

The Meaning of Christ and the Meaning of Hegel: Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank's (A)symmetrical Response to Capitalist Nihilism

MITCHELL M. HARRIS

Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Ed. Creston Davis. MIT Press, 2009. 320 pp.

In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Creston Davis, the book's relatively unnoticed editor, brings together an unconventional pair of contemporary thinkers: the Hegelian, Lacanian, Marxist materialist philosopher Slavoj Žižek and his orthodox, Western Catholic theologian counterpart, John Milbank. Davis writes an admirable introduction to the book, reminding its readers why the "unlikely debate" between a strict atheist-materialist and Christian-metaphysician is not only necessary but also the only proper response to today's capitalist nihilism, by which thought itself is reduced to operate along the coordinates of "a false dichotomy between reason and faith" (4). The "need for a theology of resistance is necessarily dependent on the Žižek/Milbank debate," Davis suggests, "because it helps to open a passage beyond the deadlock of the twin ideological structures of capitalist Empire, namely postmodernism (philosophy) and Protestant and Catholic liberalism (theology)" (5). The point is fair enough. Given that the postmodern, and even the current post-secular, epoch seemingly demonstrates that "reason's stance against myth, superstition and the theological in order to access reason, pure and autonomous reason, has proved at least wanting, if not downright irrational" (5). Though not explicitly acknowledged, Davis's claim is a Kantian one, evoking the antinomical confusion of pure reason: "If the Middle Ages failed to employ enough reason . . . then secular modernity has employed too much of it (even to the point of contradiction!)" (5).

So how is it possible for Žižek and Milbank to move beyond the inability of faith to interact with reason (and vice versa), when the two thinkers seem to epitomize the dualistic counterpoints of rationalism (Žižek) and fideism (Milbank)? Davis answers this very question by pointing out that both Žižek and Milbank are committed to in

terrogating “the very foundation of reason as such,” thus helping stage “a theology that resists global capitalism” (10). His fundamental assertion is that this critique of reason is Hegelian at its core. By confronting reason, the Žižek/Milbank debate encounters reason’s “terrifying hidden supplement, that is, reason’s otherness that does not show its truth so long as we naively accept its face value (what Hegel called the ‘Ruse of Reason’)” (10). As such a response implies, the meaning of Christ (and Christianity) in relation to the postmodern and post-secular crux, for both Žižek and Milbank, is necessarily determined by how one reads Hegel—that is, the meaning and legacy of Hegel.

Certainly, such an answer is bound to raise eyebrows. Is Hegel not, after all, the philosopher who successfully ushers in modernity, preparing the way for Nietzsche to successfully bring about the “death of God” and for Marx to develop a secular, materialist philosophy? On one level, both Žižek and Milbank would agree to this figuration of Hegel. For example, Žižek quietly concedes that the power in Hegel’s *Aufhebung* resides in its negative capacity—its ability to wipe the slate clean by opening us to the Real of the Void. Milbank, more orthodox in his approach, acknowledges the negative capacities of Hegelianism and is concerned by its “negative” or “nihilistic” adherents (118). On another level, however, both authors are suspicious of this figuration of Hegel: it is too easy to caricature Hegel in this way. What raises this apprehension for both Žižek and Milbank is how Hegel has been treated by philosophers of all kinds. That the majority of post-Hegelian philosophers have been quick to disavow themselves of Hegel seems to suggest an uncanny underbelly worthy of greater attention.

The Monstrosity of Christ is thus designed to examine this underbelly as much as it is designed to examine the Christian legacy. Žižek is given the first opportunity to present his case in the book’s first chapter, “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity.” While Žižek ultimately appears to side with the God-is-dead philosophy of Nietzsche *vis-à-vis* Hegel, Hegel is, in his opinion, infinitely more complex than the reductionist vision that sees him as a mere materialist thinker. The complexity of Hegel, according to Žižek, is made visible by how Hegel is prematurely dismissed in one of two ways by the philosophy that emerged after his work. First, post-Hegelian philosophers are quick to dismiss Hegel as the Absolute Idealist. This Hegel, argues Žižek, is a bogey, a “fantasy-formation intended to cover up a traumatic truth” (27). Paradoxically, then, Žižek contends that the “post-Hegelian turn to ‘concrete reality, irreducible to notional mediation,’ should rather be read as a desperate posthumous revenge of metaphysics, as an attempt to reinstall metaphysics, albeit in the inverted form of the primacy of concrete reality” (27). The second reason why Hegel has been rejected, according to Žižek, is because of the “teleological structure” of Hegel’s philosophy of religion—the point that “it openly

asserts the primacy of Christianity, Christianity as the ‘true’ religion, the final point of the entire development of religions” (27). These two versions of post-Hegelian thinking reveal, however, that “something happens in Hegel, a breakthrough into a unique dimension of thought, which is obliterated, rendered invisible in its true dimension, by postmetaphysical thought” (26–27). By presenting this break in the very fabric of thought, Žižek contends that Hegel himself is “the ‘vanishing mediator’ . . . between traditional metaphysics and postmetaphysical nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought” (26). And Hegel becomes this vanishing mediator through his reading of Christianity.

Here, Žižek reminds us of the orthodox, Catholic thinker, G. K. Chesterton, who, to a certain extent, had an incredible ability to think through Christianity in a proper dialectical fashion, especially in his “Oracle of the Dog,” where he declared that “you are afraid of four words: He was made Man” (25). Of course, the problem with Chesterton, in Žižek’s philosophical framework, is that he did not go far enough. The proper Hegelian reading of Chesterton’s “He was made Man” would entail thinking the materialist implication of the phrase through to its very end: yes, he was made man, and therefore the God incarnate dies on the Cross, emptying himself of his very reality (that is, material being) and as a result leaves humanity to the devices of the Holy Spirit. After Christ’s death, “there is neither Father nor Son but ‘only’ the Holy Spirit, the spiritual substance of the religious community. Only in this sense is the Holy Spirit the ‘synthesis’ of Father and Son, of Substance and Subject” (33). In this manner, Christ “stands for the gap of negativity, for subjective singularity, and in the Holy Spirit the substance is ‘reborn’ as the virtual community of singular subjects, persisting only in and through their activity” (33).

The key insight derived from this statement, for Žižek, is that subjectivity can only be derived from absolute singularity. Thus, Žižek intends to confront “the core question of Hegelian Christology: why the idea of Reconciliation between God and man (the fundamental content of Christianity) has to appear in a single individual, in the guise of an external, contingent, flesh-and-blood person (Christ, the man-God)?” (73). As Žižek concludes, the “monstrosity of Christ” resides in what he reveals to humanity, that “while Understanding [Davis’s “reason”] can well grasp the universal mediation of a living totality, what it cannot grasp is that *this totality, in order to actualize itself, has to acquire actual existence in the guise of an immediate ‘natural singularity’*” (79). Hegel’s Christ is that very singularity. As Žižek puts it, “that is the monstrosity of Christ: not only the edifice of the state, but no less than the entire edifice of reality hinges on a contingent singularity through which alone it actualizes itself” (80). Strictly speaking, therefore, from a metaphysical standpoint, Žižek properly announces the death of God, but where his “materialist theology” deviates from previous post-Hegelian materialisms is in its unabashed embrace of belief in the

epistemological and even ontological framework of Understanding. “[W]hat if,” he asks, “in a kind of negation of negation, true atheism were to return to belief (faith?), asserting it without reference to God—only atheists can truly believe; the only true belief is belief without any support in the authority of some presupposed figure of the ‘big Other’” (101). In such a negation of negation, he suggests through an analogy to modern figurations of the zombie, “‘unbelief’ is still the form of belief, like the undead who, as the living, remain dead” (101).

John Milbank’s response to Žižek, “The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” directly addresses what he determines to be one of the key components (and flaws) of Žižek’s materialist theology. “My case is that there is a different, latent Žižek,” he argues, “a Žižek who does not see Chesterton as sub-Hegel, but Hegel as sub-Chesterton. A Žižek therefore who has remained with paradox, or rather moved back into paradox from dialectic” (113). Such a Žižek, he claims, would be “able fully to endorse a transcendent God” (113). In order to make this case, however, Milbank necessarily must reject the metanarrative that Žižek embraces regarding the inevitable and undeniable movement of Christianity from Orthodoxy to Catholicism to (ultimately) Protestantism. In rejecting this metanarrative, Milbank realizes the possibility of another modernity that would “persist with the alternative dynamism of paradox and not pass over into the hypocritical sterility of dialectics” (116). Milbank proceeds to demonstrate a theo-philosophical quirkiness similar in kind to Žižek’s. Certainly, he never relents his elevation of paradox over dialectics. Nonetheless, the narrative that he constructs also relies upon a certain hedging of bets that mirrors (in a literal sense: left becomes right and right becomes left) Žižek’s. For example, at one point, Milbank suggests that Kierkegaard, like Meister Eckhart and G. K. Chesterton (the theologians Žižek most frequently cites in the first chapter), was “radically orthodox” in that he tended to highlight the “aporetic features” of the overall logic of Christian belief “and come to terms with” those features “by suggesting that this overall logic is a paradoxical logic” (177). While the line of reasoning is intelligible in its own right, there can be no doubt that comparing Kierkegaard to Eckhart and Chesterton would give pause even to some of the most conservative theologians and philosophers who, like Milbank, would openly reject altogether Žižek’s metanarrative that sees Hegel as the *telos* of the Orthodox-Catholic-Protestant trajectory. In short, it is hard to believe that Kierkegaard finds equal company amongst Eckhart and Chesterton. Moreover, Milbank’s reading of Eckhart pushes Western Catholicism to its farthest ends. Yes, one can claim that in Eckhart one finds something that is characteristically Thomistic in nature, but the consistent apologies Milbank must make in aligning Eckhart with Aquinas seems to reveal a special sort of pleading that draws attention to itself.

Despite these criticisms of Milbank’s efforts to call Žižek back to the land of paradox,

it is undeniable that Milbank probes, challenges, and provokes Žižek's "materialist theology" in ways that have not been accomplished before. This is to say that in Milbank, Žižek has clearly met his intellectual match. Nowhere is this more discernable than in Žižek's response to Milbank, "Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox." Here one must note the asymmetry of the collection: Žižek is given the benefit of the last word. And one is tempted to suggest that the asymmetry is unfair. Žižek is given ample opportunity to rebut Milbank, but, here, the asymmetry breaks down. Despite the opportunity for rebuttal, we realize that Žižek is merely shadow-boxing, which, in a way, proves Davis's point that the Žižek/Milbank debate might just be the only debate truly capable of moving beyond the deadlock that prevents the discursive intercourse of rationalism and fideism (7). For after Žižek outlines his points of rebuttal, he quickly leaves them behind, turning instead to a matter "more dark and awful," quoting Chesterton. Here, Žižek reveals that his philosophical and theological opponent(s) is not Milbank, but rather figures like Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, John Caputo, and Gianni Vattimo. Perhaps no statement is more telling of this true opposition than one he makes while discussing Caputo's *On Religion*. "Caputo professes his love for Kierkegaard—but where here," he asks, "is the central insight of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, his insistence on the central paradox of Christianity: eternity is accessible only through time, through the belief in Christ's Incarnation as a temporal event?" (258; my emphasis). Such a question seems to suggest that while there are fine points that separate Žižek and Milbank, those fine points are not so large as to separate them from successfully entering into dialogue with, or speak on the same plane as, each other. Žižek is just as quick as Milbank is to invoke paradox when necessary, and Milbank is often (though tacitly) caught following the dialectical method.

To this end, the asymmetry of the book's format is not an entirely unproductive one, if it exists at all. In fact, I am tempted to suggest that while, yes, it might have been nice to see how Milbank would respond to Žižek's rebuttals, Žižek's concluding remarks ultimately bring about a fitting Hegelian synthesis of sorts. As he reminds us, through his examination of a cheap magic trick at the heart of Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), "We should thus fearlessly admit that there is something of the 'cheap magician' in Hegel, in the trick of synthesis, of *Aufhebung*" (286). In *The Prestige*, this cheap magic trick occurs when one of the magicians performs a disappearing bird act by first smashing a bird cage and then producing a living bird in his other hand, much to the surprise of a traumatized boy in the audience who insists that the magician has killed a bird. Later, Nolan takes his audience behind the stage, showing the magician throwing away the carcass of a flattened bird (the boy was right all along). For Žižek, Hegel's cheap trick resides in the fact that in synthesis, "the good news is the bad news": paradox. Yes, the good news of the living bird is the bad news of the bird that was sacrificed. However, "in order for us to see that [the good news is

the bad news’], we have to shift to a different agent”: dialectics (286). In other words, we have to shift from the agency of the dead bird to the agency of the living bird. The ultimate example of this shift for Žižek is “from Christ as individual to the community of believers” (286). Of course, Milbank would never accept this conclusion—a kenotic emptying of the Godhead into the material being of Nothingness. And that’s the point of the pseudo-asymmetry: we know how Milbank will rebut Žižek, by suggesting that the greatest threat to the materialist philosophy-cum-theology of resistance to nihilistic capitalism both is and is not Žižek’s dialectical materialism, so long as there are thinkers like Derrida, Levinas, Caputo, and Vattimo littering the philosophical and theological landscape.

Mitchell M. Harris is Assistant Professor of English at Augustana College (Sioux Falls), where he teaches courses on early modern British literature, Shakespeare, and contemporary critical theory. His previous work on Slavoj Žižek has appeared in *Christianity and Literature* and *Intersections in Christianity and Critical Theory* (Palgrave, 2010). A contributing writer to *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, he currently is co-editing a manuscript on the Church Fathers and early modern England and finishing a manuscript on Augustinian ethics in Tudor-Stuart literature.

