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“Žižek’s Materialist Trinitarianism”

Slavoj Žižek writes of miracles. From the pen of anyone else, such ideas might seem like so much fodder for a mid-1990s Robin Williams movie, but Žižek inhabits a world that is if anything more foregone than the one Eliot so precisely captured in verse. [My original introduction used a quote from *The Waste Land*, but I skipped it.] Born under the Yugoslav Socialist system, Žižek was instrumental in bringing about its overthrow in Slovenia (*Ticklish* 207-08), only to see his nation, and indeed Eastern Europe as a whole, overrun by the machinations of capital. Yet he has devoted his philosophical career to providing the groundwork for a radical and truly emancipatory politics, of rigorously asking “the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism” (4). His first step toward addressing that question is a return to the modern concept of subjectivity, especially as that concept is developed in the work of Jacques Lacan. [And in this paper, I’m not interested in finding the “real Lacan”—I take Žižek’s word for it.]

At the same time, Žižek appropriates Pauline Christianity, and implicitly much of the rest of the Christian tradition, to his politico-philosophical project. This is for Žižek a natural outgrowth of his Marxist commitments; thus he recommends that when a Marxist is confronted with accusations of Messianism, etc., “what one should do is to reverse the strategy by *fully endorsing what one is accused of*: yes, there *is* a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism” (*Fragile 2*). [Yet] is it possible to claim sympathy with the Christian tradition while

simultaneously listing all the evils of modern capitalism and entering “the emphatic plea of ‘Not guilty!’ for the Cartesian subject” (*Ticklish* 4)? For many Christians, this provokes severe cognitive dissonance, especially in light of what has by now become a ritual among academic theologians of denouncing Descartes and modern subjectivity in general, almost as a matter of course. Instead of standing in judgment over Žižek for being “too modernist,” however, a truly Christian reading must begin with hospitality.

Robert Jenson’s work on the Trinity in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* serves to outline the contours of a possible Žižekian contribution to Christian thought. In his chapter on the Father, Jenson’s question is one that is at the heart of both the biblical witness and the Christian theological tradition: in biblical terms, “The Father is the God of Israel; The Father is one among three identities of the God of Israel. How can both of these propositions be true?” or in theological terms, “Wherein is the triune God one?” (115). Jenson reformulates these questions on the basis of his own narrative emphasis: “Is the Trinity itself a *personal* reality?” (116). After outlining a preliminary definition of a person as “one with whom other persons—the circularity is constitutive—can *converse*, whom they can *address*” (117), Jenson proposes that “modern notions of personhood appear precisely when we note that some individuals are individuated by role differentiation within narrative, and just this is what Scripture does with Father, Son, and Spirit” (118)—and, one must immediately add, with simply “God,” without specification.

From here, Jenson turns naturally to the modern concept of subjectivity, which he calls “selfhood.” He outlines “three phenomena involved in selfhood”: “what Kant taught us to call the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’” (consciousness), “the ‘I’ or ‘me,’” and “freedom, the mysterious relation between the two” (120). Although he rightly critiques modern subjectivity

for identifying the “I” with the “transcendental unity of apperception,” throughout the rest of his argument, he at least implicitly uses the same terms, although with the slight adjustment of no longer identifying the two. Thus by the end of the chapter, the Father is analogous to consciousness, the Son to the “I,” and the Spirit to freedom, while at the same time the Father can be addressed as the trinitary movement of the Father out to the Son in the freedom of the Spirit (123). Had the Father not begun this movement, Jenson claims, “he would be a sheer transcendental consciousness, unidentified and unidentifiable to himself” (122). Again, one might add, had the Father moved out to the Son from an inner compulsion rather than the freedom of the Spirit, their relationship would not have been one of freedom, but of domination, so that Jenson must later say, “the Spirit liberates the Father for the Son and the Son from and for the Father” (161). Modern subjectivity, as formulated by Jenson, “must eventually undo trinitarianism” (123), precisely because its identification of consciousness and “I” enslaves the Son to the Father, making the Trinity an economy of possession rather than of loving freedom.

That identification also undoes modern subjectivity itself, as Jenson points out (120-121). Why, then, does Jenson use the basic framework of modern subjectivity? Is he just scrapping the concept for parts, or is there some deeper sympathy between that basic framework and the doctrine of the Trinity? Although Jenson does not explicitly say so, what one sees in his chapter on the Father is not so much a scrapping of modern subjectivity as an implicit call for a correction. Žižek advances the position that Lacan’s intervention saves modern subjectivity from itself (and, I would argue, *for* trinitarian reflection). Thus Žižek’s treatment of Lacan places him not so much in the line of the great French structuralists and poststructuralists, but rather in the line of the great German Idealists. [Here I add that Karl Barth says the speculations on subjectivity of the German Idealists would have been impossible without the Trinity.]

[Here I organize my presentation around Bruce Fink's. The Lacanian theory of subjectivity begins with the determinative and alienating character of language.] Although the standard reading of Freud defines the unconscious as the space of irrational drives, for Lacan, the unconscious, this Other inside of me, is precisely the symbolic order of language, which leads him to his most famous statement: "The unconscious is structured like a language."<sup>1</sup> Language, operates independently of the subject, preceding her birth and outliving her death, and it is a wonder that she is able to call language her own at all.

The initial, "naïve" identification with language is fundamentally an identification with the mother, who at first seems to the subject to know and even anticipate the infant's every need. This gives the infant a feeling of wholeness, which is brought to completion in the mirror stage, where the infant identifies with an image of herself. That image is whole precisely insofar as it is the object of the (m)other's whole desire. Interestingly, however, the subject does not recognize the fairly obvious point that the mirror image is *not* the subject, but a false image. The only reason she is able to follow through on this identification is that she realizes that this is how she must look to the Other, which leads to Lacan's rather obtuse definition of the subject as "what one signifier represents to another signifier." [The parallelism between this definition and Jenson's definition of a person should be clear.]

A third person inevitably disturbs the binarian economy of mother and child. The child comes to understand that she is not the mother's sole object of desire, that some part of the Other's desire is taken up by someone else. This lack in the Other's desire is the minimal gap between the subject and the Other, but this lack is not simply an open space. Rather, it is filled in

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<sup>1</sup> With Lacan's "famous sayings," I follow Žižek's usage, which treats them as obvious parts of the cultural heritage that need no explicit citation. They are all repeated throughout both Lacan and Žižek's work.

by what Lacan terms object *a*. In the situation of the infant, object *a* at first represents whatever mysterious satisfaction the mother must provide to the father, but it quickly takes on a life of its own, in the end becoming that “something else” that the subject always wants, the positive bodying forth of the subject’s fundamental lack—in Žižek’s words, object *a* “as the object-cause of desire is the originally lost object: it is not only that we desire it in so far as it is lost—this object is nothing but a loss positivized” (*Ticklish* 107). The introduction of object *a* changes the situation from one of static identification to one of constant striving. The reality, of course, is that the lost wholeness was never really there to begin with. The wholeness that the subject desires is nothing but complete annihilation, being swallowed up in the Other.

Yet in a certain sense, the subject is nothing but the Other—the ego is nothing but a part of the symbolic order with which she identifies herself, her desire is imposed upon her by outside circumstances over which she has no control, her “deep self” is always-already colonized by the Other. Yet in another sense, the subject *is* this movement, this invasion by the Other. It is at this point that the Lacanian corrective for Jenson’s work becomes apparent—it is not so much that the Father would be nothing but sheer consciousness, but rather that he would be sheer unconscious, would be absolutely *no one*. In such a schema, for God to become some One, he had to become Three: the Son who is not the Father, and the Spirit who is the bodying forth of the minimal gap between them. In the same way that the ego is not the subject, but in such a way that one is compelled to say that it *is*, so the Son represents a constitutive otherness. In the same way that object *a* removes the subject from the stasis field of the mother’s gaze, so the Spirit frees the Father to give all he is to the Son, so that the Son can operate in the Symbolic order of the human world in a constant outgoing motion.

Žižek grounds a Lacanian ethical system on [this theory of subjectivity]. The basic logic follows two steps, subjectivization and subjective destitution. Subjectivization is “the purely formal gesture of symbolic conversion by means of which the subject integrates into his symbolic universe the meaningless contingency of his destiny.” This consists largely in the subject depriving herself of the customary excuses, of realizing that she always gets what she wants, even if at bottom, she does not get to choose what to want. Subjectivization is taking up the burden of responsibility, the symbolic debt with which the Other loaded the subject down in producing her. The second, more radical step, is subjective destitution, in which “the analysand has to suspend the urge to symbolize/internalize, to interpret, to search for a ‘deeper meaning’; he has to accept that the traumatic encounters which traced out the itinerary of his life were utterly contingent and indifferent, that they bear no ‘deeper message’” (*Indivisible* 94).

In *On Belief*, Žižek elaborates this same logic with respect to sacrifice, an essential aspect of every ethical system. The most radical kind of sacrifice is that in which the subject has no hope of gain, but performs his act “to fill in the lack *in the Other*, to sustain the appearance of the Other’s omnipotence or, at least, consistency” (70). In this model, Žižek sees the logic of hysterical subjectivity:

a hysteric perceives the lack in the Other, its impotence, inconsistency, fake, but he is not ready to sacrifice the part of himself that would complete the Other, fill in its lack—this refusal to sacrifice sustains the hysteric’s eternal complaint that the Other will somehow manipulate and exploit him, use him, deprive him of his most precious possession. (73)

Žižek’s concern is not to come up with a way to get the hysteric to sacrifice that possession for the Other, but rather to recognize the fact that “there is nothing to sacrifice,” that the Other is always constitutively barred just as the subject is (74). Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to teach

the subject “to *resist* the terrible attraction of sacrifice” because sacrifice “is ultimately the gesture by means of which we aim at compensating the guilt imposed by the impossible superego injunction” (74). To be cured in psychoanalysis is to sacrifice the sacrifice itself, to undergo the “‘second death,’ the death of the (lost) ideal itself” (77).

This second death is the movement from desire to drive, which is a change not so much in content as in perspective. The subject of desire believes herself to be seeking some particular, if ineffable, goal, whereas the subject of drive sees this for the futile, circular motion it is, since object *a* is functionally just “something else.” The subject of drive is beyond desire and is instead resigned to being caught up in the circular movement of drives. It is at this point that a potential problem in Žižek’s system presents itself; in the psychoanalytic cure,

Lacan abandons what is usually considered the very core of his teaching, the notion of the irreducibly ‘decentered’ subject, the subject whose very emergence is grounded in the relationship to a constitutive alterity. (80)

In short, it seems that subjectivity, on which Žižek wishes to build an emancipatory politics, is something of which one must be *cured*, an idea which threatens to undermine his entire project.

The cure, however, consists not so much in being cured of subjectivity as in being cured of experiencing subjectivity as persecution. The question that the “cured” subject is forced to ask is, “Lacking compared to *what?* Divided compared to *what?* Why did I want wholeness so badly anyway?” [*Editor’s note: my commenter took this to be a quote from Žižek; it is not.*] Those who resent being inscribed into language because language is false are simply deluded in their desire for the pure experience of the Real, because as Žižek says in “Welcome to the Desert of the Real,” “the Real Thing is ultimately another name for the Void. The pursuit of the Real thus equals total annihilation, a (self)destructive fury ...” (par. 1). The “cured” subject recognizes that

its freedom is found, paradoxically, in its recognition that it is completely determined by the Symbolic order, which for Žižek is identical with Law and ultimately with the oppressive powers at work in the world today.

The answer to the question of effecting social change is not to resist the powers of the world, but rather, “the truly free choice is a choice in which I do not merely choose between two or more options WITHIN a pre-given set of coordinates, but I choose to change this set of coordinates itself” (*On Belief* 121). This is ultimately what Žižek aims at in his political philosophy, but he recognizes that a utopian world is not going to be brought about by the laws of causality, as in the standard reading of Marx. The laws of causality belong to the Symbolic order of law itself, which the “cured” subject must recognize as false—Truth is on the side of the Real, and so Žižek calls the reordering, miraculous event that is the foundation of all authentic politics the Truth-Event. From the perspective of the Law, the Truth is nothing other than a horrible transgression, and the Christ-Event is for Žižek the paramount example of a Truth-Event.

The Truth-Event in a sense simply *is* subjectivity as reshaped by the psychoanalytic cure, which has a trinitary structure. The cure, which always comes from the outside (the analyst), is a reshaping of the division and lack and conflict at the heart of subjectivity into a positive good, the Truth itself. The Christian can see room here for the act of the Trinity, since it is to be expected that all God’s acts in the world have a trinitary character (Jenson 114). *The* solution is the Truth, which intrudes into the positive order of the Law and alters the coordinates of life itself. In the present state of things, that solution can only appear in fragments, and indeed, any Truth-Event inevitably leads to just another positive order of things, [but] it is the Truth-Event that “counts” in the end. Žižek’s praise of Lenin is exemplary: what he wishes to repeat is not

Lenin's positive program, but rather "Lenin-in-becoming," the revolutionary *movement* itself ("Repeating"). In that revolutionary movement, the revolution is already actualized, its promise is already fulfilled, no matter what inevitable betrayal follows. Žižek accords Lenin a kind of tragic dignity for his willingness to be the Master and reinstitute the Law, but this is only a consolation prize, an admission that he has lost his nerve, as we all must. This resonates with the Christian idea of the coming Kingdom that is always irreducibly future, invading the present order in a very real way without ever becoming present or established.

Žižek's presentation is obviously not simply the gospel, and indeed there are many points at which a theologian must object. Many of these, such as his anti-narrativism, seem to me to result from his use of certain terms in ways that are exactly opposite of their customary use in theology, so that what Žižek means by anti-narrativism might be something very close to what Jenson means by narrativism. Again, his insistence that the inscription of the subject into the Truth-Event represents a radical break with the social body does not sound unnecessarily "individualistic" when one considers that for Žižek, the social body is precisely the realm of untruth and oppression. There is one point, however, where trinitarian reflection cannot follow Žižek, that is, into his ultimate *impersonality*. For Lacan [in Žižek], the Real is radically impersonal. Just as the unconscious is structured like a language, so is the Real, which leads Žižek to a view of the Real as a futile, circular motion, a kind of computation that can be deciphered by subjectivity, but into which subjectivity itself must ultimately be collapsed.

Žižek makes this radical materialism clear in the section of *The Indivisible Remainder* entitled "Quantum Physics with Lacan." Drawing upon the insights of quantum physics, he determines that the Real, and thus every level of reality, from quarks to dogs to humans to society itself, has the same "out of joint" character as the subject. Far from being the narrative of

a person's actions, the invasions of the Real into the realm of Law always follow a kind of inner necessity, so that the futile circular movement of law—Truth-Event—reestablished law will never cease. In short, the Kingdom will never come, because there is no king to rule it. There is room in Žižek's work for a personal ontology, but he will not take the step. To my view, this is the most serious flaw in his system, which leads ultimately to the conclusion that principles are more important with people. In the end, people become a means to the impersonal Truth-Event, which seems to be the true meaning of his privileging of Lenin over Christ.

With that said, however, the fact remains that Žižek defies attempts at quick judgment. He displays an intimidating command of Western philosophy, yet he undercuts his perceived elite status by displaying a similar erudition in the most banal aspects of American pop culture, so that in *The Fragile Absolute*, for example, two consecutive index entries are "*The Phantom Menace* (film)" and "*Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel)" (181). He clearly has his own philosophical ambitions, yet he positions them all as attempts to champion other, greater philosophers such as Schelling, Hegel, or of course, Lacan. In his self-deprecation, his focus on another greater than he, and his openness to what is new, there is a very strange kind of movement to Žižek's work, a movement that can be described as trinitary. It is perhaps from this movement in his work itself, beyond the compatibility of his conceptual apparatus with specific Christian doctrines, that the theologian can learn the most.

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