

Introduction to the Academic Roundtable

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At a roundtable discussion closing the third “Religion and Postmodernism” Conference, hosted by Villanova University in September of 2001 and organized around two confessions – St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* – John Caputo and Richard Kearney asked Jacques Derrida to elaborate on his claim that he can “rightly pass for an atheist.” “Why don’t you simply say ‘I am an atheist’?” they asked. With an honesty and humility that could sometimes resemble prevarication, Derrida offered the following clarification: “If I knew, I would say that I’m an atheist or I’m not, but I don’t know. I don’t know for reasons I’ve been trying to explore for years and years.”¹

Readers of the recent encounter between the Lacanian neo-Marxist, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek and the “Radical Orthodox,” Anglo-Catholic theologian John Milbank, orchestrated and edited by Creston Davis and published under the titled *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*² cannot help but feel that a figure like Derrida, with his scruples and gentle, civil demeanor would be quite out of place among such robust protagonists. For, as those who prepared the book are eager to proclaim, Milbank and Žižek are engaged here in a battle between two clearly delineated positions, and it appears neither is willing to take prisoners. On the dust jacket the adversaries are introduced as prize fighters, and Creston Davis refers to the exchange as “the intellectual equivalent of Ultimate Fighting” (19). (In this arena we can imagine Derrida shoved into the corner to pray and cry while the others duke it out.) However, the points of dispute between Milbank and Žižek are serious, and they do seem worth fighting for if not about: the nature and significance of the “monstrous compound” (Hegel’s term) of the God-man, Jesus Christ; the legacy of G.W.F. Hegel; the essence of materialism; and resistance to capitalist nihilism. (With so many significant matters at stake and with such masters of intellectual posturing involved, the battle between Milbank and Žižek resembles perhaps not so much a prize fight as a professional wrestling grudge match, a sort of W.T.O. [World Theory Organization] smackdown with mental summersaults from the top ropes and chairs to the back of the head. Rest assured Milbank and Žižek walk away unscathed when it is over.)

For this Academic Roundtable we sought scholars, philosophers and theologians, with expertise in the issues over which Milbank and Žižek wrestle and a willingness to clarify and highlight the stakes of the debate and to introduce other voices and viewpoints to productively open up the debate.

Notes:

1. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 38.
2. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).