

Missed Encounter, Missed Opportunity

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As the author of a book entitled *Žižek and Theology*, I have a special stake in this book.¹ It is somewhat ironic, then, that I found it so difficult to get through. I'm glad I did, because I found Žižek's final response very valuable, particularly its concluding section – yet overall I found *The Monstrosity of Christ* to be a significant disappointment. I'll begin by discussing why I found the first two pieces by Žižek and Milbank, respectively, to be a chore. I will then spend proportionately more time on Žižek's response, indicating why I found it so compelling. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about the format of the volume as a whole.

1.

Žižek's opening piece, "The Fear of Four Words," which he characterizes as "a modest plea for the Hegelian reading of Christianity," held few surprises for me. In it, he puts forward the same basic reading of Christianity that I point out in my book: a reading in which God the Father empties himself irreversibly into the Son, whose death on the cross opens up the way for a new social bond called the Holy Spirit. So far, I was of course relieved that Žižek had not radically repudiated his position. Yet the political aspects of this theology, which I found most interesting, are muted – most notably in his lack of engagement with Judaism, which was one of the truly creative aspects of his reading of Paul in particular² – and he focuses instead on questions of the doctrine of God, proceeding by way of various discussions of the Christian tradition (the doctrine of the Trinity, the theology of Meister Eckhart). While his general point that orthodoxy has tended to attempt to "contain" the radical consequences of the incarnation is well taken, I found his readings of the tradition to be unsatisfying and overlong.

Even less satisfying was Milbank's "response" – which is in reality more like a summary of Milbank's own position, developed in an often very loose dialogue with the broad outlines of what he claims to be Žižek's position. Most telling in this regard is the almost total absence of direct quotations of Žižek's own words. Though footnotes are abundant, the ones that purportedly support his reading of Žižek often refer to huge chunks of Žižek, Lacan, or Hegel in one broad sweep, imparting a vague flavor to his arguments that is matched in the main text by his breezy name-dropping (Žižek is here quite Schellingian, there almost Kierkegaardian, etc. – nowhere is it clarified what these various points of proximity concretely mean).

Quite often, Milbank completely misconstrues Žižek's position, assimilating it to a bizarre reading of the sexual deadlocks of psychoanalysis that serves as little more than a set-up to prove that Radical Orthodox views on sexuality are somehow superior. One aspect of the Radical Orthodox literature that initially attracted me was their engagement with the latest in

continental philosophy, but eventually it became clear that, as is the case here, the philosopher is little more than a “nihilist” punching bag to be dismissed in favor of Augustine or Aquinas – or in this case, in favor of idiosyncratic readings of Kierkegaard and Eckhart, opportunistically chosen because Žižek refers to them. One’s reward for getting through this essentially useless misrepresentation of Žižek’s views is a belabored, seemingly endless discussion of the ontological implications of driving on a misty day. If for Žižek the universe is inherently incomplete, apparently for Milbank reality is intrinsically vague.

Neither of these pieces is satisfying as an “opening salvo.” Each is a virtual book in itself, and both get bogged down in secondary matters (most notably the proper reading of Eckhart), such that their main point is obscured. I came away from the two pieces exhausted and frustrated, with no sense of the contours of the supposed “debate” between the two. So when I came to Žižek’s final response, I was prepared for the worst—but I was pleasantly surprised, to the point that the final response essentially redeemed the volume for me.

2.

In light of Milbank’s misrepresentation, Žižek’s response is arguably the only authentic response in this volume. As readers of his previous responses to critics might expect, he comes out swinging. Quoting Milbank repeatedly and at length, he claims that Milbank consistently misrepresents Žižek’s own position and harshly critiques Milbank, at one point going so far as to claim that Milbank has “a soft-Fascist vision” (250). To my mind, this aspect of the response is sufficient justification for publishing the volume, as it shatters the illusion, held by many of those sympathetic with Radical Orthodoxy, that Žižek is a natural ally to orthodox theology.

More important, though, is that this response is the only thing of Žižek’s I’ve read since finishing *Žižek and Theology* that feels genuinely new. I am thinking particularly of the conclusion, where he attempts to answer the question of what his ethical approach would look like in practice (297–303). He does this through a discussion of Agota Kristof’s novel *The Notebook*, which for him is “the best literary expression” of an ethical stance that goes beyond the sentimentality of moralism and instead installs “a cold, cruel distance toward what one is doing” (301). The novel follows two twin brothers who are “utterly immoral – they lie, blackmail, kill – yet they stand for authentic ethical naivety at its purest.” Žižek gives two examples. In one, they meet a starving man who asks for help and get him everything he asks for, while claiming that they helped him solely because he needed help, not out of any desire to be kind. In another, they urinate on a German officer with whom they find themselves sharing a bed, at his request. Žižek remarks, “If ever there was a Christian ethical stance, this is it: no matter how weird their neighbor’s demands, the twins naively try to meet them.”

Yet Žižek then takes things in a direction that some will likely be uncomfortable with: not only do the boys naively try to help others, they also punish people who maliciously refuse others help. In one example from the novel, a woman not only refuses to give bread to a starving crowd of Jews but actually eats the bread in front of them, leading the twins to put ammunition

in her oven; in another, they blackmail a priest who has sexually molested a little girl, so that they can give the money to the girl's family. Žižek also provides his own hypothetical example:

Along these lines, it is easy for me to imagine a situation in which I would be ready, without any moral qualms, to murder someone in cold blood, even if I knew that this person had not killed anyone directly. In reading reports about torture in Latin American military regimes, I found particularly repulsive the (regular) figure of a doctor who helped the actual torturers conduct their business in the most efficient way: he examined the victim and monitored the process, letting the torturers know how much the victim would be able to endure, what kind of torture would inflict the most unbearable pain, etc. I must admit that if I were to encounter such a person, knowing that there was little chance of bringing him to legal justice, and be given the opportunity to murder him discreetly, I would simply do it, without a vestige of remorse about "taking the law into my own hands." (302)

This is a bold statement, to be sure, but one that I think many would sympathize with on some level. After going through some additional examples, including an assisted suicide, Žižek summarizes the ethical core that he takes away from Kristof's novel as follows:

This is where I stand – how I would love to be: an ethical monster without empathy, doing what is to be done in a weird coincidence of blind spontaneity and reflexive distance, helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity. With more people like this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion. (303)

When I first read this passage, I had the strange sense of being surprised at the same time that I felt it couldn't be any other way. His description of these sociopathic twins really does capture the core of his weirdly amoral ethics, which has always been at the core of Žižek's appeal for me – more than his ontology, his use of theology, or his explanations of some of the most difficult figures in the history of philosophy, I was drawn to his work by the sense that he offered a real alternative to the abstract moralism of the Christianity I knew from childhood and to the cloying sentimentalism of the liberals who get such deep satisfaction from nursing their correct opinions. I claim several times in my book that most often the aspect of a philosopher's thought that is most helpful for theologians can be found when religion isn't the primary focus, and for me, Žižek is no exception. His ethics provided me with a way to talk about what I had always detected at the core of the gospel: a radical amorality, no less joyous for its rigor.

3.

It seems to me that Žižek's conclusion accomplishes more in seven pages than either author had done in the hundreds of pages preceding it. Though I have often been critical of Žižek's generous use of cut and paste, I hope that the passage finds its way into some future book, simply because I am skeptical that many readers will have the stamina to reach it in its present context. Before concluding with an overall criticism, I should say that I am glad to see this volume appear insofar as it breaks with the general pattern where theologians are enthusiastic about discussing philosophy but philosophers never deign to talk back. Furthermore, I believe that Žižek and Milbank are, at least in theory, two of the best figures one could choose for such an encounter, given their extremely high profile in their respective fields.

Yet on a variety of levels, no debate actually occurs here. For instance, one could justify the opening pieces as an initial setting of the terms, to be followed by a more extended debate, but in fact only Žižek gets a chance to respond. While I realize it can be difficult to deal with two huge egos such as Milbank and Žižek, I wish the editor, Creston Davis – who has worked with the two men before and has another edited volume with them forthcoming³ – had exercised more editorial control in shaping the volume into a genuine dialogue. As it stands, it's clear from his introduction that he was envisioning a much different work, as his account of the ways Žižek and Milbank supersede the modernist presuppositions of the “New Atheists” debate has no clear relation to what Žižek and Milbank actually write. Two further responses have appeared in a special issue of *Political Theology*, also edited by Davis⁴, but that resource remains inaccessible to those without privileges at an academic library (and to many of those with) – much better to have reined in the initial statements, both to leave room for further exchange and to let the stakes of the debate stand out more clearly.

In an ideal world, each would have put forward a twenty-page initial statement. Žižek would have argued that Hegel's is the most authentic interpretation of Christianity, revealing the radical consequences of Christ's death on the cross that orthodoxy has consistently sought to cover over and, moreover, opening up an entirely new view of reality. Milbank could have then argued that Žižek's reading is one-sided, leaving out important aspects of experience and reality that orthodoxy includes and, moreover, leading to a nihilistic amorality. (In light of Žižek's conclusion, it would be hard to deny the latter charge, though I would then ask what's so self-evidently wrong about nihilistic amorality.) From there, they could try to substantiate their view and disprove each other – debating the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity, sparring over whether thinkers such as Meister Eckhart represent a kind of prefiguration of Hegel, discussing the ontological consequences of the Incarnation, and pitting paradox and dialectic against one another in a much more direct way.

Readers could have come away from such a volume feeling like they had a good grasp on the main points of contention between the latest advocates of orthodoxy and radical theology, between traditional theology and the gospel of Christian atheism. And in a sense, readers do actually have all the materials I describe in the actual existing book, but they're in an almost

completely unusable format. Žižek has often said that philosophical dialogues are ultimately just competing monologues, but in this case, the greatest sin isn't that Žižek and Milbank fail to talk to each other – more seriously, they fail to talk to any discernable audience outside those who have already very closely followed their work.

I have chided the editor of the volume for not being more forceful in pushing for the kind of authentic debate he seems to have envisioned, a debate that would be able to engage an educated public and push them beyond the simplifications of the “New Atheists.” Yet surely the bulk of the responsibility lies with the authors themselves, whose initial pieces aren't so much “difficult” as long-winded and rambling. I'm not asking anyone to dumb down their ideas or give us a pandering popularization of their work – I'm simply asking for concision and clarity of organization. A genuine debate between Žižek and Milbank could have been illuminating. It could have set the agenda for a renewed discussion of the relationship between philosophy and theology, atheism and Christianity. What we have instead is still a genuine contribution to the literature, one that from my perspective is most valuable insofar as it pushes Žižek's position forward while simultaneously distancing him from Milbank. Yet it's difficult not to regard *The Monstrosity of Christ* as a missed opportunity.

Notes

1. See: Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008). I have already addressed this book in a review in *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010): 141–144, and in an article entitled “The ‘Christian Experience’ Continues: On Žižek's Work Since *The Parallax View*,” forthcoming in a special issue of *The International Journal of Žižek Studies* on Žižek's engagement with theology. Material from both is included here, in altered form.
2. See: Adam Kotsko, “Politics and Perversion: Situating Žižek's Paul,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9.2 (2008): 43–52, <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/09.2/kotsko.pdf>, for a detailed discussion of Žižek's reading of Paul.
3. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke, 2005); John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davis, *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, forthcoming).
4. Creston Davis, ed., *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010): 121–140.