On Materialist Theology:

Thinking God Beyond the Master Signifier

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In 2008, I published a book entitled *Žižek and Theology*.[1] In retrospect, it turned out to be a particularly fortuitous time to write a work on the theme of Žižek's use of theology. On the one hand, over the course of three books on Christianity, Žižek had arrived at a consistent view of the true meaning of Christian theology. On the other hand, he had just completed his self-declared "magnum opus," *The Parallax View*,[2] in which he consolidated his intellectual project in a new way. Accordingly, I chose to focus my work on an account of Žižek's intellectual development that highlighted the importance of his engagement with Christian theology as a kind of "hinge" between his earlier work and the more mature position reached in *The Parallax View*.

My goal in the present essay is to extend and deepen my account of the importance of theology in Žižek's work by responding to two persistent—and, in my view, completely justified—criticisms of *Žižek and Theology*. First, readers have criticized me for focusing too strictly on the interpretation of Žižek's work without applying his theological approach constructively. Second, they have rightly pointed out that my account of Žižek's development of "dialectical materialism" in *The Parallax View* did not seem to be as clearly connected to my previous argument as it could have been. Reflecting on these critiques, I have come to believe that they are closely related. In order to connect *The Parallax View*'s ontology and ethics— themselves interrelated—to theology, it was not sufficient to provide an expository account. Instead, I should have set the concepts to work theologically, or to put it differently, I should

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[1] Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2008).
[2] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

have set the concepts loose into theology. That is what I propose to do here, focusing on the relationship between dialectical materialism and the "death of God."

I.

In *The Parallax View*, Žižek speaks of his project as a rehabilitation of "dialectical materialism," a goal that he associates both with the revival of Marxist movements and with the retrieval of the German Idealist attempt to develop the "System of Liberty."[3] Continually and variously applying his core concepts of the parallax gap and the death drive, he develops this project along several different axes, arguably the most innovative of which is his intervention into the field of cognitive science. Yet this self-proclaimed "magnum opus" also recapitulates and extends developments from earlier in his intellectual trajectory, including his focus on subjectivity as negativity, his insistence that a truly emancipatory politics must "tarry with the negative," and—perhaps distressingly for some readers—his engagement with Christian theology.

On the latter front, he devotes the entire second chapter to assembling "building-blocks for a materialist theology." There he follows a pattern that had already appeared in what I regard as the most fully realized of his three books on Christianity, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*,[4] and is later repeated in his most recent engagement with theology, his contributions to *The Monstrosity of Christ*.[5] He begins with a kind of internal critique of a Christian thinker, in this case Kierkegaard. Although he finds a great deal to like about the thinker, Žižek is ultimately using him as a foil, showing how he falls short of the true radical core of the Christian message, namely Hegel's particular vision of the "death of God," which opens up the door to the only

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[3] Žižek, *Parallax View*, 4-5.
[4] Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
[5] Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity" and "Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

authentic atheism. Žižek then draws various ontological conclusions from this position, along with more or less explicit ethical consequences. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, the primary Christian interlocutor is G. K. Chesterton, and in *The Monstrosity of Christ* he continues to discuss Chesterton while adding Meister Eckhart. Though the details obviously change, the overall pattern is the same: the point of engaging with representatives of "actual existing" Christianity (even more or less marginal ones) is to set in relief Christianity's revelation of the "death of God," which itself is ultimately important not as a matter of religion or dogmatics but as a way of getting at the shape of the world we live in and the ethics that best responds to it.

The ontology toward which Žižek is pointing in all of these writings is, of course, his version of dialectical materialism. Yet this brand of materialism is also a theological one in some sense, or is at least developed out of a "materialist theology." In order to clarify what is going on here, I will not proceed by textual exegesis, but will instead take the risk of systematizing his work and bring together various principles that I have seen to be at work in my reading of Žižek, using a dialectical form of argument to arrive at dialectical materialism.

Let us begin with the ontology that is broadly characteristic of traditional Christianity. The two key components are God and creation, and they are related in two main ways. On the one hand, they are related negatively, as opposites: God is eternal while creation is temporal, God is infinite while creation is finite, etc. In short, we can derive the characteristics of God by taking what we know about creation and simply reversing it. On the other hand, God founds and sustains creation, even going so far as to develop an economy of salvation when it falls into sin. The logic here is identical to that of the "master signifier" or "constitutive exception"—God founds creation while being exempt from all the limitations of creation. What's more, God reflects the tautologous character of the "master signifier," insofar as God is the point where the

quest for explanation ends. The fact that we generally think of God in this way whether we believe in God or not can be seen in the debate over creationism. While creationists are forever claiming that the complexity of the world requires some transcendent explanation, it is relatively seldom that one hears the obvious retort that such a maneuver only exacerbates the problem: if the complexity of the universe requires explanation, surely the existence of a being who could create it is in need of *even more* explanation. The creationist's logic, which prevents this question from even arising, is ultimately tautologous. God doesn't exist because of some outside cause, God exists *because God exists*. Similarly, in the last resort, the answer to the question of why we should care what God thinks is *"because he's God."* In sum, in the traditional Christian ontology, God is the constitutive exception to the created order, the one who negates it on every level and yet declares it "very good."

Materialism, in its most common or "vulgar" form, dispenses with God, leaving only the "very good" world. Yet for Žižek, the function of the master signifier remains very much in place, finding ever-new forms—ranging from the unalterable laws of Newtonian physics to the "historical necessity" that justified the crimes of Stalin. Particularly in the realm of evolutionary theory, the narrative of scientific progress is often thought to be one of overcoming theological prejudices, but from a Žižekian perspective, the conflict between Genesis and Darwin is a superficial one that masks a deeper complicity. Vulgar materialism wants to have a well-defined, self-consistent world, and for Žižek, the only way to achieve that is through some kind of constitutive exception, meaning that this particular form of atheism nonetheless remains traditionally theological in form. And indeed, it is possible that the perceived conflict between faith and modern science may never have arisen if not for a certain stubbornness on the part of church officials, whose betrayal of the heritage of allegorical interpretation set up a fatal

collision between the findings of empirical research and a flat-footed and unimaginative reading of Scripture. Healing that breach is in fact a major goal both of Pope Benedict XVI and of his Anglo-Catholic allies, the theologians of the Radical Orthodoxy school. Both argue that faith in God is necessary to found reason, and both miss the fact that modern scientific reason, at least as popularly understood, already has the "God" it needs in the form of a master signifier, whether that be the law of nature or even the notion of "the world" as such.

In a sense, then, vulgar materialism is always also theological materialism, even if its master signifier or "God" goes under different names. This is not simply a matter of "leftover" theological influences that must be purged—even if Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens succeeded in convincing literally everyone on earth to abandon Christianity and indeed every historical religion, and even if all memory of the existence of the historical religions could somehow be erased, the essentially theological structure of vulgar materialism would remain.

The way forward is not to continue to negate "faith" in favor of "reason," but to take a step back and negate the very frame that allows us to distinguish between "faith" and "reason." Žižek believes that he has found that negation in Hegel's understanding of the significance of Christ's death on the cross. Where the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity attempted to ensure that there was some aspect of divinity that was not caught up in the Incarnation, Hegel claims that the Father's self-emptying of his divinity into Christ the Son is both complete and irreversible. On the cross, then, divinity empties out into the world in the form of the Holy Spirit, which is the bond of the Christian community. Žižek does place considerable importance on the notion of the Holy Spirit as a new form of social bond that would escape the ideological structure founded on the master signifier, but for my present purposes, it is more important to focus on the incarnation itself. I have pointed out that for traditional Christianity, God is the negation of the world, and if

Christ really is fully divine, that means that he represents the entry of that negativity *into* the world. His death on the cross as "death of God" obviously marks the definitive end of God as foundation of the world. As a consequence, the very negation that God had cordoned off into a transcendent realm flows out into the world, shaking it to the core and opening up a wound that will never heal. This could sound like a mytho-poetic elaboration, but it is important not to lose sight of the logical consequence of the "death of God"—it is not just that there is no longer a God, but there is also no more *world*.

When God dies, that means that the master signifier that gave the world its coherence is gone. Instead of the familiar picture of a solid world governed by inalienable laws, one is left with a shattered, inconsistent, internally conflictual world. As Žižek says, drawing on the Lacanian *pas-tout*, meaning non-all or non-whole: "for the materialist, the 'openness' goes all the way down, that is, necessity is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances—it is the 'All' itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by an irreducible contingency."[6] Pushing Kierkegaard in a materialist direction, he goes on to claim that "Kierkegaard's God is strictly correlative to the ontological openness of reality, to our relating to reality as unfinished, 'in becoming.' 'God' is the name for the Absolute Other against which we can measure the thorough contingency of reality—as such, it cannot be conceived as any kind of Substance, as the Supreme Thing (that would again make him part of Reality, its true Ground)."[7] In other words, within the truly materialist frame, God is not the constraining figure we had to banish in order to get the world. Instead, God names the very contingency and inconsistency of the world as such.

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[6] Žižek, *Parallax View*, 79.
[7] Žižek, *Parallax View*, 79.

At this point, an obvious objection arises: once we've reached this point, why do we need to maintain the reference to theology? The answer is that the temptation to reinstall some kind of "big Other" is remarkably persistent even among those who are consciously trying to escape it, as the example of vulgar materialism makes clear. Preserving the reference to Christianity, or at least Hegel's version of it, is valuable insofar as we will always need to be reminded of the "death of God." Particular master signifiers "die" all the time, always to be replaced by something else, but Christianity gives us something unique: a master signifier that disavows itself. As Chesterton tells us and as Žižek never tires of repeating, the gospels presents us with a God who himself becomes an atheist, a God who cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Within the frame of orthodox theology, it's difficult not to conclude that God the Father really *has* forsaken Christ, remaining transcendently uninvolved as he suffers and dies— even if the Father sweeps in on the third day to raise him to glory, the abandonment of the cross and the grave is all too real. Many contemporary theologians, most prominently Jürgen Moltmann, would claim that we need to think of the Father as suffering with Christ in order to avoid this monstrosity, but in the Hegelian frame, the solution is actually to make things worse. As Žižek says, "When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in 'Father, why hast thou forsaken me?': the hope that there *is* a father who has abandoned me."[8] That hope is among the most durable features of human experience, and Žižek's retelling of the Christian mythos provides a way to crush it ever afresh.

II.

The picture so far seems rather grim, and so I expect some of my readers may be asking themselves why we should accept Žižek's vision of dialectical materialism. The answer, most fundamentally, is that it is the only way to gain access to truth—albeit by first noting that we

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[8] Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 171.

have no access to "truth" in the way we are accustomed to think of it, because there is no such thing. While all of this sounds very abstract, Žižek believes that in principle it matches up with the picture of the world that is emerging at the frontiers of quantum physics and that he believes is suggested by research into cognitive science. In fact, Žižek is generally very optimistic about science, believing that it does give us some kind of account of the Real. This is possible not because he embraces a naïve notion of scientific objectivity or disinterestedness, but because he believes that the pursuit of knowledge can be an end in itself, enjoyed for its own sake. This enjoyment gives the scientist access to a truth unmediated by any master signifier, and so dialectical materialism is the unconscious practice of science at its best, even if the odds of practicing scientists embracing Žižek's philosophy seem slim.

I have already written elsewhere about my interest in the ethics that grows out of Žižek's dialectical materialism, which was in fact what first drew me to his work in a serious way.[9] In the remainder of this essay, I would like to turn to the question that I left largely unanswered in *Žižek and Theology*: what does Žižek's use of theology in his project mean for theology? I have tried to show what Žižek's version of a Hegelian "death of God" theology is doing for his own project, but what further use could be made of it? Žižek's own critique of orthodoxy in *The Monstrosity of Christ* points in an interesting direction, one that I would like to expand on here: namely, it points toward a way of thinking God outside of the framework of the "constitutive exception."

As I have already noted above, traditional Christian theology has tended to think of God in terms of the "constitutive exception," and as Žižek points out, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity was motivated in part by a desire to reconcile belief in the full divinity of Christ

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[9] See Adam Kotsko, "The Christian Experience Continues: On Žižek's Work Since *The Parallax View*," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4.4 (2010): 1-9.

with the conviction that God must be impassible or unchangeable, that is, to preserve "God-Father" as the one who "continues to pull the strings [and] is not really caught in the process" of divine kenosis.[10] My purpose here is not to critique the doctrine of the Trinity as such, whose development was of course overdetermined and whose "final" version has many features that continue to be productive of thought. Rather, I wish to suggest that the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity was so hard-won counts as prima facie evidence that the Hellenistic notion of an eternal impassible God (i.e., a God who acts as "constitutive exception" to the creative order) and the Christian narrative of God's kenosis in Christ do not obviously go together. Some theologians might claim that such a contradiction is unavoidable as we finite humans seek to know the infinite God, etc., but I agree with Žižek's rejection of the notion of paradox, believing that, like its close cousin "mystery," it too often serves to indicate where a theologian gave up—and indeed, the notion of paradox often serves to shore up a concept of God as "constitutive exception," as when conservative theologians would have us believe that God disrupts our expectations sheerly for the sake of doing so. The counterintuitive has its place in theology as in all disciplines, but it must *lead somewhere*, or else it devolves into simple intellectual laziness.

In discussing the possibility of a thinking of God that escapes the logic of the "constitutive exception"—in other words, the possibility of a non-all or non-whole God—I would like to turn to two of the most influential texts of the Christian tradition: Augustine's *Confessions* and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Divine Names*.[11] My reason for taking this approach is a reflection of my own theological method—I prefer to be able to find some ground in the tradition if at all possible, both out of a fear of indulging in sheer speculation and out of a

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[10] Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity*, 29.

[11] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961); Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, ed. Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist, 1987). Further citations from these works will be provided in-text, following standard textual divisions.

conviction that the Christian tradition is, if we read closely enough, consistently stranger than we expect it to be.

Augustine's *Confessions* provide a prime example of this strangeness. In his concluding commentary on the first creation account in Genesis, he devotes two full books to the first two verses, spending much of Book XI on a discussion of the nature of time and turning in Book XII to the possible referents of the "heaven and earth" of Genesis 1:1. While acknowledging that the common sense reading that refers them to the familiar sky and ground is plausible and has its own truth and utility, Augustine believes that it is more fitting to assume that the "heaven" of Genesis 1:1 refers to the "heaven of heavens," a purely intellectual realm characterized by closeness to God, and the "earth" refers to "formless matter entirely without feature" (XII.3). Augustine is deeply perplexed by this formless matter:

> …reason told me that if I wished to conceive of something that was formless in the true sense of the word, I should have to picture something deprived of any trace of form whatsoever, and this I was unable to do. For I could sooner believe that what had no form at all simply did not exist than imagine matter in an intermediate stage between form and non-existence, some formless thing that was next to being nothing at all (XII.6).

As Catherine Keller points out in *Face of the Deep*,[12] Augustine's attempt to pin down this formless matter leads him into interesting contradictions, which she mobilizes in her attempt to disprove the doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo*. Perhaps the most interesting for my purposes is the path that he must follow in order to understand formless matter:

> So I gave up trying to find a solution in my imagination, which produced a whole series of pictures of ready-made shapes, shuffling them and rearranging them at will. Instead I

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[12] Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003). See especially 75-77.

turned my attention to material things and looked more closely in to the question of their

mutability, that is, the means by which they cease to be what they have been and begin to

be what they have not been (XII.6).

This retreat from images exactly echoes his struggle, detailed at great length throughout the

Confessions, to understand God as something other than a body, but in this case it leads him not

to the perfect changelessness of God, but to changeability as such. This is a strange overlap, but

the fundamental difference between God and formless matter is clear: God is *above* form, while

the primordial matter is *below* it.

A similar logic is at work in Pseudo-Dionysius's account of evil as deprivation of good.

The language that this mysterious author uses to describe evil can in many cases overlap with the

language he uses to describe the God who is beyond being, as when he claims that evil "has a

greater nonexistence and otherness from the Good than nonbeing has" (IV.19)—like God, evil is

beyond affirmation and negation. But again, the difference between the two is clear: God is

above being, while evil is below it. Indeed, the Areopagite is unsparing in his denigration of evil:

"It is a defect, a deficiency, a weakness, a disproportion, a sin. It is purposeless, ugly, lifeless,

mindless, unreasonable, imperfect, unfounded, uncaused, indeterminate, unborn, inert,

powerless, disordered" (IV.32).

This insistence is interesting in itself: could anyone fail to recognize that evil is, in fact,

evil? Pseudo-Dionysius does refer to the metaphysical dualism that, in the form of the various

Gnostic sects, would be a perpetual adversary to Christianity (IV.21), but I would suggest that he

is here reacting to the logic of his own text, which leads to a kind of overlap between his purely

negative account of evil and his negative theology. That is not the only problem he faces with

regard to evil, however—he must deal with the problem that haunts all hierarchical ontologies: if

evil is deprivation of being, then it becomes difficult to resist the temptation to declare beings that fall lower on the scale to be somehow inherently evil. Pseudo-Dionysius is much more consistent than Augustine in resisting this temptation, absolutely affirming the participation of even inert matter in the Good and declaring unequivocally that "the evil in souls does not owe its origin to matter but comes from disorder and error" (IV.28). Even seemingly inherently evil beings such as demons are good insofar as they exist, but "are evil insofar as they have fallen away from the virtues proper to them" (IV.34).

Evil beings are evil, then, not because they lack being—every particular being is lacking in the superabundance of God's being. Rather, they are evil because they have fallen from what they should be, which seems to mean their place in the ontological hierarchy that gives the created world its order and stability. Differences in degree within the hierarchy are appointed by God for the benefit of the world as a whole, whereas the differences caused by evil fall outside of God's plan and threaten the stability of the world.

Bringing together Augustine's reflections on formless matter and Pseudo-Dionysius's account of evil, we might say that evil is a change in form that goes against God's order, while good or divine action is a change in form that reinforces it. Both necessarily involve the moment of formlessness that Augustine detects in the transition between forms, and both can lead to good results—as Pseudo-Dionysius says, God's providence can make use of evil (IV.33), a statement with which Augustine would surely agree. More broadly, it seems impossible to conceive of God as acting otherwise than by means of change, given that creation is inherently subject to change insofar as it is not divine. Even assuming that God's creation had remained in its initial state, as Augustine believes the "heaven of heavens" to have done, the very fact of being created would

be a change, a fact that Augustine expresses mytho-poetically in the (non)image of formless matter.

The only difference between evil change and good change, then, seems to be the initial reference to God as the guarantor of the world's order, that is, to God insofar as he serves as the constitutive exception of the world. Taking a step beyond Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius's explicit intentions, if we remove God as master-signifier, we are left with changeability as such as simultaneously the foundation and the perpetual unfounding of the world—that is, essentially the same result that Žižek, following Hegel, claims for the incarnation and death of Christ. My point here is not simply to replicate Žižek's results from within the tradition, but instead to demonstrate a potential approach to the tradition for a materialist theology. Here I am extending Žižek's strategy of reading (normally marginal) figures in the history of theology as pushing toward dialectical materialism but falling short. By pushing this approach into even the most central figures of the tradition, I am claiming that we need to take seriously the possibility that when great minds such as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius attempt to think through the implications of Christianity with real rigor, they will, despite their cultural prejudices and philosophical leanings, necessarily end up at least laying the groundwork for an understanding of God as non-All.

A research agenda starting from that hypothesis would, for example, make the vast literature on evil as deprivation available in a new way—not as a direct presentation of "correct" views, of course, but as tools to think with. More broadly, it would force us to reconceive what theology is and does. A materialist theology that rejected the authority of God as master signifier would necessarily be deprived of the institutional standing that currently founds the distinction between Christian theology and philosophy, a development that from my perspective would be

all to the good. Instead of posing as the transmitters of the unchanging truths of God, either for or in opposition to a changing world, theologians would essentially be philosophers working from within a particular tradition, just as other philosophers work from within phenomenology or psychoanalysis. Standing in that tradition would no more predetermine their conclusions than Žižek's use of Lacan and Hegel predetermines his, as he reveals with particular candor in *The Indivisible Remainder*.[13] Instead of reflection on a body of doctrine, then, materialist theology would be an intellectual tradition that avows the double meaning of *tradere* as "to hand on" and "to betray"—a loyalty that finds its best expression in a rigorous infidelity.

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[13] See Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996), particularly chapter 2.