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THE CHRISTIAN LEGACY IS INCOMPLETE: FOR AND AGAINST ŽIŽEK

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Abstract:

Keywords:

Given the continuing decline of Christianity in the West and the growing indifference to theology within both the academy and Western culture, it is not surprising that Western Christians and theologians should respond with enthusiasm to any secular thinker who engages with the Christian tradition. This is certainly the case with Slavoj Žižek, whose popularity amongst Christians has grown as Christianity becomes ever more central to his philosophical project. But given the long history of Christianity's entanglement with colonialism, anti-Semitism and white supremacy there are reasons to be concerned about this focus on Christianity as a resource for radical thinking. This is especially true in our current context, in which the appeal to 'Christian Europe' has become increasingly important both to explicitly racist far-right organisations within Europe and to the dogwhistle racism of mainstream politics.

It is certainly the case that Žižek's advocacy of Christianity as crucial for radical politics is bound up with his argument that the best hope for the contemporary left is a recovery of the 'European legacy'. It is also true that Žižek's work – in which human history reaches its highest point in the atheism which emerges out of Christianity, which in turn surpasses first paganism, and then the 'world religions' – fits comfortably into the white supremacist narrative whereby 'the secular West rejects religion for itself … as the price that must be paid in order to reject the non-West by characterising this non-West as religious' (Barber, 2011:110). In addition, Žižek has a tendency to repeat classically racist and anti-Semitic tropes: that the veil worn by Muslim women reflects a greater proclivity towards sexual violence amongst Muslim men (2009b: 107);[1] that Christianity represents the

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For more detailed discussion of the racist and colonialist history of this argument, see e.g. Delphy, *Separate* 2015. Delphy argues that the assertion that Muslim culture is uniquely prone to sexual violence 'allows France to kill two birds with one stone: not only can it use it to condemn the "others", above all it can absolve itself of the sin now being "exposed"'. The example Žižek cites as support for his claim that, unlike 'Muslim countries', 'the West relies on the premise that men *are* capable of sexual restraint' is an Australian

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‘overcoming’ of the Jewish Law by love.[2] But, as Žižek responds to one critic who attacks his celebration of Christianity, he does not consider these parallels between his own work and the logics of white supremacy, anti-Semitism and colonialism to constitute a sufficient challenge to his ideas, because at the heart of his argument is the claim that the limitations of Eurocentric thought can be overcome only from within (2002, 580).

In this article, I will explore the fundamental logic which drives Žižek’s claim that the ‘European-Christian legacy’ is not simply the best but the *only* source for the notions of universality he considers essential for radical politics today. I will argue that this claim is not only a problem because of the ways in which it justifies the ongoing violence of the Christian West, but because it is fundamentally inconsistent with Žižek’s underlying ontology. I will suggest that if Christians are to make use of Žižek’s work, we would do better to focus on this ontology - which offers valuable resources for re-imagining the Christian tradition - rather than Žižek’s celebration of the European-Christian legacy, which, whatever he claims, cannot maintain its Euro- and Christocentrism if it is to overcome its attachment to the white supremacist, anti-Semitic and imperialist legacy of European Christendom.

Žižek and the European-Christian Legacy

For Žižek, the key to radical politics is a concept of universality which emerges first and only in European and Christian history. However, the European and Christian legacies are not as synonymous as Žižek suggests, as is clear from his reliance on two different thinkers for this argument: Alain Badiou, who locates the origin of political universality in St Paul; and Jacques Rancière, who finds it first in Ancient Greece. This double appeal to both Europe and Christianity begins to unsettle Žižek’s claim that *only* the Christian-European legacy can offer hope for the future of radical politics.

Muslim cleric who excused a gang rape on the grounds that ‘If you take uncovered meat and place it outside on the street … and the cats come and eat it … The uncovered meat is the problem.’ Žižek is apparently unaware not only of the questionability of making claims about ‘Muslim countries’ on the basis of assertions made by Australian Muslims, but also of the grim frequency with which this precise logic is expressed by white Westerners.

2 For a fuller account of the relationship between supersessionism and both racism and anti-Semitism, see Jennings, 2010. Žižek acknowledges the danger of ‘potentially anti-Semitic’ Christian supersessionism. In response, he argues that it is not that Christianity ‘“accomplished/fulfilled the Jewish Law … by supplementing it with the dimension of love, but by fully realizing the Law itself’ (Milbank and Žižek, 2009: 268, 270). It is not clear how this distinction absolves him .

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Christian Universality

For Žižek, the *only* truly radical political position is atheism; but to be an atheist one *must* first pass through Christianity. Žižek is a materialist: for him there is nothing outside of the material world, no transcendent principle or God to guide history. But he is not a crude materialist who believes that everything that exists can be reduced down to series of causes and effects so that, for example, human consciousness is *nothing more* than the movement of atoms within the brain. Instead, he is what Adrian Johnston calls a 'transcendental materialist', a materialist who thinks that that there is always a gap, an inherent excess in the physical processes of cause and effect such that something *more than* mere physical processes is able to emerge (2008). This means that human consciousness is more than merely the movement of atoms in the brain; and that human society is more than simply the sum of individual actions and intentions. While abstractions like money only exist because enough people believe in them, once individual beliefs have brought them into being they exert a power of their own, shaping individuals as well as being shaped by them.

For Žižek, then, it is crucial to reckon with the incompleteness at the heart of all beings. The least sophisticated accounts of reality are those which seek to escape this internal antagonism: the least interesting religions are those which seek harmony. For Žižek this means both 'paganism' and 'New Age spiritualities'. Žižek claims that 'pagan' religions (by which he means all religious and spiritual traditions which pre-date capitalism and cannot be classed amongst the major 'world religions') appeal to 'cosmic Justice and Balance', affirming a belief in 'the circular death and rebirth of the Divinity', such that no real historical change ever occurs (2000a: 118). 'Paganism' also affirms a belief in the 'Great Chain of Being', seeing hierarchy as a fundamental feature of both cosmos and society, and so it rejects any radical politics which seeks to fundamentally transform the social order (2011: 53).[3]

Likewise, for Žižek,'New Age' spiritualities (which post-date capitalism) seek after wholeness. They hold that all religions appeal to 'the same core of mystical experience' affirming the possibility of entering into harmony with the universe (Milbank and Žižek, 2009: 27); and they understand spirituality as a continuous process of growth, rejecting the possibility of radical change (2000b, 231).

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3 This is an odd claim given that it is Christianity which transmitted the Greek notion of the Great Chain of Being through European history.

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For Žižek, the monotheistic religions represent progress from either 'paganism' or 'New Age spiritualities' because they emphasise transcendence: they know that the world is not harmonious but fundamentally ruptured. But where all monotheistic religions affirm the Oneness of God, Žižek argues, only Christianity recognises (in the doctrine of the Trinity) that there is no Oneness without rupture, no self-identity without difference (Milbank and Žižek, 2009: 86). And - perhaps more importantly - only Christianity opens the way to the recognition that transcendence is not outside the world but within it. Transcendence is not a being outside the world like the God of classical monotheism, but 'that which is in us more than ourselves'. What dies on the cross, Žižek says, is 'the God of Beyond himself, i.e. the notion of God *qua* inaccessible, transcendent, nonrevealed entity' (2008a: 167). For Žižek, the resurrection *is* the arrival of the Holy Spirit which *is* 'the community of believers'. The Spirit is nothing but the effect of this community and yet, nonetheless, is more than the sum of its parts (2001, 91). For Žižek, then, '*Christianity* (at its core, if disavowed by its institutional practice)' is '*the only truly consistent atheism*', and *'atheists are the only true believers*' (2012: 118). This atheism is important not only because it is true but also because it alone enables the love which is at the heart of radical politics, and which, like Christ, 'brings peace, love, etc. *and* ... a sword, turning son against father' (2012: 107). 'In true love', Žižek says, 'I "hate the beloved out of love": I "hate" the dimension of his inscription into the socio-symbolic structure on behalf of my very love for him as a unique person' (2000a: 126). This, for Žižek, is the core of radical politics.

European Universality

Žižek repeatedly appeals to 'the European legacy' as the hope for radical politics (2002: 579; see also 1998a and 1998b). Often this appeal to Europe is made simultaneously with an appeal to Christianity (2009b: 137, 139).[4] Yet while Žižek's appeal to Christianity relies heavily on the work of Alain Badiou, who sees St Paul's understanding of Christianity as exemplary of 'the Event', a moment of radical break with the existing order of things, his appeal to Europe tends more often to rely on the work of Jacques Rancière, and his notion of 'politics proper'. 'Politics proper' emerges for the first time, according to Rancière, in Ancient Greece, and consists essentially of the those excluded from both recognition and

4 Here Žižek also refers to atheism as 'a European legacy worth fighting for', in a clear parallel with the title of his book *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*

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power in society demanding their inclusion. As with Christian love, politics proper insists on emphasising that which is in the social order more than itself, the inconsistency, excess or antagonism which is not the obstacle to the harmony of the social order but the condition of its possibility. Žižek links this notion of politics proper to both Badiou and to Christianity: the logic of Rancière's work 'is, like Badiou's thought, profoundly Christological', the excluded part of the social order representing 'the dimension of universality' in the same way that Christ, the singular individual, stands for humanity in Christian theology and in Badiou's understanding of Christianity (2000b: 228).

But there is a problem here. The idea of a direct historical connection between ancient Greek thought — specifically ancient Greek notions of democracy — and early Christian thought — specifically Pauline notions of Christian identity — might fit comfortably into European and Christian self-mythologising. But to argue that both share a single history is to ignore the facts, not least the crucial role of both Judaism and Islam in forming and transmitting these ideas. Is the European legacy Greek, or Christian, or both? If ultimately a Greek legacy, what are we to make of Žižek's repeated appeal to the Christianity of St Paul, which emerges separately from the democratic logic of classical Greek thought? If ultimately a Christian legacy, why appeal to Ancient Greece? And if it is both - if it is not *only* in Christianity or *only* in Ancient Greece that this logic emerges - this opens up the possibility that the same emphasis on antagonism and particularity which makes radical politics possible might emerge elsewhere, outside of Europe and/or outside of Christianity.

I want to turn next to this possibility, and to argue that when Žižek says that the possibility for radical politics emerges *only* from Europe and/or *only* from Christianity, he not only plays into the narratives of white supremacy which prevail in the West (as previously discussed, this possibility does not especially concern Žižek); it is a failure on Žižek's part to consistently maintain the fundamental concepts which drive his work.

The problem with oneness

Žižek's ontology

From the beginning, at the heart of Žižek's work is the attempt to bring together the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan with the philosophy of G W F Hegel and the political thought of Karl Marx. One crucial aspect of Žižek's early work is the claim that human

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society is structured in a way that parallels the structure of the individual subject: as an internally inconsistent being that seeks to deal with its incompleteness by projecting the cause of this incompleteness outwards, blaming its failure on an external impediment. So where the individual subject blames her dissatisfaction on her failure to find the right sexual partner, rather than her own inability to confront the truth of her desire, the social order looks for scapegoats to avoid facing up to its own internal antagonism: class struggle. In the mid-90s, Žižek extends this structural parallelism to the nature of the material world as such, so that just as society is riven by the antagonism of class struggle and the individual by the antagonism of desire, the material world itself is riven by the antagonism of quantum uncertainty.

Žižek understands reality, then, as consisting of a series of levels: the material world, the individual subject, and the social order. Each level is constituted as an internally inconsistent, antagonistic One. These inconsistencies mean that each level is fundamentally historical, changing over time as a result of the struggle to reconcile its internal conflict. At both the individual and social levels it becomes possible for these inconsistent Ones to evade confrontation with their own consistency by inventing false narratives about the causes of their conflict and dissatisfaction: fantasy or ideology. So, for example, Žižek argues that 'Although politics proper is … something specifically "European", the entire history of European political thought is ultimately nothing but a series of disavowals of the political moment, the proper logic of political antagonism' (1998a: 991). Similarly, 'the entire history of Christianity … is structured as a series of defenses against [its] traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection' (Milbank and Žižek, 2009: 260).[5]

Žižek's internal antagonisms

If every product of human subjectivity and society is internally divided, with a strong tendency to refuse to confront its own internal inconsistencies, this is no less true of Žižek's work. There are three key inconsistencies in Žižek's argument that *only* the Christian and/or European legacies can provide us with the resources for a truly radical politics:

First, Žižek argues that every system is structured around a central antagonism; yet simultaneously maintains that only Europe and Christianity are able to provide the resources

5 Elsewhere, however, Žižek dismisses attempts to argue that Islam is a fundamentally peaceful religion, misused by fundamentalists to justify violence because 'the game of redeeming the inner truth of a religion or ideology and separating this out from its later or secondary political exploitation is simply false' (2009b, 116).

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for recognising this antagonism. Central to Žižek’s ontology is the claim that everything that exists shares the same basic structure because everything that exists has its basis in the fundamental material reality of inconsistency and antagonism. But according to this understanding, *every* religious tradition and *every* society must, likewise, be structured antagonistically, must have its own points of internal conflict which can give rise to the dialectical transformation towards truth, and towards more radical politics. There are points in Žižek’s work where he partially acknowledges this possibility. In *Less Than Nothing* he argues that there is a fundamental antagonism in Buddhism between its Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna branches. Yet the Vajrayāna tradition which emerges as an attempt to reconcile this antagonism fails, on Žižek’s account, to be truly radical, regressing back towards paganism instead of moving forwards to something closer (it is implied) to the Christian notion of universality. But the antagonism remains nonetheless: surely there is nothing in Žižek’s materialism which rules out the possibility of the emergence of new forms of Buddhism which realise its radical potential? If Žižek is right about the nature of the material world — that everything is intrinsically historical because everything is inherently inconsistent — then he cannot be correct in his assertion that only the Christian and European traditions are properly historical.

Second, Žižek consistently holds that a system can only be transformed by pushing it to confront its own internal antagonisms; yet he persistently argues that capitalism is no longer reliant on Europe, European values or Christianity (2001: 12; 2009b: 156). In order to overcome capitalism, Žižek says, we need a ‘gesture that would undermine capitalist globalization from the standpoint of universal Truth, just as Pauline Christianity did to the Roman global Empire’ (2000b: 2011). Yet it is not clear why this gesture must come from Christianity. If Christianity is no longer necessary to capitalism then, on Žižek’s logic, Christianity cannot provide the resources for capitalism’s overcoming. Žižek argues that the most effective resistance to violent European colonisation came not from ‘the reference to some kernel of previous ethnic identity’, as to make this kind of reference is to ‘automatically adopt the position of a victim resisting modernization’. Instead, those who most effectively resisted colonialism were those who were able to claim that their ‘resistance is grounded in the inherent dynamics of the imperialist system - that the imperialist system itself, through its inherent antagonism, activates the forces that will bring about its demise’ (2000b: 256). Why then does Žižek seek to resist the encroachment of this new capitalist globalisation by

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reference to some kernel, some proper logic or core of European or Christian identity? Should he not instead ground his resistance to post-European, post-Christian capitalism in the inherent dynamics of this system? Does this system not have its own inherent antagonism which will, ultimately, activate the forces that brings about its demise?

Third, while Žižek argues that it is only a system's internal antagonisms which force it to transform itself, at the same time he repeatedly makes claims about the important role of encounters between ideas or societies with that which exists outside of themselves in understanding their history. Žižek argues that it is only by tearing a theory 'out of its original context' and 'planting it in another historical moment' that it can be first universalized and then '*put to work*, fulfilling its potential of political *intervention*' (2001: 2-3). Nor, for Žižek, is it only ideas and theories which can be dramatically transformed by that which is outside of them: according to Žižek the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is not — as others have argued — the consequence of the internal antagonisms within global capitalism, between, for example, Western governments and the Marxist government of Afghanistan (Delphy, 2015: 187-224) or radical left anti-racist movements within the UK and USA (Kundnani, 2014). Instead, Žižek claims, it is the result of the separate histories of Western and 'other societies - exemplarily the Muslim ones', which mean that while, in Europe, modernization 'was spread over centuries' such that 'we had the time to accommodate to this break, to soften its shattering impact', 'the symbolic universe' of these other societies was 'perturbed much more brutally' (2008b: 33).[6] States emerge, it seems, separately, and develop to some degree independently such that when they are brought back into contact with one another, this encounter can be profoundly traumatic (although Žižek rarely shows any interest in the dialectical development of non-European cultures). Perhaps we might add to this list of examples the fundamental role that the Western encounter with Islam played in the development not only of the idea that the European legacy is one which is fundamentally derived from ancient Greece, but also the emergence of the Protestantism which is, for Žižek, the highest dialectical development of Christianity. Žižek is right that the West cannot hold itself responsible for every evil of the world (2009a: 114); but nor then can it claim to be the sole hope of its salvation.

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6 This argument not only erases the very long history of violent resistance to modernization within Europe (see, for example, Thompson, 1968); but also the physical violence which accompanied the symbolic violence of of European 'modernization' (e.g. Fanon, 2001); not to mention the continuities between both physical and symbolic violence within Europe and outside of it (e.g. Federici, 2004).

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Conclusion: Towards a more Žižekian assessment of the Christian and European legacies

Žižek’s argument for the centrality of the Christian-European legacy to the future of radical politics fails on its own terms, then. How might we move forward? I have two suggestions.

First, because much of Žižek’s work focuses on moving individual Ones, be they subjects or societies, from desire - which through fantasy or ideology seeks to enlist others in the narcissistic project of bringing wholeness and harmony to the One – to drive – which liberates others to exist in their own right by assuming responsibility for the antagonisms internal to the One – there is relatively little in his work which explores the question of relationship with others outside of fantasy or ideology. Yet there are moments when this relationship can be glimpsed. For example, Žižek argues that the West was unable to understand the break-up of former Yugoslavia, because its idea of Yugoslavia was a fantasy, ‘the place of savage ethnic conflicts long since overcome by civilised Europe’: by fantasising Yugoslavia in this way, Žižek argues, Europe was able to avoid confronting its own racism. Yet Yugoslavia did really exist in its own right. Far from a place in which ‘archaic ethnic passions’ were played out, as Europe imagined, it was a site for political conflict in which ‘the moves of every political agent’ were ‘totally rational within the goals they want to attain’ (2005: 212-213). Here Žižek implies that the key to Europe’s engaging politically with the rest of the world world is to recognise that not everything can be understood through the lens of European narcissism. While the ‘gaze of the West’ is a powerful factor in global politics, it is not the only factor. Other states, other cultures, have their own agendas and desires. Perhaps if we are able to let go of the notion that everything centres around us — around Europe, around Christianity — we might finally be able to engage with others out of the kind of Christian love which, according to Žižek, entails ‘the hard and arduous work of repeated “uncoupling”’ in which we refuse to use others as the ‘blank screen’ onto which we project our own fantasies and begin to see them instead as they really are, in all their imperfections (2000a: 128).

Second, Žižek is clear that the love which grounds radical politics entails commitment to particular things or ideas not because they are the only things worth committing to, not because they represent the kind of ‘all-encompassing unity’ which, for Žižek, can only ever

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be the product of fantasy, but because they are the thing which, for better or worse, we cannot help but love. Žižek argues that:

> In the history of modern Europe, those who stood for the striving for universality were precisely atheist Jews: Spinoza, Marx, Freud. The irony is that in the history of anti-Semitism Jews stand for both of these poles: sometimes they stand for the stubborn attachment to their particular life-form which prevents them from becoming full citizens of the state they live in, sometimes they stand for a ‘homeless’ and rootless universal cosmopolitanism indifferent to all particular ethnic forms … [perhaps this] is our central struggle today: the struggle between fidelity to the Messianic impulse and the *reactive* … ‘politics of fear’ which focuses on preserving one’s particular identity (2008b: 5).

Yet elsewhere Žižek consistently argues that it is precisely particularity which makes universality possible. Would not the truly Žižekian argument be that it is precisely insofar as we retain a stubborn attachment to our particular life-form that we are able to represent universality? We might then argue that what we need is not only a radical re-imagining of the Christian and European legacy, but also radical re-imaginings of the North American, South American, African, Asian and Australasian legacies; of the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim legacies; of every legacy there is, of every particularity there is, because, as Žižek himself argues, everything contains its own inherent antagonisms. As Wood (2015) points out, Žižek’s focus on Christian Europe blinds him to the radical political struggles taking place elsewhere in the world. Žižek’s understanding of the incarnation brings to mind Karl Rahner’s claim that, in the person Christ, the command to love God and love our neighbour become identical. But how can we love our neighbour if we cannot even see them?

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