

## “Not Peace But a Sword”:

### Dionysius, Žižek, and the Question of Ancestry

Marika Rose

Everybody knows that theologians are preoccupied with sex; and it doesn't take much to see that this preoccupation goes all the way down. Theology traces its pedigree through genealogies, long straight lists of who begat whom. It pledges its allegiance to its Fathers, and it strictly forbids miscegenous liaisons with that which is foreign to it. And – like all those who are proud of their pedigree – it is eager to overlook the peccadilloes of its illustrious forebears whilst demanding that its descendants toe the line or forfeit their inheritance. This hypocritical puritanism has tended to characterise its relationship with philosophy. Theologians have rushed to retrospectively baptise those pagan philosophers whose beliefs were embarrassing to orthodoxy and yet whose intellectual legacy was too rich to be hastily cast aside; whilst theology's attitude to contemporary secular philosophy has resembled that of the parents nagging their rebellious teenagers: 'After everything I've done for you, the least you could do is to come to church with me once in a while.'

But philosophy itself is not much better. The emergence of the secular relies, as Daniel Colucciello Barber argues, on a whitewashing purification of philosophy's bloodline, purging the taint of Hebraism from its Hellenic inheritance “through the racist affirmation of the Aryan and negation of the Semitic.”<sup>1</sup> Philosophy is immune neither to the lure of pedigree nor, as Luce Irigaray has so amply demonstrated, to a rather questionable erotics.<sup>2</sup>

Mystical theology is, at least on some versions of this complicated family history, at the

---

<sup>1</sup> *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion and Secularity* (Eugene, Or: Cascade, 2011), 106.

<sup>2</sup> See especially *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian G. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

heart of the mutual entanglement of theology, philosophy, the erotic, and the policing of bloodlines. In this chapter I will, first, discuss the marriage of Christian theology and Neoplatonism which takes place in the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, and some of the problems which arise from this remarkably fruitful liaison. Then, second, I will trace the line of descent which leads from Dionysius to Žižek, who takes this inheritance and mutates it in ways which are potentially generative for theology and philosophy, both in relation to one another and to desire.

### **The sins of the fathers: the congenital disorders of Christian-Neoplatonism**

Denys Turner argues that Western Christian thought traces its lineage back to the coupling of Christianity and Platonism. Specifically, it is born from the meeting of two climactic moments: the biblical narrative of Moses' encounter with God at the peak of Mount Sinai; and Plato's allegory of the cave. This encounter, issuing forth in Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, begets two of the determining metaphorical pairs of later Western theology: darkness and light; ascent and descent.<sup>3</sup>

For all his talk about the conceptual importance of *eros* for Christianity, questions of gender, sexuality and family are often strikingly absent from Turner's work, not least in his discussion of Dionysius.<sup>4</sup> For Dionysius, mystical negation is preceded by theological affirmation: by the long

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Women are consistently relegated to the margins of *The Darkness of God*, whose central chapters all focus on exposition of works by male mystical writers; the book as a whole sets out as its project the goal of recovering an account of mysticism more faithful to the genealogical origins which is not merely indifferent but actively opposed to an understanding of mysticism which takes experience as its central focus. This shift in the idea of mysticism from one in which 'dialectical epistemology' is central to one in which this meaning has been 'evacuated', the metaphorical meanings refilled 'with the stuff of "experience"' is one which both Turner and, he argues, the fathers of mystical theology 'reject' (*The Darkness of God*, 7). *The Darkness of God* was, interestingly enough, published in the same year and by the same press as Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) which argues that both the mystical appeal to experience and the rejection of

line of proper names for God, handed down from fathers to sons, unsullied by the touch of women. *Exitus* and *reditus*, affirmation and negation, are consistently sexed: from the pure pedigree of theological tradition and the dark, womb-like cave of Platonic allegory which must be left behind if men are to encounter truth, to the women who are excluded from the hierarchical and priestly mystical encounter with God both implicitly – because Dionysius inhabited an all-male community – and explicitly – because by virtue of their sex women are necessarily excluded from the Christian priesthood, and therefore also from eucharistic rites to which the mystical climax belongs. And yet, as for Plato, desire remains central to this pattern of descent and ascent, *exitus* and *reditus*; in the absence of women's bodies theology can become all the more perfectly and purely erotic. It is the desire of God which gives birth to the long lines of 'begats', to the hierarchy of the church; and to men's desire for God which returns them to their source, which brings them to the mystical summit where their desire can be consummated.

Writing in the more exclusively male confines of *Eros & Allegory*, Denys Turner points out the centrality of *eros* to Dionysius' Christian-Neoplatonic synthesis.<sup>5</sup> *Eros* is important for the celibate men who comment on the *Song of Songs* because it allows them to solve key philosophical problems which arise from the conjunction of Neoplatonism with a Christian account of creation and redemption – the problem of freedom, and the problem of differentiation. Christian Neoplatonism begins with the absolute simplicity of God: "God is above all else unity, a oneness beyond all differentiation". In God there is no distinction, no multiplicity, no change. And yet

---

this appeal as not properly theological must be understood within the context of an ongoing struggle between women seeking to lay claim to theological authority and men seeking to deny it to them.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout *The Darkness of God*, questions of desire are persistently referred to Turner's *Eros & Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995) where the focus of the book allows him to exclude women entirely from the discussion: "I confine myself to male writers, not *because* they are male, but because I confine myself to writers of formal commentary on the Song of Songs, and they are all male" (*Eros & Allegory*, 18). Lest we worry that some queerer kinship might emerge from this homosocial *eros* we are repeatedly assured on the first page of the book's preface that no "Freudian explanations" for this "male celibate enthusiasm for the imagery of *eros*" are to be entertained (*Eros and Allegory*, 18).

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

creation, by contrast, “is multiplicity.”<sup>6</sup> The created world is differentiated not only within itself but also from God; it is distinct, it is multiple, it is changeable. Creation depends on God and yet God does not depend on creation; how then can it be that the unchanging, undifferentiated God who has no need of any other can bring into being the dynamic multiplicity of the created world which depends on the divine for its being?

The problem of creation here is twofold. First, *why* did the self-sufficient God – who has no need or lack – create? Second, *how* does the multiplicity of the world emerge from the absolute simplicity of the divine oneness? According to Turner, for Dionysius it is *eros* which makes it possible to answer these two questions. When we desire, Turner says, we are at the same time both utterly free and utterly compelled: to love is to be the willing slave of the beloved. And for Dionysius, Turner implies, though he does not exactly say, it is not only we who love God in this freely willed submission to the other, but God who loves us in the same way. God does not need to create but God freely chooses to create because of the divine desire for us: God too, freely chooses to be enthralled and enraptured by creation.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, for Turner, desire holds together oneness and differentiation. To love, he says, is to desire absolute union with the beloved; and yet at the same time to be absolutely individualised by the encounter with the beloved other. I am never more myself than when I love and am loved, Turner argues, and yet to love is to wish to become one flesh with the other. So it is desire, Turner says, which enables us to understand how God, who is one, brings forth creation, which is many; and how God, who needs nothing and wants nothing, comes to create the world. But this account of desire and the generation of the world is not without its problems for Christian theology, and

---

<sup>6</sup> *Eros and Allegory*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Eros and Allegory*, 56-64.

particularly so in its relationship to philosophy. Here I will explore, briefly, three of these problems: freedom, materiality, and universalism.

## Freedom

The notion of the simplicity of the One – important both to Plato and to the Neoplatonists – is the idea that all good things – justice, freedom, life, beauty etc. – come together and are identical within the One which gives rise to everything that exists. Just as all things come from the One, so all things are to return to the One; this return is both the inherent *telos* of human life and the ultimate good for human beings. So two questions arise. First, if all being comes from the One and is, in the One, identical with goodness, where does evil come from; how can evil exist at all? Second, if everything that is desirable and good for human beings is in the One, why would anyone choose to do anything which was not directed towards their end in the One? How, as Dionysius puts it, “could anything choose [evil] in preference to the Good?”<sup>8</sup>

Dionysius’ solution is simply to suggest that evil *does not exist*. All *being* comes from God; and so anything which has being cannot be entirely evil because insofar as it exists at all it must continue to participate in God.<sup>9</sup> Evil is a distortion, a corruption; not a thing in itself but “a deficiency and a lack of perfection [...] evil lies in the inability of things to reach their natural peak of perfection.”<sup>10</sup> Yet although it is “weakness, impotence, a deficiency of knowledge [...] of desire”, those who sin are nonetheless culpable because, Dionysius says, God “generously bestows such

---

<sup>8</sup> ‘The Divine Names’ in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo- Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 84.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Divine Names’, 85

<sup>10</sup> ‘Divine Names’, 92

capacities on each as needed and, therefore, there can be no excuse for any sin in the realm of one's own good."<sup>11</sup>

Evil is only inexplicable as a lack, a failure, a weakness; and yet those who fall short are to be held responsible for doing so because they were strong enough to do otherwise. There can be no reason, no justification for sin; sin, in short, is structured in a manner which exactly parallels creation itself: as an excessive, unjustifiable, inexplicable act. Yet where the free excessive act of the God who is neither being nor nonbeing is fertile and generative, bringing into being all the multiplicity of the created world, the free excessive act of human and demonic beings which has neither being nor nonbeing can only bring death and dissolution. The free act of evil is thus arguably the point at which humans most closely resemble the God who created them: it is where human beings are *most divine* in their relationship to the economy of creation; and yet, it is precisely this act which brings for them death and condemnation.

Where God exceeds the economy of cause and effect out of the overflow of divine goodness, the human transcendence of economy can be thought only as lack. This account of evil as privation gives rise to an inability on theology's part to acknowledge that anything new can be produced by human thought which has not already been given by God, and so, insofar as philosophy diverges from the truths which are handed down by theology, it can give birth only to nothingness. Something like this, I think, underlies the frequent accusations of 'nihilism!' levelled by theologians at secular philosophers. Perhaps it is a similar faith in heredity which underlies philosophy's frequent reluctance to acknowledge kinship with theology, fearing to be drawn back into captivity within the womb-like cave of mother Church. If newness is impossible then the genealogy of theology is destiny.

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Divine Names', 96.

## Materiality

A second problem with Dionysius' account is the difficulty of reconciling the traditional Christian affirmation of the goodness of creation with the erasure of materiality in the mystical ascent. In the hierarchical ascent of Plato's *Symposium*, the desire of the lover leads him upwards in a process of increasing abstraction away from the material and the particular:<sup>12</sup> beginning with the love of an individual beautiful body, the lover comes first to reject attachment to this particular body in favour of an appreciation of all beautiful bodies; next to the realisation that beautiful practices are more beautiful than beautiful bodies, beautiful knowledge than beautiful practices, until finally he comes to love above all "that particular knowledge which is knowledge solely of the beautiful itself."<sup>13</sup> The goal of the philosophical quest for knowledge is to get as far away from the body as possible.<sup>14</sup> How then can the goodness of the created world be affirmed? Matter is good, Dionysius argues, because insofar as it has being it participates in the Good. It is not a heavy weight which drags souls away from God and towards evil.<sup>15</sup> And yet the structure of Dionysius' thought makes it impossible to maintain this affirmation. Evil is a falling away, a lack of the good: and yet, on Dionysius' account, the hierarchy of created being is defined precisely as the hierarchy of greater or lesser participation in the good. Of created things, some "share completely in the Good, others participate

---

<sup>12</sup> I use the male pronoun here as Plato does because it is indicative of the gendered assumptions of Plato's thought and his persistent – though not entirely consistent – tendency to assume that men are better fitted for philosophical contemplation of the truth than women.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, trans. M. C. Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Here, though, it is worth noting Grace Jantzen's argument in *Death and the Displacement of Beauty. Volume One: Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 193-221 that, although on balance Plato sides with the universal and abstract against the particular and the material, there are elements of his work which disrupt this emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> 'Divine Names', 92-93.

in it more or less, others have a slight portion only, and, to others, again, the Good is but a far-off echo [...] this has to be so, for otherwise the most honoured, the most divine things would be on the order with the lowliest.”<sup>16</sup>

It is perhaps here that the exclusion of women from the consummation of the erotic return to God is most immediately apparent: as Grace Jantzen points out, by associating progress towards God both with progress up the ecclesiastical hierarchy and with intellectual ascent, Dionysius’ work doubly excludes women, who have historically been refused access both to positions of ecclesiastical power and to education. By seeking to maintain *both* that God is immediately present to all being *and also* that beings are differentiated precisely by their relative closeness to God, such that the *telos* of human existence is both increasing participation in God *and also* continuing, distinct existence, Dionysius does not escape the Neoplatonic queasiness towards materiality but simply adds to it a Christian affirmation of the material world. The conflict between these two persists as a central antagonism within his work – an antagonism which, as I have argued elsewhere, persists through much of the Christian tradition.<sup>17</sup> This antagonism in turn is entirely of a piece with the absence of women from so much Christian theology; a problem which is of course shared with philosophy (assuming that we are in fact willing to see the absence of women as a problem).

## Universalism

---

<sup>16</sup> ‘Divine Names’, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Marika Rose, ‘The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*’, *New Blackfriars* 94.1053 (2013), 541-551. Denys Turner similarly suggests that “the stress of these tensions [between Dionysius’ affirmation of hierarchy and of the direct dependence on God] will leave their mark upon the imagery which he left as his legacy to Western theologians” (*The Darkness of God*, 48).

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

Because, for Dionysius, those lower down the ecclesiastical hierarchy are further away from God and therefore have a lesser capacity for good, progress towards God is understood to take place along a straight and narrow path. Progress towards God is a straightforward process of ascent along what Mary-Jane Rubenstein describes as “a specific – one might say prefabricated – journey”.<sup>18</sup> The logic of this model of spiritual progress is perhaps best articulated by the Orthodox theologian Alexander Golitzin, who says that “the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy is our context, our world, the place of our strivings and the milieu of our encounter with Christ [...] Nothing of any validity or truth may be accomplished outside of our hierarchy.”<sup>19</sup> To be outside the church is, simply, to be further away from God and therefore from the truth.

This attitude is perhaps not unfamiliar to anyone who has read a lot of Christian theology; the real problem is not its arrogant refusal of the possibility that theology might have anything to learn from that which is outside it, but the basic contradiction which it reveals within Dionysius’ thought. Here, at the birth of Christian-Neoplatonism – a bastardisation of pagan philosophy whose legacy will continue to run deep within Christian theology’s bloodline – we find a model of theology which cannot conceive the possibility of its own existence; which would rather assert – against all the evidence – belief in virgin birth than accept the possibility of its progenitors’ promiscuity.

Whatever Dionysius might say, Christian theology has always been an illegitimate child, its heredity undeniably enriched by the Fathers’ promiscuous liaisons with foreign gods. And yet, as for the Israel of the Hebrew Scriptures, these practices of miscegenation and queer kinship are

---

<sup>18</sup> ‘Dionysius, Derrida and the Critique of “Ontotheology”’ in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, edited by Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford; Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 204

<sup>19</sup> *Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Thessalonika: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikôn Meletôn, 1994), 167.

persistently accompanied by the rhetoric of purity and unsullied lines of descent.<sup>20</sup> The double rhetoric of descent via a pure pedigree and return to universality and away from contamination by the material, the particular, and the feminine is not escaped by the secular philosophy which emerges, later, from theology's loins, but – all too often – is simply repeated differently, with theology merely transposed to the realm of the material and the particular which is to be transcended in the quest for universal truth.

### **Unto the third and fourth generation: Žižek and the mutation of Christian inheritance**

There is no such thing as a pure line of pedigree when it comes to thought, however much the sterility and congenital disorders of many contemporary theological and philosophical debates might suggest otherwise. But I do want to trace what I think is the development of a particular family characteristic – the entanglement of desire, ontology and epistemology – from Dionysius to contemporary continental philosophy. For Dionysius, the focus of erotic longing for consummation lay at the meeting point between God and the world: the world being, naturally, embodied in the single figure of a male intellectual and leading amongst other things to a decidedly queer flourishing of monastic meditations on the Song of Songs as the model for the individual soul's quest for God.

But a crucial mutation took place somewhere between Descartes and Kant, such that the

---

<sup>20</sup> As Gil Anidjar points out, the logic of purity becomes so fundamental to Christian theology that goes so far as to invents the notion of a kinship carried in the blood (*Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)). That this new notion of blood as kinship and the mark of distinction between Christians, Jews and Muslims should be so entangled with new articulations of the literal reality of the blood of the Eucharistic elements, themselves dependent on the infusion of new ideas from Jewish and Muslim scholarship, neatly illustrates the persistence of Dionysius' double logic of descent and denial.

central problem for philosophy was no longer the consummation of the love between God and the world but the question of whether the individual subject could ever know the world (knowledge here, of course, is to be taken in its full biblical sense). It is for this reason, at least in part, that psychoanalysis came to be taken seriously not only as a science of the individual subject, but as philosophy.

Curiously enough, this re-emergence of the question of desire, and its re-centring around the individual subject made possible the re-emergence of mystical theology, whose intense eroticism had come to be associated with the body, and hence with women, and therefore came to be seen as unphilosophical, insufficiently high-minded and universal. All it really needed to re-emerge into philosophical respectability, however, was a man to speak for it and to claim this inheritance as his own. Several such men put themselves forward; but the two who are of interest for our purposes are Lacan and Hegel, whose work fathers forth the oeuvre of Slavoj Žižek.

In contrast to the metaphysics of Dionysius' Neoplatonic Christianity (which sees everything safely contained within the closed economy of participation, within which the material world and everything associated with it is viewed as something to be escaped and where no newness can be permitted to degrade the pure bloodlines of theology) Žižek offers a materialism in which both past inheritance and future descent are genuinely at stake. The material world exists, for Žižek, as a system which is intrinsically ruptured not from without but from within. It comes into being beginning with the separation of nothingness from itself, an intrinsic inconsistency within materiality.

Žižek talks about this inconsistency at the heart of the material world both in terms of the biblical account of creation (in which God brings the world into being precisely through an act of distinction, of separation), and also in terms of quantum physics, which, according to Žižek, holds

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

that “mass consists only of the surplus generated by [the electron's] movement, as though we're dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself”.<sup>21</sup>

This gap within the material world is, for Žižek, “a kind of generative lack, a withdrawal that opens up space, a lack which acts as a surplus”,<sup>22</sup> and it is out of this paradoxical coincidence of surplus and lack, the intrinsic incompleteness of the material world, that beings emerge in what Žižek describes as an atheist creation *ex nihilo*. Because of this incompleteness of materiality, the system of cause and effect is not closed but is always ruptured: every effect exceeds its cause. This has two consequences: first, not only is the future genuinely open but the past is also at stake. What happens now changes the meaning of the past: every genealogy can be rewritten. And second, it means that as particular entities emerge from the creative incompleteness of the material world, they become, in a sense, their own cause, their own ground of being (and here Žižek draws on the contemporary biological notion of *autopoiesis*, which describes organisms as “bootstrapping” themselves into existence).<sup>23</sup> We can become more than, less than, other than our inheritance; and our descendants too may escape our grasp.

This account of the material world is also an erotics. Žižek's work draws on Lacan's account of the difference between masculine desire and feminine drive, which Lacan explicates precisely in relation to the Neoplatonic account of the One as the origin of all things, from which everything that *is* originated and to which it will return, drawn back by desire, by *eros*. In this sense, the problem of creation in Christian Neoplatonism is precisely the opposite of the problem of desire for Lacanian

---

<sup>21</sup> *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 22.

<sup>22</sup> ‘There Is No Sexual Relationship’ in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 217

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Žižek's discussion of Francisco Varela's work in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 204-205.

psychoanalysis. Where for Dionysius the problem of creation is how to make two from one, to bring to birth an immense multitude from the absolute simplicity of God, for Lacan, “Eros is defined as the fusion that makes one from two, as what is supposed to gradually tend in the direction of making but one from an immense multitude”.<sup>24</sup> But, Lacan argues, this gathering of the many into one is a fantasy: as his famous phrase goes, “the sexual relationship does not exist”; however much we may long for oneness, for perfect union, we cannot have it. Here Lacan refers primarily to the sexual union of male and female, but something similar applies to the union of God and the individual in mystical ecstasy. It is only insofar as we exist as separate that we exist at all; it is only insofar as we know ourselves to be distinct from the world around us that we are alive. Perfect union is – as the mystics well know – essentially indistinguishable from death.

Instead of *eros*, the gathering of everything into union, Lacan says that analysis seeks to assert the existence of the One as a singular individual, and to explore not desire but love.<sup>25</sup> In love, he argues, the gender of the other person is irrelevant, because gender is always a system of making two into one. To love according to drive, by contrast, is to refuse the desire to absorb the other person into oneself. Žižek takes this Lacanian erotics and couples it with Hegel’s account of the development of human societies and quantum physics’ account of the emergence of something from nothingness. For Žižek everything comes not from the One but from an inherently inconsistent

---

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 66. It is no coincidence that Lacan refers this problem of desire to both neoplatonism (67) and mystical theology (76); where the problem that concerns Turner is that of creation, *exitus*, the emergence of multiplicity from the oneness of God, the problem that concerns Lacan is consummation, *reditus*, the return of multiplicity to the (fantasy of) oneness of perfect union with the (m)other.

<sup>25</sup> This move bears some parallels to the central argument of Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros* (trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) that *agape* and *eros*, love and desire, ought to be treated as two distinct notions, the former being properly Christian and the latter pagan. For Nygren, *eros* is primarily acquisitive whereas *agape* is generous and creative; although unlike Lacan he conceives of love as something which individuals receive from God and pass on to others (*Agape and Eros*, 725, 737). Lacan does in fact mention Nygren during his discussion of feminine *jouissance* as a philosopher who writes “on the subject of love”, suggesting that Nygren is “no stupider than anyone else”, though commenting that “Christianity naturally ended up inventing a God such that he is the one who gets off!” (*Seminar XX*, 75-76).

nothing: the problem of creation is not how multiplicity and contingency could emerge from a perfect and self-contained One, but how identities emerge from inconsistent nothingness and, more importantly, how the multiplicity and complexity of the world might be sustained in the face of the ever-present threat of the return to nothing. This allows for a kind of reconfiguring of the antagonisms within Dionysius' work, as we can see by returning to the three themes of freedom, materiality, and universalism to show how Žižek repeats them differently.

### Freedom

For Žižek, as for Dionysius, desire is what makes it possible to hold together freedom and necessity. Love is, he says, “a state in which activity and passivity, being-active and being-acted-upon, harmoniously overlap (the paradigmatic case, of course, is the mystical experience of Love).”<sup>26</sup> And yet, unlike for Dionysius, for Žižek it is possible to imagine a love which is truly generative, really productive of newness. Like the subject and the symbolic order, materiality works, for Žižek, on the feminine logic of the non-all, where effects always exceed their causes. It is in this non-all gap in the economy of causation that freedom is located: every effect has its causes, but can never be entirely accounted for in terms of those causes. This excess which is inherent to causation does not just account for human freedom; it also means that human freedom itself is excessive. Žižek's materialism means that “we created our world, but it overwhelms us, we cannot grasp and control it.”<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Dionysius, then, Žižek both recognises and fully endorses the formal parallel

---

<sup>26</sup> *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 69.

<sup>27</sup> In John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (London: MIT, 2009), 244. This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

between God's excessive, unjustifiable act of creation and the excessive, unjustifiable human act of sin, positioning Christianity, philosophy, and being itself firmly on the side of excess and rupture rather than harmony and union. To be human, for Žižek, is to do precisely what the God of traditional Christian doctrine did: to love not out of necessity or compulsion but out of an excess which is both free and unfree. To be human is to love *this* thing, *this* person, not because we need them or because they are better than anything else in the world, but simply because we love them; and to love them without seeking to absorb them into ourselves but precisely insofar as they are *not us*.

This promises, I think, not only an alternative to patriarchal notions of desire and reproduction as necessarily linked to ownership, but also to prevailing models of the interactions of theology and philosophy, which can relate to one another only in terms of pedigree or absorption, which cannot find anything they love in one another without seeking to possess it. If the intercourse between theology and philosophy can be liberated from the demands of inheritance – from the need to honour parents, to produce heirs, to maintain the crumbling piles of stately canonical tradition – perhaps this opens up space, too, for pleasure; for mutual enjoyment.

### **Materiality**

Likewise, Žižek resolves the tension in Dionysius' thought between the desire to affirm materiality and the desire to escape it by making two moves: firstly, he rejects the existence of a pure source of transcendent otherness outside of the material world. Everything that is, is material. Second, he sides not with the masculine desire for completeness, perfection, a clear line of patriarchal

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

inheritance and an end in God the Father who holds all things together, but with the feminine principle of the non-all. Everything that *is*, is material, but materiality itself is non-all, inherently incomplete, failed. Completeness and perfect union are neither possible nor desirable: instead we find that the abject, the liminal, the seeping fluids and inconsistencies which both philosophy and theology seek to expel by the silencing and exclusion of women are right at the heart of every identity. Theology and philosophy confront one another, then, not as master and slave, to kill or be killed, to possess or incorporate, but as two imperfect, incomplete entities, who might, improper though it seems, come together without absorbing one another to give birth to something which is neither of them, to something which is new. As Jean-Luc Nancy says, in his Lacan-inflected meditations on sexuality, newness and pleasure are not the same thing: although “there are regions we might choose where genitility and therefore generation are tied up with eroticisation [...] the significance of the one need not be exhausted in the other: pleasure and the child might be two distinct figures of incalculable excess, but it might not be possible to superimpose one on the other.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Universalism**

Where the notion of divine simplicity means that Dionysius envisages everything that is both beginning from and returning to union with God, the emphasis of Žižek’s work is not on union but on separation. Žižek is fond of citing Jesus’ strongest rejection of family allegiance:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality*, translated by Anne O’Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 17. This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY: INTERCHANGE IN THE WAKE OF GOD on 24 May 2017, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Mystical-Theology-and-Continental-Philosophy-Interchange-in-the-Wake-of/Lewin-Podmore-Williams/p/book/9781472478610>.

but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.<sup>29</sup>

But he also quotes approvingly Chesterton's argument that "Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces [...] All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separate and sets free."<sup>30</sup> Kinship is to be rejected precisely in the name of love for one's kin; to reject inheritance, family, genealogy is to liberate both oneself and others, to recognise that it is division and separation, not union or absorption which constitute life, which open up the possibility of love.

There is no such thing as a pure line of descent; philosophy and theology cannot lay claim to unsullied and coherent identities because no identity is unsullied or coherent. For Žižek, even nothingness is not at one with itself but inconsistent and antagonistic, and every identity is riven by internal conflict, by failure. The drive is the logic of borders, of separation between things, of that which shatters and disrupts economy. Similarly, what constitutes universality for Žižek is not the universal participation of all things in the single, simple source of all Being but precisely the rupturing of all things, the fact that every identity is constituted by an internal inconsistency. What is universal is failure. Every cultural iteration of the difference between men and women is a particular attempt to grapple with the universal problem of sexual difference, which in turn is ultimately the universal problem of the incompleteness of every individual. Every society is a

---

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 10:34-36 (NRSV).

<sup>30</sup> From Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, quoted in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 39.

particular attempt to resolve the class struggle which constitutes society.

For Žižek, this means two things. First, that, as above, what is universal to every particular identity is what is excluded. And second, that what is at stake is the meaning of the universal. Žižek speaks about the “concrete universality” which is the totality of every attempt to grapple with a particular problem.<sup>31</sup> The concrete universality of the Bible “lies in the very totality of its historically determined readings”; the concrete universality of class struggle is the totality of human history.<sup>32</sup> And because what happens later can change the meaning of what comes before, this means that everything is at stake in the struggle for the way in which the universal problem will be imperfectly articulated in this particular instance. The universal is neither safe, as for so much of classical Christian philosophy and theology, nor hopelessly unattainable, as for so much continental philosophy in the deconstructive tradition. Nor, crucially, is it a colonizing universal: “concrete universality”, Žižek says, “does not concern the relationship of a particular to the wider Whole [...] but rather *the way it relates to itself*, the way its very particular identity is split from within.”<sup>33</sup> What is universal, ultimately, is failure; but what matters more than anything is *how* we fail.

### **Conclusion: miscegenous liaisons**

For Dionysius’ mystical theology, desire reaches its climax in the mystical encounter with God which is also, within the structure of Dionysius’ theology, the celebration of the eucharist, an act which is no more a final resting point than the climax of the sexual encounter from which it draws

---

<sup>31</sup> *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 359

<sup>32</sup> *Less Than Nothing*, 359.

<sup>33</sup> *Less than Nothing*, 361-362.

so much of its analogical heft. The pedigree of God's chosen people may have culminated, for Christianity, in the person of Jesus Christ; and yet the church carries on, spinning out new lines of descent which are as tangled and scandalous as any human genealogy, loath though it is to acknowledge the more disreputable members of its family. Philosophy, too, has struggled to scrub the taint of theology from its bloodline. What Žižek's work offers, I have tried to suggest, is a surprisingly queer reading of philosophical and theological genealogy: an infidel fidelity to the theological and philosophical inheritance with which he, like us, continues to grapple.

Philosophy and theology remain, perhaps, uncomfortably close cousins, both at times a little reluctant to acknowledge the acts they have accomplished together in the mystical darkness of unknowing. And yet perhaps what we ought to ask of them in their relationship to one another is that question so beloved of chaste Catholic clerics: can their intercourse bring into being new life?