individual and social development, freedom of consciousness and of speech as well as of sexual orientation. Such possibilities are not evident in the context of a communist system and thinkers of the New Left should, according to Ventis, show whether they are compatible with their proper communist vision. It is of course important to recognize with Žižek the importance of the exteriority of truth, as well as of ontology, against any post-modern spiritualism, esotericism and pietism, which tend to be the natural allies of capitalism. However, a critical liberal reader would wish to find some principle of falsifiability in Žižek's thought, so as to avoid the totalitarianism that was the inherent characteristic of previous efforts to make a politics of truth. Ventis concludes his chapter with the reminder that the characteristic of genuine Christianity is eschatology rather than immanence, i.e. an eschatology after the end of history proper (even though eschatology should be seen as the completion of history rather than its abolition). Marxists who appropriate the Gospel sometimes tend to turn it into a sort of historical determinism, precisely because the demand of immanence annuls the post-historical eschatology, which is arguably Christianity's most salient feature.

Jack Pappas is concerned to compare Žižek's and Badiou's interpretations of Saint Paul. What is essential for understanding Žižek's relation to Christianity is the fact that the Slovenian thinker regards Judeo-Christianity as the only religious tradition that rejects the idea of justice as an adaptation to the cosmic order. The Christian God presents an absolute otherness both to the cosmic order that He has Himself created and to the Law that He has Himself given. Consequently, Christianity's fundamental particularity lies in the fact that the Christian God is the only one who has sacrificed Himself in the person of His Son, i.e. precisely what did *not* happen in the case of Isaac.

The God of the Christians is neither the omnipotent God of the natural order, as in paganism, nor the external mediator, as in the great monotheistic traditions. He is the God who through His sacrifice and death puts on the shoulders of men the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility. The death of God paves the way for the death of man, the way for his transformation and rebirth. The importance of Christianity lies thus in its exceptionality. Christ constitutes the absolute exception, the innocent who is punished by the Law, the God who becomes man, and so on. He thus valorizes something that was condemned by paganism, namely the division from the world, an act in which love constitutes a violent individualization of man, subverting the cosmic balance. Christian catholicity is thus not an abstract catholicity of assimilation, but on the contrary a catholicity that sacrifices itself in favor of the particular.

This means, however, that the particular is not the self-existent subjective identity of individualism, but an off-center point of focus of a new catholicity which is based on love for those who are on the margin of the cosmic order. In this Žižek is very close to Alain Badiou's notion of *subtraction*. Jack Pappas puts the two thinkers in their historical context, namely the collapse of socialist regimes and what Francis Fukuyama has named (in a not particularly successful attempt at prophesy) "The End of History." According to Pappas, this could be seen as a sort of "realized eschatology" of the liberal consensus. What is valuable in both the notions of "subtraction" by Alain Badiou and "community of the Spirit" by Slavoj Žižek is that they transcend identitarian communities, such as the ethnic, racial or tribal, which are sometimes proposed as a false form of resistance to capitalism. The two thinkers trace an emancipatory alternative both to abstract internationalism and to the particularism of closed communities.

In Pappas' paper, one can also find some profound remarks on the relation between the notion of "forced choice" that we find in Žižek and that of the *Ent-schlossenheit* (anticipatory resoluteness) that we find in Martin Heidegger, i.e. the revelation of the finite horizon of the agent which forces her to discern the conditions of her response. Žižek interprets in these terms a whole theological line of reasoning about the so-called "absolute predestination" found in Augustine of Hippo, theologians of early Protestantism such as John Calvin, in Jansenism etc., partially having roots in the Apostle Paul himself. This is an original interpretation of the text of Saint Paul, according to which Truth is an event which constitutes the subject as an agent. This is a theory of "I choose because I am chosen" in which freedom and grace are intertwined. In this sense, both Badiou and Žižek present some elements of "anti-philosophy," which brings them close to the "anti-philosophical" stance of

Saint Paul. They are, however, quite remote from the voluntarist individualism of fideism, which is founded on the individual's decision to believe. Belief is rather a fidelity to the event, according to Badiou, or an interiorization of God's sacrifice in the Spirit, according to Žižek.

The chapters by Haralambos Ventis and Jack Pappas both start by sketching aspects of the contemporary politico-cultural scene, focusing on questions at once philosophico-theological and political, but that by Pappas does so by also engaging with some of the sources of Žižek's thinking, St. Paul of course but especially Badiou's St. Paul. In the following, eighth, chapter Sinan Richards interrogates a further crucial source in the work of Friedrich Schelling. This exploration takes further a key concern of the present volume, that of tracing the Christian genealogy of Žižek's thought, echoing the comparable endeavor of Padosniak to relate it to that of Meister Eckhart. Žižek does not only draw from Christian predecessors, but he reads them anew, through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. He thus presents us with novel "updated" versions of Christian thinkers, which incorporate Lacanian intuitions. This procedure is particularly apparent in Žižek's reading of Hegel. Sinan Richards, however, shows us how something similar is performed in the case of F.W.J. Schelling. Žižek finds in Schelling a great thinker of immanence, who tried to distance himself from the dualism of both Kant (understanding and reason) and Fichte (ego and non-ego). Being inspired by Baruch Spinoza, Schelling sets out to reestablish a philosophy of immanence, according to which the structure of spirit is not separate from the structure of nature. Schelling's point of departure is the universe in its entirety and not just self-consciousness as in Fichte. In Schelling's view, nature evolves dialectically through polarities and not through a mechanism of causal chains. The fundamental questions of his philosophy are the emergence of finitude from infinity, freedom, and the problem of evil as an indispensable condition for human freedom. In his response, Schelling contemplates a God who is reproduced in His image, the latter acquiring self-dependence as a form of freedom. When God checks His image, however, He is performing this from the perspective of His image and thus falls from being God and from being the Absolute. Creation and fall are thus conflated in Schelling's thought. What is more, the creation and the fall are linked to God becoming sort of a subject Himself, since they entail an internal split in God Himself. This means that God is Himself emptied and divided between His ground, on the one hand, and His ecstatic existence on the other. The latter means that God "contracts" Being, as if contracting a disease, and is Himself alienated.

For man, on the contrary, salvation entails an examination of his beginnings in order to transcend the fall. But Schelling thinks that the true origin is the "beginning before the beginning." The latter is both unconscious and theological, since it constitutes the divine "ground" of the world, or, rather, God as the ground before His ecstatic existence. Žižek follows Schelling in this consideration of God as both "ground" and "existence" in the world. In what concerns the former, one could say that Žižek interprets Schelling's God through the Lacanian notion of the Real. God founds the world and continues to exist as suppressed inside it. What is equally important is the consideration of a God who is "historicized," who not only enters history, but becomes history Himself. Žižek draws this idea from Schelling, but he also celebrates it, whereas in the German philosopher God's historicization has rather

the character of a tragedy. God as the Real inside history entails that the historical world is not a totalizable whole. In this sense, Schelling's romantic idealism leads us to think from the side of the "night," in contrast to the tendency of Enlightenment to regard subjectivity precisely as "light."

This, indeed, is a theology which stands in total opposition to that of René Descartes. In contrast to Descartes, Schelling writes about a subject that is not herself the master of her thoughts, but presupposes some form of unconscious. This version of human subjectivity is in agreement with the Lacanian intuition that God can play with the surface of the world and can lie in total opposition to Descartes' notion of God's absolute reliability. In Lacan, the lie is a necessary implication of speech. Žižek interprets in this way the theology of both the Trinity and the economy of salvation. The production of matter results from an internal split in God, which resembles a differentiation between Father and Son. The teaching on the Incarnation of the Son has to be considered in relation to the dogma of the creation of matter out of nothing. The Son is incarnated, becomes matter, because He also becomes temporality and history. But the difference between Father and Son lies mainly in that God the Father is tantamount to an unconscious that retains the cruelty and the arbitrariness of the origin of the world precisely by being unconscious. On the contrary, God the Son is the God who is "historicized" and thus suffers His own arbitrariness, violence and cruelty. What is more, He is precisely the God of the revelation of this primordial cruelty and arbitrariness.

It is in this point that Žižek proceeds further than Schelling by insisting on drawing conclusions which would be too blasphemous for the German philosopher, as well as by pointing out that it is God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ who makes this revelation in a blasphemous way. The way in which Žižek reads Schelling is characteristic of a more general way Žižek uses some of his sources. He takes a Christian thinker and rethinks him through Jacques Lacan, who is usually performing a deconstruction of theological narratives. Žižek then presents a novel version of that Christian thinker, which is radicalized and even goes against the explicit intentions of this same Christian thinker by revealing conclusions that the Christian thinker would probably wish to honor with silence. What is more, in Žižek's view it is Christianity itself and the Christ in particular who draws all the blasphemous conclusions which were honored with silence by pre-Christian monotheism. In this sense, Žižek's blasphemous interpretation of his Christian predecessors could arguably be viewed as an *imitatio Christi*. Bold hermeneutics is thus a "Christological" work and interpreters who reveal the hidden blasphemous consequences of the thought of their predecessors are but imitators of Christ.

Following Sinan Richards's examination of Schelling as a prime source of Žižek's thought, the last two chapters of this volume (prior to Slavoj Žižek's *Afterword*), by Bruce Krajewski and Mike Grimshaw respectively, refocus in different ways on this volume's central questions: a critique of Žižek is offered by Krajewski, and a more sympathetic speculative inquiry into "Christian atheism" by Grimshaw. In the ninth chapter we find a critical dialogue between Bruce Krajewski and Slavoj Žižek in a series of questions relating mainly to the subject of universalism. Krajewski remarks that the universalism sought by theologians such as Milbank or Žižek is very different from the abstract universalism of

equality sought by communism. Krajewski's paper is a serious engagement with the dialectical way of thinking. Krajewski accepts Žižek's observation that modern atheism is conditioned by Christianity, since it constitutes a dialectical negation of the latter that is answering to questions posed for the first time by Christians. In this sense, Krajewski's paper answers to the fundamental question of this volume by pointing out that the relation between Slavoj Žižek and Christianity is crucial even for an atheist, since the Slovenian philosopher exposes a dialectical understanding according to which modern atheism is inconceivable apart from Christianity. A dialectical comprehension of religion is thus important for the atheist as a profound endeavor of self-consciousness. However, Krajewski's discussion is not limited to endorsing and elaborating on this. He proceeds in a critical dialogue with Žižek by employing this notion of dialectics in order to cast some doubts on Žižek's own narrative. Krajewski remarks that Christianity's emphasis on hierarchy is itself a dialectical negation of anti-hierarchical polytheism. The origins of Christianity are thus not outside dialectics, but constitute themselves a dialectical response to the previous polytheistic universe. Krajewski continues, however, by asking whether Christian universalism is satisfactory for contemporary communists. For the latter, universalism is linked to a demand for thorough egalitarianism. On the contrary, in the Christian vision, catholicity coexists with hierarchy. This is evident in the fact that in Christianity we find hierarchical institutions or a distinction between the external official religion and the internal religion of the mysteries. We also find, however, a radical gap between heaven and hell pointing to a fundamental inequality in Christianity's eschatological vision.

It is to be noted that in Žižek's thought we do find antidotes against such objections, a fact that makes Krajewski's objections all the more valuable in highlighting the Slovenian philosopher's distinctive perspective on Christianity. Žižek does not celebrate the hierarchical structure of the church that we find in Catholicism or Orthodoxy. The community of the Holy Spirit that he expounds in his works is precisely the community of the singulars, a vision that radicalizes certain anti-hierarchical tendencies of Protestantism, going beyond even them. Krajewski's objections, nevertheless, point to some important issues. For example, how could one interpret the violent opposition between heaven and hell in Christian theology by taking into account Žižek's intuitions? Žižek is of course an "atheist Christian" not believing in an eschatological state *post mortem*, his only eschatological vision concerning the immanent community of the Holy Spirit as a sort of paradise inside history. It would be fruitful, however, to pose the question on how one could reinterpret the Christian vision of heaven and hell aided by Žižek's dialectical thinking.

At some points Krajewski implies that dialectics do have their own inherent limits. It usually shows the negativity of the existent, without being always capable of showing a positive alternative with practical value. In this context, Krajewski considers negatively certain consequences of Žižek's engagement in contemporary political issues, such as his support of Donald Trump in the context of "accelerationist" politics, namely the idea that a possible aggravation of the capitalist condition might pave the way for envisaging other alternatives. He is equally critical of what he perceives as Žižek inadequacy to propose a specific communist alternative that would include individual liberties. Krajewski formulates such objections through a creative reading of G. K. Chesterton, who is a positive source of

inspiration for Žižek himself. Krajewski's originality lies in the fact that, at certain times, he turns Chesterton against Žižek himself. For example, he combines the figure of the Reverend Father Brown with the motif of the Lacanian detective, but also with a reading of Agatha Christie's work *Murder at the Vicarage*. What he seems to imply is that the gesture of the absence of the divine Thing's revelation, performed by Christ according to Žižek, might be repeated revealing the absence of many more things than Žižek himself would be ready to admit. In general, Krajewski's paper makes a challenging use of Žižek's dialectical thought in a way that subverts certain conclusions that Žižek himself would like to draw.

In the tenth chapter, Mike Grimshaw examines *The Puppet and the Dwarf* in relation to the thought of great theologians of the "death of God" such as Thomas Altizer, Gabriel Vahanian and Gianni Vattimo. Žižek maintains that contemporary man should pass through the "Christian experience," in the sense of an assumption of temporality. In Christianity, it is God Himself Who becomes temporal and dies. Žižek would add that in Christianity, it is God Himself who becomes an atheist. What is crucial about the Crucifixion is precisely the fact that God does not intervene in order to save the Messiah. God is thus revealed to be definitively thrown into temporality and mortality. Grimshaw notes that after the experience of the "revolutionary" Good Friday, the experience of the morning of Holy Saturday is as if nothing has changed. The change has occurred only within the very small circle of the disciples who have gone through the death of the big Other, an act of teleological and ontological violence.

On this reading, Christ's crucifixion is the death not only of God but also of man, and Grimshaw seeks to encourage Žižek to take this with full seriousness, to become a theologian not only of the death of God but also of the death of man, in the sense that there is a double subtraction from both divinity and humanity. Here, he suggests, Žižek has as yet been insufficiently radical. The separated, divided man dies and what is subtracted is the concrete universal of the new community. After the death of God there is no longer a gap between God and man, but rather a gap inside humanity itself. We are thus invited to an atheist *imitatio Christi* which consists in ourselves bringing "a sword to the earth" (Matthew 10:34). The day of Holy Saturday is the day in which everything seems to be the same, even though in reality everything has changed. It is just like the day after the revolution. There are those who have nostalgia for the *ancien régime*, while others seek a "Stalinist Christianity." The experience of Holy Saturday is crucial, because it is neither the event of the revelation in the Cross (Good Friday), nor the moment of the Resurrection as a confirmation of eternity. It is rather the opening of the possibility for a novel humanity that insists on the revelation of the Crucifixion without expecting the Resurrection. However, the true meaning of the death of God is, according to Žižek, that what is left is *deficiency*, a necessary deficiency of the world, which is however tantamount to a call for universal love. This universal love is now materialist and immanent in character. For Grimshaw, Christian atheism is the Lacanian Real, dialectical materialism being its Symbolic. In this context, the Crucifixion is a revolution from which results the new, Godless humanity. Grimshaw's paper is written from the perspective of someone who identifies with Žižek in that he is simultaneously an atheist and a Christian, since Christianity is for him precisely the religion of the exit from religion, i.e. the religion of atheism. Christianity is in this case the name for the politics of revolutionary

emancipation. Or, after Walter Benjamin's imagery, Christianity is, after all, the dwarf that moves the puppet of dialectical historical materialism.

Our volume concludes with Slavoj Žižek's own *Afterword*, "The Antinomies That Keep Christianity Alive" — a treatment of the Book of Job via Pope Francis, Martin Luther and (against) the primarily Eastern Orthodox teaching on deification, *theosis*.

On the scandalous possibility of caffeine

The *Afterword* of this volume belongs to Slavoj Žižek who so graciously agreed to participate in this project by contributing his "The Antinomies That Keep Christianity Alive." However, since we are here dealing with Žižek and/on Christianity and theology, another implicit "afterword" looms large on the wider horizon of this book: a fundamental and logically sacrilegious *What if?* That is, *what if* the emergence of the Christian Church and its itinerary in history is not merely a (however singular) social, philosophical or religious phenomenon of (however lofty) importance, out of which valuable reflections can be elaborated — *what if* we were to entertain the perpetually scandalous idea that the Christian Church is indeed what it professes, i.e. the historical body of God, the ineffable uncreated creator, incarnated, crucified and resurrected out of manic love for his creature? *What if* it is truly and literally the case that "the Son of God became man so that we might become God"²⁷ — against which, as found in the works of St Maximus the Confessor, Slavoj Žižek protests in his *Afterword*? *What if* this madness were indeed true, rendering all "meta-" analyses deliciously redundant? *What if* caffeine prevails?

The editors subscribe to the perversion that such a scandalous redundancy should be hoped for. After all, even if the reader does not find this volume *deifying*, then at least she may find it *edifying*.

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²⁷ St. Athanasius, *De incarnatione* 54.3, *Patrologia Graeca* 25:192B.

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