

Appropriating Zizek for Liberation Theology

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If I were asked to provide a one-line description of where I stand, I would probably choose the paradoxical self-designation of a Paulian materialist.

(Zizek, 1999d, p. ix)

Christianity does not mean the removal of all barriers, but itself creates a new barrier, that between Christians and non-Christians. Consequently, the Christian is the brother of his fellow Christian, but not of the non-Christian.

(Ratzinger, 1966, p. 65)

Stand-up Theologian in the Post-Capitalist World

According to Goeffrey Harpham (2003), the publication in 1989 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, launched the popularity of an unknown Slovenian scholar named Slavoj Zizek. Harpham attributes this to Zizek's mastery of all the skills required by academic discourse, a scholar with multilingual familiarity, a

¹ This essay is our joint work because it reflects our different background but similar interests. One of us is a sociologist while the other one is a theologian. Both of us are coming from the Franciscan background. Also, we believe that our disciplinary background converges with Zizek's analysis of religion and Christianity and his virulent attack against capitalism. This essay is a product of our continuing philosophical and political conversation. Errors and oversights therefore are both our responsibility.

philosophical sophistication that few could match, and engaging style. The author gives the final accolade by concluding that Žizek “seemed to be possessed of every possible gift. Incorporating arguments and examples from literature, linguistics, psychoanalysis, film studies, philosophy, opera, theology, political theory, electronic technology, history, popular culture, and current events, he seemed to be attempting the impossible, a total theorization of the world” (p. 453).²

Whatever judgment one might take – for or against Žizek³ – honestly, we find ourselves enthralled by his radical interpreta-

² McLemee (2004) notes in his review of the film *Žizek*: “Sure, it’s fun to see him torment the Kantian neo-liberals. He knows a lot of dirty jokes. And he can analyze an Alfred Hitchcock film like nobody’s business. But after a while, a reader begins to notice that Mr. *Žizek* repeats himself. A lot. He even recycles whole chunks of material from one work to the next. By the time Verso published his latest book, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, in June, devotees had encountered some paragraphs in three or four earlier incarnations.” A reviewer of Žizek’s *Puppet and the Dwarf* provides another acute portrayal of Žizek’s style: “Žizek does not journey to this conclusion by a straight line. Indeed, nothing in the book follows a linear form, from the cryptically titled chapters to the seemingly random examples to the often baffling prose. Žizek wanders from topic to topic without introductions or outlines, constantly digressing on popular culture, political philosophy, and current events... His examples draw from an impressive intellectual range, making interesting connections among authors like Bataille, Lacan, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Chesterton. At the same time, however, the style prevents Žizek from ever building a coherent or convincing case for his ideas. The examples, while clever, are seldom pursued systematically or in depth, and the insights are never assembled into a synthetic argument. And while the citations from popular culture are fun to read, it is often unclear that they actually prove anything” (Buckser, 2004). From a theological point of view, another reviewer notes: “Concerned fundamentally with the nature and presence of ‘belief in contemporary Western culture, Žizek is arguably, and paradoxically, one of the few genuinely Christian theologians writing today, to some extent, as we shall see, in the tradition of Thomas Altizer and the American “death of God” theology of the 1960s, while at the same time percolating Christian thinking through Socialist materialism and the psychoanalytic thinking of Lacan. Like Alain Badiou and others, he focuses specifically upon the Pauline community of believers rather than the Christianity of the canonical gospels, and draws upon a vast range of literature and film from within contemporary European culture” (Jasper, 2005).

³ Miklitsch (1998) says that Žizek is a divided subject whose work celebrates postmodern ‘pulp’ even as it critiques postmodernism. Edith Kurzweil (1992) thinks that Žizek is not writing about sociology, philosophy, much less pop culture. He is a postmodern writer. Denise Gigante, on the other hand thinks

tion of Christianity. We thus believe that it is very important to look closely at what Zizek is saying about our present situation.⁴ As one commentator suggests, "There is method to his madness, wisdom in his foolishness." We do not see Zizek as merely playing the academic game and mastering its rules, as Harpham seems to suggest. As Zizek rebukes his critics,

I fully assume his [Geoffrey Harpham] central thesis that my work presents a threat to the Western way of life. More precisely, I hope this thesis is true, because I am not playing intellectual games and my ultimate aims are ruthlessly radical. I only claim that, if one accomplishes the critical analysis of the "standard format" Harpham rhetorically demands, this ultimate aim of mine no longer appears as an intrusion of irrational (self) destructiveness, but as a rational aim based on the critical dissection of the existing order (2003a, p. 494).

We take this avowal seriously and literally.⁵ So what we will attempt to illuminate in this essay is the radical wisdom of

that Zizek's function in contemporary theory is no more than that of a "vanishing mediator", mediating between different theoretical points of view', never really possessing one of his own. *Michael J Thompson* (2003) is more dismissive: "Zizek succeeds in presenting a superb example of what leftist intellectuals must avoid: an unclear methodology and a lack of seriousness with respect to the subject matter at hand. Yet Brian Nocil (2000) argues otherwise, "But his elusiveness is in fact underscored by a clear consistency in his work, a particular kernel of critical *jouissance*, as he might put it himself – namely, his aim to celebrate a kind of madness at the heart of the subject."

⁴ In a site on the Internet, Ashley Woodiwiss describes Zizek: "A self-declared "fighting atheist" who claims the Christian legacy is worth fighting for. A Leninist who seeks wisdom in Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*. A leftist accused of being authoritarian, anti-feminist, and anti-Semitic. A critic of the worst excesses of capitalism who himself so over-produces books and articles that critics despair of ever being able to pin him down before he's off on his next tangent. So full of apparent contradictions is Zizek that to some critics it appears that while it is true Zizek exists, nevertheless we may well have created him."

⁵ In her review of the documentary film, *Zizek*, by Astra Taylor, Shai Ginsburg (2006) writes, "One should, therefore, take Zizek's pranks and stories seriously, particularly when they seem fantastical, for our fantasies are the leading clue to ourselves, to our motivations, and to the world in which we live." Stephen Moss (2007), a reporter for *The Guardian* narrates the following in his conver-

Zizek's Lacanian-Kierkegardian-Leninist interpretation of Christianity. We will show that Zizek's constructive and ingenious appropriation of Christian revolutionary legacy must be situated within his overall revolutionary agenda: Is liberal-capitalist democracy the ultimate horizon of our political practice, or is it possible effectively to comprise its inherent limitation and thereby to open up the space for another political articulation (Zizek, 1993, p. 221)?⁶ As one commentator remarks rightly,

Marx's image of capitalism as a "vampire" is thus quite apt (Marx, 1906, p 257). It therefore shouldn't come as a surprise that Zizek's Christian turn coincides with the occurrence of some of his odd-sounding references to Stalinist Marxism (nothing wards off vampires better than a crucifix) – paraphrasing the late Heidegger, "only a revolutionary god can save us now." Simply put, it would seemingly take nothing less than the divine intervention of a miracle to defeat such a cunning and powerful adversary (Johnston, 2004).

Our main point in this essay is to present a coherent(?) account of how Zizek juxtaposes the revolutionary philosophy of Marxism with the universal singularity of Christianity in order to slay this vampire.

sation with Zizek: "He is on a private visit to London and expressly not here to boost Zizek!, which is showing this month at the ICA. 'It's nicely done,' he says, 'but what I don't like is that it's about me. I hate myself.' This is a common theme – he claims to be a reluctant star, performing only to hide his insecurity and self-loathing. He also resents the way people now expect a constant flow of jokes and paradoxes from him. 'The way some people celebrate me is really a disguised form of an attack. 'He's a funny provocateur,' they say. 'He just likes to provoke.' I don't provoke. I'm very naive; I mean what I say.' Interestingly Zizek confides that the only time he feels truly relaxed and free is when he misses a connection and has to spend a night in an airport hotel. 'That's pretty close to happiness for me – I do nothing. If I'm in the US, I always watch the Weather Channel. I watch it for hours. It's ideal for obsessional neurotics: 'This storm is over, but look, look, another front is gathering up there.' I love it. There is always something to worry about, but at the same time you think you have it under control."

⁶ Following Duncan B. Forrester's (2004) call for a renewed "public theology," we may explain Zizek's turn to Christianity: "Great issues, events that 'cut history in two like a knife', turning points and encounters with radical evil or with authentic holiness in history seem to demand religious symbols and religious, even apocalyptic, language for their adequate interpretation and description" (Forrester, 2004, p. 18).

In his Preface to *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003b) Zizek reiterates the radical critique in the tradition of philosophy of religion: "Religion is either used for therapy or critique. Either it helps the individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order" (p. 3). Zizek's incursion into Christian soteriology, its relationship with Judaism, and Christology is occasioned by his revolutionary goal of questioning the way Gnosticism and other New Age religions have lent themselves to pacifying the violence of late capitalism. In the face of this unstated pact between neo-Paganism and postmodern capitalist ethos, Zizek champions the singular universality found in Christianity. This militant universality must be opposed to false universalities being preached by post-political prophets and to the new age spiritualisms that offer fetishistic comfort amidst the rampaging violence of globalism. Zizek's theology is deeply rooted in his rejection of the god of the market. We therefore find Zizek's intervention in the current intellectual scene as a welcome fresh contribution to revivifying, or to use Zizekese vocabulary, "repeating," liberation theology.

And if Zizek's plea are too radical to be realized, at least, we can follow Adrian Johnston's (2004) suggestion: "Maybe, at least for the time being, the most important task is simply the negativity of the critical struggle, the effort to cure an intellectual constipation resulting from capitalist ideology and thereby to truly open up the space for imagining authentic alternatives to the prevailing state of the situation." If our essay can cure some of our readers' intellectual constipation arising from undigested and premature celebration of capitalism's apocalyptic victory, then, we have accomplished our task.

Against the God of the Market

Zizek challenges the absolute character of neoliberal capitalism while criticizing those who think that class struggle is dead. Zizek declares, "More than ever, capital is the concrete universal of our historical epoch. That is, while it remains a particular formation, it overdetermines all alternative formations, as well as all noneconomic strata of social life" (Zizek, 2004a). He deplores the so-called end of ideology thesis which states that our current

social condition is dominated by an anonymous Fate beyond social control. Our only possible response to it is to ride the juggernaut of modernity and humanize it (2000c, p. 63).⁷

A couple of decades ago, people were still discussing the political future of humanity – will capitalism prevail, or will it be supplanted by communism or another form of totalitarianism? They discussed this while silently accepting that somehow social life will continue. Today, we can easily imagine the extinction of human race, but it is impossible to imagine a radical of the social system – even if life on earth disappears, capitalism will somehow remain intact (Zizek, 2006e, p. 149).

Moreover in the postmodern, post-political constellation the clash of global ideological visions is replaced by the collaboration of expert managerial bodies, negotiating the interests of a multiplicity of particular social strata and groups, reaching a compromise in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Zizek continues to think, ‘in the old Marxist vein’, that today’s capitalism, in its very triumph, is breeding new ‘contradictions’ which are potentially even more ‘explosive’ than those of standard industrial capitalism (Zizek, 2006e, p. 162). The fundamental divide we should consider, is the one between those included into the sphere of economic prosperity and those excluded from it (cf. Agamben, 2000, p. 35). The result of globalization and the rise of the global village is the creation of new marginalized sectors globally (Moleenaar, 2004, p. 206). And instead of the political subject – ‘working class’ demanding its universal rights – what we are witnessing today is the proliferation of identity politics, of

⁷ This is the position of Third Way advocate like Anthony Giddens (1998; 1994), an adviser to the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair (Isaac, 2001). For Zizek (1999b): “The idea of a Third Way emerged at the very moment when, at least in the West, all other alternatives, from old-style conservatism to radical social democracy, crumbled in the face of the triumphant onslaught of global capitalism and its notion of liberal democracy. The true message of the notion of the Third Way is that there is no Second Way, no alternative to global capitalism, so that, in a kind of mocking pseudo-Hegelian negation of negation, the Third Way brings us back to the first and only way. Global capitalism with a human face.”

social strata and groups that demand the right to be recognized culturally. Ironically, this false celebration of Difference and tolerance, that shifts the struggle from class politics to cultural struggle, sustains the operation of global capitalism everyday (Zizek, 2006e, p. 170).⁸

New Age Fetishism and Suspension of Belief

Zizek inveighs against New Age occultisms that act as fantasmic support to postmodern liberal capitalism. Psychoanalytically, he sees the proliferation of Buddhism and other Eastern type of cults in the West as a form of fetishism rather than as a symptom of capitalism. Following Freud, Zizek posits a strict distinction between repression and fetishization as two separate defenses utilized by the psyche. In repression, the subject bars a traumatic memory or unpleasant ideational content from entering the restricted domain of its cognizance. The correlate of repression is the "symptom," namely, a conspicuous-but-seemingly-nonsensical feature of the individual's experiential field or behavioral patterns that results from the repressed material exerting a distorting influence upon the subject's lived reality. Due to the censorship of repression, the conscious individual is largely unaware of the significance and function of the symptom *qua* pathological return of the repressed. Fetishists, on the other hand, deliberately and knowingly "enjoy their symptoms" (Zizek, 2006e, 253; Johnston, 2004). A fetish becomes a substitute for the lost object of desire so that the fetishist is able to tolerate life because of this false substitute.⁹ In global capitalism, fetishism is not an aberrant, deviant phenomenon, but, instead, a virtually innate structural

⁸ Zizek contends that current multiculturalism relies on the underlying One: the radical obliteration of Difference, of the antagonistic gap. Multitude of struggle is still contained in the One. His bimodal analysis of antagonism is based on Hegelian notion that "specific difference is ultimately the difference between the genus itself and its specie as such" (2001a, p. 239). This alternative Leftist politics is expressed in Deleuze and Guattari and in Hardt and Negri. For Zizek's incisive critique, see Zizek (2006b).

⁹ A good introduction to Lacanian analysis of fetishism is in Zizek (1997), especially Chapter 3: "Fetishism and its Vicissitudes."

feature of social reality, a necessary coping technique for the subjects of reigning ideologies. The fetishist is someone who can, whether through stoicism or sarcasm, tolerate the harshness and difficulty of daily existence – “fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly “realists,” able to accept the way things effectively are – since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality” (Zizek, 2001b; 2006e, p. 253). This is precisely the function of New Age Buddhism:

Buddhism is such a fetish: it enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless this spectacle is – what matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw... (Zizek, 2001b, p. 15).

This fetishism is reflected in the postmodern disavowal of belief in anything. The current strategy of capitalist liberal-democratic ideology is no longer to “mask” reality behind the veil of appearance. Rather, it allows individuals to claim they are non-conformists in their beliefs but nevertheless they do the opposite in their actions: “I know very well... yet I still...” (see Zizek, 1989). Ironically, with all the nonconformists sitting around it is quite surprising that capitalism is still alive and kicking (Jonston, 2004).¹⁰

¹⁰ Against such fetishists and cynics, Zizek sarcastically states, “Compare the struggle and pain of the ‘fundamentalist’ with the serene peace of the liberal democrat who, from a safe subjective position, ironically dismisses every fully pledged engagement, every “dogmatic” taking sides. Consequently, yes, I plead guilty: in this choice, I without hesitation opt for the fundamentalist.” The same is true with postmodern philosophers. They usually argue that one should modestly accept that all our positions are relative, conditioned by contingent historical constellations, so that no one has definitive solutions, just pragmatic temporary solutions. Zizek asks wittingly, “Is their [deconstructionists] apparently modest relativization of their own position not the mode of appearance of its very opposite, of privileging their own position of enunciation, so that one can effectively claim that the self-relativizing stance is a key ingredient of today’s rhetorics of power?” So Zizek has great admiration for authentic fundamentalists, the materialist fundamentalists like St. Paul, Chesterton and Lenin, against those pseudo-fundamentalists like the Moral Majority (see interview with Rasmussen, 2004, p. 79).

If God Doesn't Exist, Nothing Is Permitted: The Ethics of Permissive Capitalism

Hand in hand with the doxa of postmodern skepticism which says: "Suspend your belief," postcapitalist morality also enjoins people to invert Kant's famous moral dictum: "You can because you must." Today the motto of postmodern yuppies is: "You may because you can." The superego injunction is suspended in such a way that individuals are allowed to transgress social conventions. Hence "reflexive individuals" – to use Giddens' term – are happy to believe that they can transgress social norms. For postmodern reflexive subjects, "If God is dead, everything is permitted!"

True to Lacanian reversal of logic, Zizek inverts Dostoevsky's famous maxim, that if God doesn't exist, not everything is permitted, but everything is prohibited.

Lacan's anti-Dostoyevsky motto, "If God doesn't exist, everything is prohibited": 1) God is dead, we live in a permissive universe, you should strive for pleasures and happiness – but, in order to have a life full of happiness and pleasures, you should avoid dangerous excesses, so everything is prohibited if it is not deprived of its substance; 2) If God is dead, superego enjoins you to enjoy, but every determinate enjoyment is already a betrayal of the unconditional one, so it should be prohibited (Zizek, 2004b, p. 507).

The obscene obverse of this motto is the totalitarian motto: if there is God, everything is permitted.

And if there is God, then everything is permitted – to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of His will; clearly, a direct link to God justifies our violation of any "merely human" constraints and considerations (as in Stalinism, where the reference to the big Other of historical Necessity justifies absolute ruthlessness). From politics to biopolitics (*ibid.*, p. 508).

Far from imposing on us a firm set of standards to be complied with, the totalitarian master suspends moral punishment. His secret injunction is: "You may." Zizek claims that Lacan was right, and the so-called fundamentalist terrorists are exactly the proof of his claim. "With them, it is inverted: God exists so every-

thing is permitted. If you act as a divine instrument, you can kill, rape, because through all these mystical tricks, it is not me who is acting, it is God who is acting through me." He continues,

He [the totalitarian leader] tells us that the prohibitions which regulate social life and guarantee a minimum of decency are worthless, just a device to keep the common people at bay – we, on the other hand, are free to let ourselves go, to kill, rape, plunder, but only insofar as we follow the master. (The Frankfurt School discerned this key feature of totalitarianism in its theory of repressive desublimation.) Obedience to the master allows you to transgress everyday moral rules: all the dirty things you were dreaming of, everything you had to renounce when you subordinated yourself to the traditional, patriarchal, symbolic Law you are now allowed to indulge in without punishment, just as you may eat fat-free salami without any risk to your health (Žizek, 1999c).

What interests Žizek is the following paradox: how, precisely in our liberal societies, where no one can even imagine a transcendental cause for which to die, we are allowed to adopt a hedonistic, utilitarian, or even more spiritually egotistical stance – the goal of my life is the realization of all my potential. "The result," Žizek wittily points out, "is not that you can do everything you want, but a paradoxical situation: you can enjoy your life, but in order to do it, no fat, no sexual harassment, no this, no that. Probably never in human history did we live in a society in which, at the microlevel of personal behavior, our lives were so strongly regulated" (interview with Rasmussen, 2004; see also Salecl, 2004).

Against Gnosticism: Revolutionary Universalism

In his talk on human rights on November 16, 1999 at Olin Auditorium, Bard College, Žizek provocatively suggests, "I think the Christian legacy is all too precious to be left to, well, Christians themselves." And he vexes his audience by declaring his purpose is "to demonstrate how Christianity effectively provides the foundation to human rights and freedoms." Žizek defends the revolutionary character of Christianity against the growing popularity of New Age spiritualisms. The unbridgeable difference between these

two worldviews is on the issue of globalism versus universalism. For Žižek, “the very core of the pagan wisdom resides in the insight into this cosmic balance of hierarchically ordered principles, more precisely, the insight into the eternal circuit of the cosmic catastrophe, derailment, and the restoration of order through just punishment” (Žižek, 2001a, p. 54). In the pagan cosmology everyone has her own rightful place in the hierarchy. This kind of cosmological principle is enshrined in New Age religions. Christianity, like in Buddhism, introduces a very disconcerting element into this cosmology (2001a, p. 54; also 2002b, Chap. 1). Žižek interprets the injunction of Jesus in Luke 14:26 [“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”] as enjoining Christians to universalize their love. Rather than the individual being defined by a bigger cosmic hierarchy, the individual in Christianity is unplugged from her organic connection with traditional hierarchy. Christianity is a miraculous Event that disturbs the balance of the One-All. It is the violent intrusion of difference which throws off the rails the balanced circuit of the universe.

Borrowing from Freud’s group psychology, Žižek likens the opposition between pagan society and Christian movement to the difference between the church and the army. Pagan society is like a church that always compromises and tolerates, while the Christianity like an army is a “combative group working towards an aggressive re-conquest defined by the antagonism between us and them.”¹¹

This what Žižek finds so militant in Christian universalism. It is a fighting creed. As Žižek strongly argues, “Christian universality is not the all-encompassing global medium where there is a

¹¹ So Žižek prefers the Pope to Dalai Lama: “One can understand now why the Dalai Lama is much more appropriate for our post-modern permissive times. He presents us with a vague feel-good spiritualism without any specific obligations. Anyone, even the most decadent Hollywood star, can follow him while continuing his money-grubbing, promiscuous lifestyle. In contrast to it, the Pope reminds us that there is a price to pay for a proper ethical attitude. It is his very stubborn clinging to old values, his ignoring the realistic demands of our time even when the argument against it seems obvious, as is the case of the raped nun, that makes him – conditionally I use this term – great” (2000c, p. 102).

place for all and everyone – it is rather, a struggling universality, the site of constant battle” (2006d, p. 35; 2006a). He therefore suggests, “Christianity and Marxism *should* fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms” (2000c, p. 3).

The Universality of Christianity against Neo-Paganistic Globalism

For Žizek what distinguishes the fundamentalist materialists from postliberal intellectuals (Chesterton versus Giddens) is that the former, especially Saint Paul, do not make room for everyone within the community. Paulinian universality, like Hegelian notion of universality, is not universality as a positive encompassing feature.¹² On the contrary, “To follow Saint Paul: not the division between Law and sin, but between, on one side, the totality of Law and sin and its obscene supplement, and, on the other, the way of Love (2006, p. 35).¹³ Paradoxically he points out,

...the accusation against Saint Paul’s universalism misses the true site of universality: the universal dimension he opened up is not the “neither Greek nor Jew but all Christians,” which implicitly excludes non-Christians; it is, rather, the difference Christians/non-Christians itself which, as a difference, is universal, that is to say, cuts across the entire social body, splitting, dividing from within every substantial ethnic, etc., identity – Greeks are divided into Christians and non-Christians, as well as Jews. The standard accusation thus,

¹² Žizek further develops this view of opposition in his notion of parallax view (2006, p. 7).

¹³ In an interview, Žizek passionately defends Christian notion of universality against Gnostic wisdom and neo-paganism of New Age occults: “Universality is a line that cuts universally and this is, how shall I put it, absolutely unique in Christianity and this is what we are losing with these gnostic wisdoms and even with political correctness, tolerance, and so on, because the notion of truth there is not that of a fighting truth but that of differences, space open for everything. This notion of truth as painful, truth means you cut a line of difference ... which is why for me, as I claim, you know that mysterious statement of Christ’s “I came here not to bring peace but a sword” – I don’t think this should be read as “kill the bad guys.” It is a militant work of love (interview with Ramey).

in a way, knocks on an open door: the whole point of the Pauline notion of struggling universality is that true universality and partiality do not exclude each other, but universal Truth is accessible only from a partial engaged subjective position (Zizek, 2006c, p. 35).

This fighting universalism is similar with the motto of the proletarian revolution: "We were nothing, we want to become All" – from the perspective of Redemption; that which, within the established order, counts as nothing, the remainder of this order, its part of no part, will become All" (2003b, p. 133).¹⁴ Hence Zizek endorses Jacques Ranciere's definition of democracy. Democracy begins when the excluded strata of society declare: "We, the ones who are excluded, we are the all, we are the people, we stand for universality." When they said not, "We want our balanced share of the cake," but when they said, "We stand for universality; you stand just for your particular interests". So this is the risk you should take, not this false, "We are all equal, let's make a compromise" (Zizek, 1998).¹⁵

So the fighting notion of universality found both in St. Paul and proletarian revolution locate the universal when in a social body you have some strata, some people who do not fit into it, who are out of place or displaced. These half-excluded are the site of universality in the most radical form (Zizek, 2006e, p. 166).¹⁶

¹⁴ Zizek sides with the fundamentalist materialists who are ready to lose their heads to affirm the universal – people like Lenin, St. Paul, and G.K. Chesterton. Between liberals and conservatives, Zizek opts for the conservatives. Both conservatives and fundamentalists may be considered as "true" Leftists: "Left is defined by this readiness to suspend the abstract moral frame, or, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, to accomplish a political suspension of the Ethical" (2006e, p. 177).

¹⁵ Zizek gives the example of the *Muselmaenner* – "Muslims, in the Nazi concentration camps. They are literally the walking dead. So universality in Zizek means elevating these strata into the status of the universal.

¹⁶ Lest readers are misled to think that Zizek believes in a priori universal principles, Zizek distances himself from Habermas' modernist project. Zizek rejects any notion of universal rules or principles. His notion of universality is political: "But I don't believe in some *a priori* universality of fundamental rules or universal notions. The only true universality we have access to is political universality. Which is not solidarity in some abstract idealist sense,

This is where Žižek finds Paul's universality as nearest to revolutionary Act.¹⁷ Žižek equates the gesture of Paul in breaking away from religious conventions with Lacan's notion of authentic Act. For Lacan "an Act cannot be anticipated and defined from within the framework of a given symbolic order, since it shatters the parameters of that same framework if and when it happens" (Johnston, 2004; de Kessel, 2004, p. 319).

The point is not simply that, once we are thoroughly engaged in a political project, we are ready to put everything at stake for it, inclusive of our lives, but, more precisely, that only such an "impossible" gesture of pure expenditure can change the very coordinates of what is strategically possible within a historical constellation. This is the key point: an act is neither a strategic intervention into the existing order, nor its "crazy" destructive negation; an act is an "excessive," transstrategic, intervention that redefines the rules and contours of the existing order (Žižek, 2004b, p. 511).

Žižek connects this with the hope for a revolutionary overturning of the present capitalist world order. Christianity, like Marxism is the true harbinger of singular universality by siding with those who are Part of no-Part. This is also similar to the

but solidarity in struggle. If we are engaged in the same struggle, if we discover that – and this for me is the authentic moment of solidarity – being feminists and ecologists, or feminists and workers, we all of a sudden have this insight: 'My God, but our struggle is ultimately the same!' This political universality would be the only authentic universality. And this, of course, is what is missing today, because politics today is increasingly a politics of merely negotiating compromises between different positions" (interview with Reul and Deichmann, 2001).

¹⁷ Žižek claims in one of his lectures, "what people deplore in St. Paul I appreciate in St. Paul. Not human rights; it's us versus them. Universality is a fighting position... Christianity means us against them. It means universality is a position of struggle. The conflict is not the conflict between two particular groups. The moment you conceive the conflict as the conflict between the two particular groups, you can play the pagan games: the balance, compromise, and so on. From a Christian perspective, the conflict is the conflict between the global order and this radical universality. I see Christianity in this sense as an extremely politicized religion, if you want to put it this way. It's really a religion of a new community (lecture on Human Rights; see also Žižek, 2001, p. 143).

Lacanian logic of love. Love in its purest form introduces a cosmic imbalance. It picks up an object among plural entities and elevate it the status of object of desire.

For Leninist Political Theology Against *Denkverbot*

Therefore, Zizek heaps scathing remarks against those prophets of post-capitalism who prohibits any talk of an alternative to current political constellation simply because it might lead to Gulag (2001a). Post-political philosophers equate the assertion of Universalism as erasure of Difference in favor of Same-ness. And Same-ness leads to Holocausts. Zizek notes that, "Today, reference to the "totalitarian" threat sustains a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* or "prohibition against thinking" (Zizek, 2001a, p 3). Against this *Denkverbot* Zizek forcefully argues for "repeating Lenin." (or, perhaps "repeating Saint Paul). The phrase "repeating Lenin" does not refer to the ridiculously anachronistic and ineffective posturing that would be involved in another attempt at launching a communist revolution. For Zizek, it broadly signifies a disruptive break that makes it possible to imagine, once again, viable alternatives to liberal-democratic capitalism by removing the various obstacles to seriously thinking about options forcefully foreclosed by today's reigning ideologies (Zizek, 2002a). As Zizek puts it fittingly, "Lenin" stands for the compelling FREEDOM to suspend the stale existing [post]ideological coordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* in which we live – it simply means that we are allowed to think again" (Zizek, 2001d, p. 51). In this sense, Paul is a "proto-Lenisist" who had to fight all deviations (1999a, p. 226).

Utopian? Traversing the Fantasy of Neo-liberal Capitalism via Messianism

Is this utopian? Zizek avers, "The ultimate answer to the reproach that the radical Leftist proposals are utopian should thus be that, today, the true utopia is the belief that the present liberal-democratic capitalist consensus could go on indefinitely, without radical changes" (Zizek, 2001d, p 101). Or, in his critique of Allain Badiou's Leftist philosophy:

The test of the true revolutionary stance, as opposed to this game of hysterical provocation [let's demand from the system things that it cannot meet so we can go on with our massive criticisms], is the heroic readiness to endure the subversive undermining of the existing System as it undergoes conversion into the principle of a new positive Order that can give body to this negativity – or, in Badiou's terms, the conversion of Truth into Being" (Žižek, 1998b).

In *The Ticklish Subject*, the theological import of this line of thought becomes more blatant:

...absolute/unconditional acts do occur, but not in the (idealist) guise of a self-transparent gesture performed by a subject with a pure Will who fully intends them – they occur, on the contrary, as a totally unpredictable *tuché*, a miraculous event which shatters our lives. To put it in somewhat pathetic terms, this is how the "divine" dimension is present in our lives, and the different modalities of ethical betrayal relate precisely to the different ways of betraying the act-event: the true source of Evil is not a finite mortal man who acts like God, but a man who denies that divine miracles occur and reduces himself to just another finite mortal being" (Žižek, 1999a, p 376; see also Johnston, 2004).

Žižek attacks Badiou's apprehension about any form of revolutionary Event because it might lead to terrorism and totalitarianism. Badiou and other Leftist philosophers seem to accept the idea that the idea of Revolution will always be deferred. There is an absolute abyss that separates the Event from the real utopia. Žižek links liberal-democracy's employment of the threat of totalitarianism to a more fundamental rejection of the Act itself *qua* intervention whose consequences cannot be safely anticipated. The refusal to risk a gesture of disruption because it might not turn out exactly the way one envisions it should is the surest bulwark against change – "This lack of guarantee is what the critics cannot tolerate; they want an Act without risk – not without empirical risks, but without the much more radical "transcendental risk" that the Act will not only simply fail, but radically misfire... those who oppose the "absolute Act" effectively oppose the Act *as such*, they want an Act without the Act" (Johnston,

2004; Zizek, 2002c, pp 152-153).¹⁸ Zizek rejects this position via the Jesuit axiom: "Here, then, is the first rule of acting: assume/believe that the success of your undertakings depends entirely on you, and in no way to God; but nonetheless, set to work as if God alone will do everything, and you yourself nothing" (2001, p. 125). Zizek interprets this maxim as: "the trust in God must be in your acts, not in your beliefs."

Zizek distinguishes Judaism from Christian messianism. In Judaism the Jews wait for the arrival of the Messiah, their attitude is one of suspended attention directed towards the future, while for Christianity, the messiah is already here, the Event has already taken place (2001, p. 126). The space for struggle is opened.

In spite of these radical critique developed by Zizek many of his critics still see his philosophy as going nowhere (Moolenaar, 2004; Jonston, 2004; Morton, 2003; Laclau). Is Zizek expecting a total revolution to overturn current social and economic constellation? In an interview with Eric Rassmusen Zizek confides,

What I'm trying to avoid is the traditional pseudo-radical position which says, "If you engage in politics – helping trade unions or combating sexual harassment, whatever – you've been co-opted and so on." I hate those pseudo-radicals who dismiss every concrete action by saying that "This will all be co-opted." Of course, everything can be co-opted. This is just a nice excuse to do absolutely nothing. Of course, there is a danger that, to use the old Maoist term popular in European student movements thirty some years ago, "the long march through institutions" will last so long that you'll end up part of the institution. But we need, more than ever, a parallax view, a double perspective. You engage in acts, being aware of their limitations. This does not mean that you act with your fingers crossed. No, you fully engage, but with the awareness that – the ultimate wager in the almost Pascalian sense – is not simply that this act will succeed, but

¹⁸ Hence rather than denying the lineage between Christian Messianism and Marxism, Zizek (2000, p. 2) forcefully posits it.

that the very failure of this act will trigger a much more radical process (interview with Rassmussen).¹⁹

A Lacanian-Hegelian-Kierkegaardian Christology

If the Event had already erupted in history, what should be the proper stance of Christians? It is interesting here to discuss how Žižek reads Jewish iconoclasm not as a prohibition against any images of God because God is *tout autre*, beyond, and every image betrays him. For Žižek the “only terrain of the divine is contact with other humans. Images of God are proscribed “because the space of the divine is not up there, it’s here, in human interactions, and I think this is perhaps only brought to a conclusion in Christianity.” Christianity merely carried this iconoclasm into its logical conclusion by equating the divine image in Jesus Christ. By arguing that “Christianity inverses the Jewish sublimation into a radical desublimation,” Žižek is arguing that Christianity brought iconoclasm into its logical conclusion. The divine resides in detail. The divine in Christ is a *schien* of God in the humanity of Christ. This is not the traditional Feuerbachian reduction of theology to anthropology, of reducing transcendence to immanence. Far from that, transcendence is rendered accessible – “it shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being that I love” (2001, p. 90). Žižek rejects vehemently the so-called “humanist reading of Christianity, which says that simply, in a kind of Feuerbachian boring statement, that God is only the projection of various aspects

¹⁹ Žižek parries the criticism raised against him by his fellow radicals like Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler – that he provides incisive analysis of the present capitalist system but he offers no concrete solution – by arguing: “Against such a stance [we should act now based on our theoretical analysis], one should gather the courage to claim that the only way to effectively remain open to the revolutionary chance is to renounce easy calls to direct action, which necessarily involve us in an activity where things change so that the totality remains the same. Today’s predicament is that, if we succumb to the urge of directly doing something (for example, engaging in the antiglobalist struggle, helping the poor), we will certainly and undoubtedly contribute to the reproduction of the existing order. The only way to lay the foundations for a true, radical change is to withdraw from the compulsion to act, to do nothing – and, thus, to open up the space for a different kind of activity” (2004a). Žižek (2006e) calls this gesture “passive aggressivity”.

of being human, and so on.” Neither does he accept the Gnostic position that says there is some divine spark in human beings. Paradoxically, Zizek emphatically argues, “I want to say not only that humanity only knows God through Christ but that only through Christ does God know himself.”

Rejecting the traditional theological explanation of redemption, Zizek offers his own Lacanian-Hegelian solution. He considers Christ as the mediator between God and humanity: in order for humanity to be restored to God, the mediator must sacrifice himself. That is, as long as Christ is here, there can be no Holy Ghost, which is the figure of the reunification of God and humanity.

Christ as the mediator between God and humanity is, to put it in today's deconstructionist terms, the condition of possibility AND the condition of impossibility between the two: as mediator, he is at the same time the obstacle which prevents the full mediation of the opposed poles. Or, to put it in the Hegelian terms of the Christian syllogism: there are two “premises” (Christ is God's Son, fully divine, and Christ is man's son, fully human), and to unite the opposed poles, to arrive at the “conclusion” (humanity is fully united with God in the Holy Spirit), the mediator must erase himself out of the picture (interview with Reul and Deichmann, 2005).

The climax of Zizek's Christology is to claim that the truth of theology is not the standard Feuerbachian formula: Man=God, nor the traditional Christian formula that were it not for the original sin of man he will become divine. Again, using his famous Lacanian logical inversion, Zizek claims that the formula of Christ is man=man where the divine dimension intervenes only as that which prevents Christ from being fully human is exactly the divine in him (2001, p. 132).

The identity of humanity with God “is asserted only in/through God's radical self-abandonment, when his distance towards God overlaps with the inner distance of God towards himself” (p. 146). Or in more theological terms, human being's split and sinfulness must be projected back to God Himself. For God also abandoned His Son. This shows, for Zizek, that the secret of Christianity is that there is no secret. God the Father is also impotent

amidst the suffering and death of His Son. The death of the Son on the Cross also meant the death of God the Father, the Big Other. What happened on the Cross therefore is just like what happens at the termination of psychoanalytic treatment. The patient is freed from the illusion of the existence of the Big Other that supports her fantasy (2003b, p. 170). We are left alone with the Holy Spirit that dwells in the community of believers. Žižek wants to build a community like the Paulinian way. This alternative community he likens unto Lenin's revolutionary community, described as "a society of aliens speaking all languages, taking no account of difference in customs, laws, and institutions."

Christ's death is not part of the eternal cycle of the divine incarnation and death, in which God repeatedly appears and then withdraws into himself, in his Beyond. As Hegel put it, what dies on the Cross is NOT the human incarnation of the transcendent God, but the God of Beyond Himself. Through Christ's sacrifice, God Himself is no longer beyond, but passes into the Holy Spirit (of the religious community). In other words, if Christ were to be the mediator between two separated entities (God and humanity), his death would mean that there is no longer a mediation, that the two entities are apart again. So, obviously, God must be the mediator in a stronger sense: it's not that, in the Holy Spirit, there is no longer the need for Christ, because the two poles are directly united; for this mediation to be possible, the nature of both poles must be radically changed, i.e. in one and the same movement, they both must undergo a transubstantiation. Christ is, on the one hand, the vanishing mediator/medium through whose death God-Father himself "passes into" the Holy Spirit, and, on the other hand, the vanishing mediator/medium through whose death human community itself "passes into" the new spiritual stage (interview with Reul and Deichmann, 2001).

This makes Christianity more radical than Feuerbachian humanism. For it attacks the persisting hard core within humanism and Stalinism, with its belief in the existence of the Big Other that guarantees the objective meaning of history and human actions (2003b, p. 171). Yet this impotence and imperfection is also the proper locus of love. It is only through God's fundamental imperfection that the "properly Christian Love can emerge, a love Beyond

Mercy" (p. 146). For love is loving the other because of the lack of the other – of his imperfections, frailty, and sinfulness.

The Secret of Christianity Is It Has No Secret

Zizek argues that Christianity has no secret. Its secret was already revealed on the cross. That is, God was impotent in the face of the suffering of His son. Zizek sees the parallelism between Job's innocent suffering and Christ. In the case of Christ the fallenness of man is reflected back to God. God is split. The following lengthy but fascinating theological exposition is worth quoting in full:

It is with regard to this assertion of the meaninglessness of Job's suffering that one should insist on the parallel between Job and Christ, on Job's suffering announcing the Way of the Cross: Christ's suffering is also meaningless, not an act of meaningful exchange. The difference, of course, is that, in the case of Christ, the gap that separates the suffering, desperate man (Job) from God is transposed onto God himself, as His own radical splitting or, rather, self-abandonment. What this means is that one should risk a much more radical than usual reading of Christ's "Father, why did you forsake me?": since we are dealing here not with the gap between man and God, but with the split in God himself, the solution cannot be for God to (re)appear in all his majesty, revealing to Christ the deeper meaning of his suffering (that he was the Innocent sacrificed to redeem humanity). Christ's "Father, why did you forsake me?" is not the complaint to the omnipotent, capricious God-Father whose ways are indecipherable to us mortal humans, but the complaint which hints at the impotent God: it is rather like the child who, after believing in his father's powerfulness, with horror discovers that his father cannot help him. (To evoke an example from recent history: at the moment of Christ's crucifixion, God-the-Father is in a position somewhat similar to that of the Bosnian father made to witness the gang rape of his own daughter, and to endure the ultimate trauma of her compassionate-reproaching gaze: "Father, why did you forsake me?"). In short, with this "Father, why did you forsake me?," it is God-the-Father who effectively dies, revealing his utter impotence, and thereupon rises from the dead in the guise of the Holy Ghost. The passage from Judaism to

Christianity is thus again the passage from purification to subtraction: from the deadly fascination with the transcendent God-Thing to the minimal difference that makes Christ-man divine (Zizek, 2001f).

For Zizek Christ takes upon himself the excess of life freely – sin or the obscene Supplement of the Law. Christ did not abolish the Law but followed it to the letter (Rheinhard, 2004). By doing this, he redeems humanity, not by obliterating our sins but people are given the possibility of redeeming themselves, of getting rid of the excess. Or as Zizek beautifully puts it,

Christ does NOT do our work for us, he does not pay our debt, he “merely” GIVES US A CHANCE – with his death, he asserts OUR freedom and responsibility, i.e., he “merely” open up the possibility, for us, to redeem ourselves through the “leap into faith,” i.e., by way of choosing to “live in Christ” – in imitation Christi, we repeat Christ’s gesture of freely assuming the excess of life, instead of projecting/displacing it onto some figure of the other (2000b1, p. 105).

Ultimately the death of Christ is not similar to paganistic notion of going back to organic unity and primordial nature. Against paganistic “recollection” Christianity posits REPETITION. That is to say that Christ’s death, in the Hegelian reading, is the disappearance of disappearance.²⁰ Here is Zizek at his most theological moment:

Here I think it is crucial to read Christ’s sacrifice not literally as paying a debt. It is also – we should just trust our intuitions here – because the message of Christ’s sacrifice is not “now I take it for you, you can screw it up again.” No, it just opens the space for our struggle, and this is the paradox I like... To put it in very simple terms, Christ’s redemption doesn’t mean that, OK, now we can go watch hard-core movies because we are redeemed each time. No, it’s done, the Messiah is here, it’s done, means that the space is now open for struggle. It’s this nice paradox that the fact that

²⁰ We agree with Steve Nolan (2002) that Zizek’s theological explanation of the cross is a return to death of God theology, only this time it is interpreted with Lacanian twist.

the big thing happened does not mean it's over. It precisely opens the space for struggle. This is what I find again so incredible. Which is why to the horror of some of my Jewish friends, who doesn't like this idea that in Christianity everything happened whereas in Judaism the Messiah is always postponed, always to-come, and so on. No, I like here this crazy radicality of Christianity which is that, no, it happened, it already happened. But precisely that doesn't mean everything is already decided. No, again, what intrigues me is that I find here such a shattering revolution of the entire economy (interview with Delpech-Ramey, 2007).

A Christian Response to Zizek

David Jasper (2005) asks, "Why, then, can we call Zizek a genuinely Christian theologian?" His answer is:

It is because he addresses a legitimate possibility for Christianity in a post-ecclesial, post-Christian age. He refuses to pursue the myth of Christian relevancy within the bounded dogmas of the Church, whose traditional authority, at least in the West, has effectively evaporated, leaving the Christian a homeless wanderer on the edges of the very culture that the Church has largely, in days gone by, constructed. Thinking about religion, to be serious, must take place in a world not dominated by traditional Christian symbols and liturgies, but by the popular cinema, Kinder Surprise eggs, multiculturalism and psychoanalysis – whether we like it or not. In this sense Zizek is seriously pursuing theological goals" (Jasper, 2005).

Zizek as a Paulinian theologian writes from the perspective of post-communist society and post-Christian culture. His theoretical arsenals are deeply rooted in the radical tradition in European Marxist philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis.²¹ As Christians living in Third World society and having been raised in the atmosphere of politicized religion, we are astonished by the

²¹ He belongs to the so-called *Ljubljana* or *Slevene Lacanian school*. This circle includes Zizek, his ex-wife, Renata Salecl, Miram Bozovic, Zdrabko Kobe, Mladen Dolar, and Alenka Zupancic (see Wright and Wright, 1999, p. 1).

fact that Zizek does not mention anything about the historical Jesus and the enormous scholarship that has sprouted from it. We are also perplexed by the conspicuous absence of liberation theologians and political theologians in Zizek's radical re-interpretation of Christianity.²² Instead he chooses G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and Eric Santner as his religious interlocutors.²³ We are also very much aware that Zizek, in spite of his rather congenial attitude to Christianity, is a fighting atheist.²⁴ But we share the same historical horizon: global capitalism.

Be that as it may, these theoretical shortcomings do not dissuade us from considering the enormous contributions of Zizek to the REPETITION liberation theology in Third World countries. So in the following discussion we will put forward what liberation theologians can learn from Zizek's theology and Lacanian reading of Marxism.

²² We are thinking here of the works on liberation Christology by Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Illacuria, Juan Luis Segundo, and political theology of Edward Schillebeeckx, J.B. Metz, and Jurgen Moltman.

²³ Of course, Zizek's readings are not intended as an apologetic for the Christian faith. As one sympathetic commentator observes, "Zizek is revisiting the Judaeo-Christian story for other purposes, and his theological excursions continually lead back to an analysis of material cultural within a Lacanian framework. At times this fickle attitude towards theology can be infuriating – Zizek's engagement, for example, with theological material on the Fall or the Pauline tradition is highly selective, and the theological ramifications of the ideas Zizek raises are rarely examined in sufficient detail. But one has to remember that Zizek is not writing a work of systematic theology, nor making any pretensions to being a theologian. Instead, he is offering a series of provocative, hol(e)y reflections, reflections that are needed by a Christian tradition that often fails to grasp the rich, subversive potential of its own beliefs. Zizek therefore re-minds us of Christian radicalism amidst the post-Christian culture hybridized by New Age spiritualisms and occultisms" (Knight, 2005).

²⁴ His atheism is militant as expressed in the following slogan: "For centuries, we have been told that without religion we are no more than egotistic animals fighting for our share, our only morality that of a pack of wolves; only religion, it is said, can elevate us to a higher spiritual level. Today, when religion is emerging as the wellspring of murderous violence around the world, assurances that Christian or Muslim or Hindu fundamentalists are only abusing and perverting the noble spiritual messages of their creeds ring increasingly hollow. What about restoring the dignity of atheism, one of Europe's greatest legacies and perhaps our only chance for peace?"

First, we believe that Zizek compels us to go back to the radical exegesis of Saint Paul in relation to Christian universality.²⁵ In a time when the Religious Right and Establishment Christianity are vigorously claiming St. Paul on their side, and pseudo-Nietzscheans are dismissing Paul as the “greatest liar”, liberation theologians must go back to Paulinian-Hegelian universality. Zizek provides liberation theologians with an ideological tool to unmask false claims to universality by global capitalist gurus and New Age prophets. Much can be learned from Zizek’s contrast of two forms of universality, false universality or globalism and true universality of the Paulinian type:

...we are dealing here with two opposed logics of universality to be strictly distinguished. On the one hand, there is the state bureaucracy as the universal class of a society (or, in a larger scope, the U.S. as the world policeman, the universal enforcer and guarantor of human rights and democracy), the direct agent of the global order; on the other hand, there is the “supernumerary” universality, the universality embodied in the element that sticks out of the existing order, which, while internal to it, has no proper place within it (what Jacques Ranciere calls the “part of no-part”). Not only are the two not the same but the struggle is ultimately between these two universalities – not simply between the particular elements of the universality, not just about which particular content will hegemonize the empty form of universality, but between two exclusive forms of universality themselves (Zizek, 2006b; also 2006e, p. 165).

²⁵ The best work on the revolutionary spirit of Paul’s theology is by Juan Luis Segundo (1986). In the Philippine context, a Protestant scholar imaginatively suggests a recontextualization of Paul for today: “Paul is understandably interpreted as co-opted by imperial power, especially in places where Christianity was introduced alongside the colonial enterprise. But a re-imagining of Paul within present world dynamics might have Paul born to a family of Filipino migrant workers (say, in Hong Kong), sent back to his homeland for a proper education, but there encountering a new religious movement that had sprung up in the hills of a remote area in conflicted and impoverished Mindanao, and that had found a foothold in the capital city despite the salvaging of its founding prophet, he first zealously resisting the new movement but then zealously embracing it, proclaiming its message of a soon to-be transformed world in the centers of commercial and political power, but eventually last heard of in a place of detention” (Zerbe, 2005).

Zizek makes Paul as a model, a formal structure which can then be applied to revolutionary emancipatory collectivities.²⁶ When Paul says that love is the greatest virtue, Zizek interprets this to mean that the authentic Christian notion of love is something very violent and unilateral, it is totally different from the pagan notion where love is this kind of universal balance. Is not the preferential option for the poor the most derailing of all beliefs embodied in liberation theology, and Christianity, in general?

By going back to Paul and the early Christianity we are reminded that Christianity is originally a movement of “non-persons” – of people whose dignity and rights are denied of them (Boff and Boff, 2003, p. 31). Today, the exclusionary violence of global capitalism produces new Others that are totally outside the system. Nestor Miguez of *Instituto Universitario ISEDET*, Buenos Aires, Argentina, describes the new exclusion under neo-liberal capitalist-driven globalization:

²⁶ Interestingly Joseph Ratzinger (1966), in his study of the meaning of Christian brotherhood, parallels Zizek and Badiou’s analysis of the universal singularity. For Ratzinger argues that the Enlightenment notion of universal brotherhood is unrealizable. Apropos Schiller’s naïve universalism (“Be embraced ye millions”), Ratzinger rightly argues, “a brotherliness which embraces everyone equally cannot expect to be taken seriously by anyone.” Then, he pertinently asks: “Must an ethos [universal brotherhood], to be realizable perhaps contain some form of duality? Does it inevitably require a closed ‘inner ring’ to be fully workable” (p. 16). In a truly Hegelian fashion, Ratzinger declares: “If the foundation of the Church, and thus the realization of Christ’s mission, has created a new duality among men – that of the Church and non-Church – then it is clear that the real goal of the work of Jesus refers not to the part, but to the whole – to total humanity. This healing of the whole takes place, according to the will of God, in the dialectical antithesis of the few and the many, in which the few are the starting point from which God seeks to save the many (p. 75). Reduced to its formal kernel, isn’t this “inner ring” the same with Jacques Rancière Part of No-Part, Badiou’s supernumerary, of Zizek’s “outcast”? This Part of No-Part is the foundation of concrete universality. We must be clear here: Zizek and Badiou, two great contemporary philosophers of universality today, do not have faith in the substance of Ratzinger’s universal brotherhood. What these two are after is the formal structure of Christian universality, which we think is very similar to Ratzinger’s. Ratzinger (1966) rightly points out that Paulinian universality should be understood in Paulinian sense – with demarcation yet open to all – rather than in the Enlightenment tradition (p. 70).

The context of globalization has been, at large, bad news for Latin America, as for the vast majority of the Third World. We enjoy very little of its technological advances, and suffer a lot by the accumulation of wealth and power that it is bringing about, because it is the result of the exploitation and exclusion of many. The word in the agenda is 'exclusion'. People previously called 'marginal', that is, on the borders of social structures of production and distribution, are today 'excluded', that means, they are totally outside of the system. There is no place for them, even on the margins. There is no chance for them to be taken into consideration by market forces or world policy makers. Many of our 'popular Bible readers' are now in this frightening new category.

In Zizek's Hegelian version, from this "excluded" stems Christian universality:

Christian universality emerges at the symptomal point of those who are "part of no-part" of the global order. This is where the reproach of exclusion gets it wrong: Christian universality, far from excluding some subjects, is formulated from the position of those excluded, of those for whom there is no specific place within the existing order, although they belong to it; universality is strictly codependent with this lack of specific place/determination (2006a; 2006e, p. 167).

Second, Zizek invites theologians of liberation to retune their theological analysis in the light of neoliberal capitalist-driven globalization.²⁷ Zizek reminds us that the ultimate horizon of our theological understanding is still class struggle and inequalities wrought about by late capitalism. Liberation theologians should break the *denkverbot* and state of exception against all radical criticisms contra capitalism. Today to oppose capitalism is considered passé. Any radical questioning of capitalism bears the suspicion that the future might lead to another Gulag or Auschwitz. It seems that the ideological fantasy enveloping academic critique

²⁷ Some theologians such as Franz Hinkelammert, Hugo Assmann, Julio de Santa Ana and Jung Mo Sung, are trying to rethink liberation theology in the light of these new economic realities. Jung Mo Sung has shown that liberation theology, although it has socio-analytical mediation as the first step of its method, has in fact largely overlooked the economy in its analysis.

today is: if you're not for capitalism, then, you are for Stalinist totalitarianism.²⁸ And this ideological fantasy, which equates any revolution to Stalinism, dissolves the universal antagonism between Left and Right. Today, the end-of-ideology prophets proclaim that the real battle is between modern rationality and postmodern politics. Socialism and capitalism are considered as metaphysically equivalent (2000c, p. 16).

On the other hand, while some sympathetic critics think that liberation theology should veer away from class analysis (Petrella, 2004), Zizek reminds us that class struggle is the Real of social order.²⁹ Class struggle as the Real of society is the "absent cause" that prevents society from establishing absolute harmony. There

²⁸ We therefore disagree with Daniel M. Bell's (2001) sympathetic critique of liberation theology, that capitalism must be defined in terms of its logic of control and desire. This is reminiscent of the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental logic of capitalism. This merely sidesteps (which Bell of course advocates) the issue of state and power. This is just a step away from those who argue, like Adorno and Horkheimer, that socialism and capitalism are just the same species cloned from instrumental rationality of modernity (see Zizek, 2000a, p. 157).

²⁹ Sympathetic critics like Vashum (2005) and others (see Petrella, 2005) follow the popular cultural turn and accuse liberation theologians of ignoring the culture of the people. While this critic is laudable, we think that theologians must be wary of overemphasizing culture to the detriment of political economy. As Peter Scott (2001) points out, by focusing on local cultures, we may not be opposing capitalism. Zizek is very scathing in his criticisms against liberal and postmodern account of multiculturalism. Zizek is not against cultural tolerance per se. What he deplores is that "when you buy this multiculturalist tolerance, you buy many other things with it. Isn't it symptomatic that multiculturalism exploded at the very historic moment when the last traces of working-class politics disappeared from political space? For many former leftists, this multiculturalism is a kind of ersatz working-class politics. We don't even know whether the working class still exists, so let's talk about exploitation of others" (interview with Reul and Deichmann, 2001). Zizek's point is echoed in Ian Linden's essay on the contemporary relevance of liberation theology: "any project of liberation and transformation that is unable to transcend the local, even national, level to challenge real concentrations of power outside and above these levels, is doomed to complete or partial failure" (p. 20). Another counterproductive move is to oppose liberation theology with Christian eco-spirituality. We agree with Lampe (1999:3) that the most threatened species today are human beings themselves due to global poverty and inequality. Rather than seeing socialism as opposed to ecology, theologians of creation should look at harmony of creation is impossible within the neoliberal capitalist framework.

is therefore no place outside it (Wright and Wright, 1999b, p. 75). Many liberation theologians, in their haste to make liberation theology up-to-date and palatable to post-socialist struggles – ethnic struggle, gay and lesbian rights, indigenous peoples struggle, and so on – end up depoliticizing its critique.³⁰ Zizek contends:

Today's blockade is that there are two ways open for the sociopolitical engagement: either play the game of the system – “engage in the long march through the institutions” – or get involved in new social movements, from feminism through ecology to antiracism. And again, the limit of these movements is that they are not political in the sense of the universal singular: they are “one-issue movements” lacking the dimension of universality—that is, they do not relate to the social totality (2001d).

Zizek of course is not denouncing other forms of struggle.³¹ Neither is he reducing everything to class struggle.³² But, like

³⁰ Rosemary Bradford Ruether (2005) observes, “What has happened to Latin American liberation theology in the last 15 years is not that it has dried up, but rather that it has greatly diversified. It was criticized for being too narrowly focused on class and economic hierarchies and neglecting other dimensions of social relations, such as race, ethnicity and gender. In the last two decades this has been rectified by a great flowering of Latin American feminist theology, all of which sees itself as rooted in liberation theology but expanding through the new recognition of gender hierarchies. Likewise there has been since 1992 a flowering of indigenous theologies, or *teologia india*, with many *encuentros* (meetings) across Latin America, especially in the Andean region.

³¹ In another occasion Zizek writes, “the first task today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things... but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. If today, one follows a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space – it will be an act within the hegemonic ideological coordinates: those ‘who really want to do some thing to help people’ get involved in... exploits like *Medicins sans Frontieres*, Greenpeace, feminist and anti-racist campaigns, which are all not only tolerated, but even supported by the media, even if they seemingly enter economic territory (say, denouncing and boycotting companies that do not respect ecological conditions or that use child labour) – they are tolerated and supported as long as they do not get too close to a certain limit” (p. 238).

³² Zizek here targets “corporate multiculturalism” or “Benetton multiculturalism” that perfectly fits the global market. In contrast, Zizek opts for “critical multiculturalism” as a strategy that unites common forces against various forms of oppression (2002a, p. 172; see also Zizek, 2004c).

Paul's universality, Zizek is advocating for a wholesale and global replacement of capitalism that could not be addressed by other non-class-based struggles (2000a, p. 159). Nestor Miguez (2006), writing on the development of Latin American Biblical scholarship captures the proper Zizekian approach to multiculturalism. He advocates for the plurality of subjects within Biblical reading, yet there should emerge a single vision.

But I want also to bring in some concern that we find in many biblical circles and communities about this diversity. Because, on the one hand, it has to be considered and honored. But on the other hand it endangers the need of an inclusive view. It risks shattering people in so many pieces that inhibits solidarity, that fragmentation becomes a hindrance to joint action, that partial vindications are played by dominant powers, one against the other. Poor against poor: we are seeing that already. A new challenge is open for our popular reading of the Bible: the need to identify the different subjects and build identities and the dignity of each, but at the same time, find the links that permit the body to keep coordinated, the unity to be kept and the network of social solidarity to be rebuilt.³³

Against the populist and "corporate multiculturalist" tendencies, we are compelled here, apropos Benjamin's theses on history, to REPEAT Juan Luis Segundo's *crux theologica*. In 1975 essay, Juan Luis Segundo (1980) posed the theological crux: "*Capitalism versus Socialism: Crux Theologica*." Today, Peter Scott, like true historicists, still leaves the issue open. Scott is looking for another crux theological for today.³⁴ For us the opposition between socialism and capitalism still stands as the *crux theologica* of our age. Of course capitalism today has changed. It is not the

³³ Here, we agree with Bell (2001) that Christianity can offer a counter ethos (understood in Heideggerian sense as dwelling) against the values of neoliberal capitalism.

³⁴ Peter Scott suggests that we go beyond the socialism of liberation theology and the end of history of postliberal theology. Yes, Scott is right that we must historicize this opposition. Both of these are products of specific social formations. Yet Scott misses the most important point: that capitalism is still the frame that determines this historicity. (p. 52). Hence, like Zizek, we sharply distinguish between historicism (of Scott and poststructuralists) and historicity.

same with capitalism twenty years ago.³⁵ This is where liberation theologians should focus on. How do we do liberation theology in cyberspace capitalism or hypercapitalism? How do we proclaim the Good News to the poor in the borderless world created by the unprecedented flow of capital?

By positioning theology squarely with neo-liberal-driven globalization, theologians can unmask those religions that serve as fetishes for poor people. In Europe and United States Zizek singles out New Age and Western Buddhism. In third world countries we have what Claudio Oliveira (p. 307), a Methodist minister in Baixada Fluminense (Rio de Janeiro), Brazil, as "prosperity theology" of Evangelical Christianity.

Third, Zizek's call for Christians and communists to stand in the same barricade renews the theologians' commitment to reconsider the possibility of collaboration for the sake of liberation. We will not deal here with renewing the reservations of the Catholic Church against appropriation of Marxist analysis. Suffice it to say that if we, Christians will stand side-by-side with Marxists like Zizek and Alain Badiou, we stand nothing to lose. After all, Zizek and Badiou follow St. Paul's radical indifference to differences in the name of universality.³⁶

Liberation theology, like Marxism, is one of the few counter-ideologies to the idols of global capitalism. As Armando Lampe (1999) argues,

Precisely because neoliberal paradigm is predominant, it condemns all those who think from the perspective of the excluded ones, liberation theology is relevant due to its words that come from the excluded world... therefore liberation theology remains important as one of the few counter-ideologies that question the supremacy of neoliberalism (p. 335).

³⁵ For analysis, see Harvey (1997; 2001); Amin (2000; 2004); Lash and Urry (1994); Greider (1997).

³⁶ Badiou (2001) writes apropos Paul: "But in order for people to become gripped by truth, it is imperative that universality not present itself under the aspect of a particularity. Differences can be transcended only if benevolence with regard to customs and opinions present itself as an indifference that tolerates differences, one whose sole material test lies, as Paul says, in being able and knowing how to practice them oneself (p. 99).

Lastly, Zizek's challenge to Christianity to give up its own hard core, to sacrifice itself, echoes the challenge of many Marxist theoreticians who engaged in the dialogue with Christian theologians in the sixties. What is new in Zizek is that he clothes this challenge within the Lacanian discourse. Of course we cannot follow Zizek's radical Lacanian suggestion of eliminating God as the Big Other.³⁷ But we agree that Christ death on the cross formed a new community guided by the Holy Spirit. The death of God and the resurrection of the community is echoed in Pablo Richard's definition of Christian solidarity. If globalization augments the scourges of social fragmentation and exclusion, then the concrete form in which resistance takes shape is through the practice of solidarity. Solidarity, for Richard,

is the capacity to construct within the system a cultural, ethical and spiritual resistance to the total market system itself. Solidarity with the life of the excluded and with nature constructs a culture of life, against the system's culture of death (quoted in).

We do not believe that Christianity must give up its secret – except its idolatrous secret (in Jean-Luc Marion's sense). To the contrary, we want to follow here the Lacanian reversal: it is only by keeping its secret that Christianity can be the light to the world. As Pablo Richard argues,

if the church were capable of reconstructing the identity of its origins and recovering the strength of the Word of its first communities, then the Word of God would be today life and hope for the majority of humanity excluded from all life and hope, and also for the cosmos that groans stricken by humans' "progress."

Finally, Zizek challenges Christians to "hope against all hopes." Interestingly, even liberation theologians are not immune

³⁷ One of course can defend Zizek, following Jean Luc Marion (2001), by suggesting that Zizek is eliminating the traditional god-idol of Christian onto-theology with the metaphor of the icon. Or, Zizek's radical denial of God as Big Other can also be interpreted as the radical kenosis of God advanced by Vattimo (1999). In short, can't we claim that Zizek is advancing an *aphopathic* theology? A theology *via negativa*.

from the current pessimism regarding the unopposed triumphal march of global capitalism. Hugo Assman, for instance, seems to be pessimistic about apocalyptic end of capitalism: He considers that once the concept of a "final victory" is gone, "The challenge is to know how to live together with that ambiguity [no more revolution] and not to fall into the temptation of apocalyptic deceit. To cope with the absence of definitive solutions" (quoted in Kater, 2001).

Amidst the pessimism of our age that nothing radical can happen, Zizek reminds us that the ultimate answer to the reproach that leftist proposals for a radical transformation are utopian and unrealistic should be that the 'true utopia' is the belief that the present liberal-democratic capitalist consensus could go on indefinitely, without major disasters and/or radical change. So in order to be truly a 'realist', one must consider breaking out of the constraints of what appears 'possible' or 'feasible' today, that is by opting for the impossible, that is for that what seems impossible or 'utopian' today (2001c, p. 24).³⁸ According to Zizek the old 1968 motto, "*Soyons realistes, demandons l'impossible!*", still holds. The only 'realistic' prospect is to hold on to this impossible utopian place of the global alternative, holding this place open – even if it remains empty, living on borrowed time, awaiting the content to fill in (Moleenaar, 2004, p. 272).

Of course with the collapse of the Berlin Wall the old revolutionary aspirations of radical Christians had been undermined (Scott, 2001, p. 53). Yet against such pessimism and resignation, Zizek affirms Hegel's dictum "that a political movement gains victory when it splits" (2002b, p. 270). The triumph of liberal democracy against its enemy (Communist "Evil Empire") is in itself the moment of confrontation with its immanent limit. In the era of globalization there are emerging signs of the New that could not

³⁸ Zizek refuses to yield to the fatalistic resignation of Third Way gurus who think that capitalism is here to stay so we have to humanize it: "The rise of global capitalism is presented to us as such a Fate, against which one cannot fight; one either adapts oneself to it or one falls out of step with history and is crushed. The only thing one can do is to make global capitalism as human as possible, to fight for global capitalism with a human face (this is what, ultimately, the Third Way is or, rather, was about) (Zizek, 2004a).

be integrated into the existing ideological frameworks (20063, p. 34). This is where liberation theology gains added currency. For the New is nothing but the eruption of the kingdom of God in history. Hence Zizek counsels the Left (and radical Christians as well) "not to give way":

it [the Left] must preserve the traces of all historical traumas, dreams and catastrophes which the ruling ideology of the "End of History" would prefer to obliterate – it must become itself their living monument, so that as long as the Left is here, these traumas are marked. Such an attitude, far from confining the Left within nostalgic infatuation with the past, is the only possibility for attaining a distance on the present, a distance which will enable us to discern signs of the New (2002b, p. 273).

If a Paulinian materialist atheist can cling to last strand of hope, Christians should even more be hopeful. We agree with Zizek's interpretation of Christian Messianism. The Messiah had arrived and therefore the space for struggle is now open. Ribeiro (1999) puts up a parallel analysis:

This raises the question of the power of the poor and of the option for them. In the 1970s and 1980s, especially in Brazil, many groups and theologians were expecting to see power coming from poor people's movements. Enthusiasm was great, and there were many cooperative efforts by popular movements hoping for real and lasting change. It has not happened. The situation of the poor in the 1990s has not improved but worsened. The power of neo-liberalism has brought a feeling of powerlessness, weakness and despair among the poor as the possibilities of social changes have not been realized. Now more than ever, the option for the poor must be grasped. This option means being committed in costly ways, living a life of instability and risk, without a chance to be in power or to get power. It is a spiritual and a prophetic calling to follow the way of Christ (pp. 310-11).

Or in the words of the Costa Rican theologian Vitorio Araya:

The worst that can happen in times of desperation is not to have hope; in times of darkness, not to trust in the light. In the depth of darkness we should always have in our minds,

as St. John's prologue says... "The light-life of God came to the world and dwelt among us." ...In the midst of history and its prolonged darkness, the light continues shining. The darkness could not dominate it or put it out (quoted in Kater).

Our hope is also made alive through the "memory of the poor" in the biblical narratives:

The idolatry of the market, exclusion and 'one way thinking', are the bloodthirsty powers that are shaping our world today. People do not matter, only commodities. Not even real commodities, but financial commodities that set the pace of life. How long can this go on without provoking a human shock, a total crisis? Is there a way out that can avoid hurting once again the weak, the eternal victims of injustice? How can hope, love and faith be kept in situations of exclusion and denial of the humanity of the victims? How can real everyday life be found meaningful in a context of stress, of bare survival, of increasing structural, criminal and spontaneous violence? We have no clear answer ...once again we will go to our biblical narratives with hope and anguish (Miguez, 2006, p. 129).

Zizek of course will not follow Miguez's return to the Bible. Zizek rather invokes Walter Benjamin's thesis on history. By interpreting Benjamin's thesis on history via the Lacanian lens, Zizek interprets all forms of revolution as the return of the symptoms, the return of "past failed revolutionary attempts, forgotten, excluded from the frame of the reigning historical tradition" (2006e, p. 102). Every revolution therefore is a REPETITION. Or as Zizek puts it, "Revolutions "delivers" the past failed attempts by repeating them in their "possibility", it retroactively realizes their potentials which were crushed in the victorious course of "official history" (1992, p. 80).³⁹

³⁹ Following Kierkegaard, Zizek favors REPETITION rather than REMEMBRANCE: "we do not transpose ourselves into the spirit of the past from a standpoint external, neutral gaze; the past appears in its openness, in its possibility, only to those whose present situation is threatened by the same abyss, who are caught in the same deadlock" (1992, p. 79). This is how we want to understand REPEATING JUAN LUIS SEGUNDO and the attempt of liberation theologians to transform evil structures.

In conclusion, we believe that our reading of Zizek, as a theologian and as a sociologist, has renewed our commitment to the original impetus of liberation theology: solidarity with the poor and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. For us Zizek provides a fresh breeze of optimism in an age when talk about radical social change – both local and global – is prohibited – *denkverbot*.

Zizek made us realize the truth in G.K. Chesterton's (1955) approach in defending Christianity against outsiders: "the next best thing to being really outside Christendom is to be really outside it. And a particular point of it is that the popular critics of Christianity are not really outside it." By engaging with an outsider, a "fighting atheist," we realized the spark of truth in these enigmatic words of Chesterton: "when we do make this imaginative effort to see the whole thing [Christianity] from the outside, we find that it is really looks like what is traditionally said about it inside" (p. 12). From the inside, we engaged ourselves passionately with Zizek's Lacanian unmasking of Christianity's secret. Like Chesterton, of course, we are not impartial. We are believers who accept the truth of Christianity, not just its formal meanings, Christians with deep sympathy for liberation theology. By engaging with an outsider's "queer" theology (Knight, 2005) "we find that it [Christianity] really looks like what is traditionally said about it inside" – that is, indeed, "Christian legacy is worth fighting for" in the age of unbridled global capitalism and New Age occultism.⁴⁰ □

⁴⁰ Prof. Sarah Raymundo, Gerry Lanuza's colleague at the Department of Sociology, suggested that our use of Chesterton's dictum may be awry. She suggests that Zizek may not be outside of Christianity but indeed an insider. We don't have enough space to discuss this very important point. At the risk baptizing Zizek reluctantly to Christianity, we, for now, let him circle in the limbo of belief.