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BY EUGENE MCCARRAHER | 12.23.03

A Merry Marxy Christmas

A specter has been haunting Marxism —the specter of Christianity. Routed politically by capitalist globalism, and hard-pressed to identify any really existing hope, some prominent Marxists have turned to Christianity for inspiration and revision. Terry Eagleton has reclaimed his Catholic past, and now exhorts his comrades to read theology. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have invoked St. Francis as a model of “the future life of communist militancy.” And Alain Badiou, arguably France’s foremost Marxist, has upheld St. Paul as the pre-secular augur of revolutionary universalism.

Now comes (or rather, returns) Slavoj Zizek, seeking to unite the existential and political import of Christian faith—extracted from its “religious” trappings—with a revitalized revolutionary Marxism. Zizek has been racing back and forth on the road to Damascus for some time now, and his new book retraces some of that journey, with all the nerdy erudition and promiscuous allusion that are his intellectual signature. Coming as close as an atheist probably can to a bold assertion of faith, Zizek becomes the godless theologian of our time, exhibiting all the sacred foolishness of that hopeful and futile vocation.

Zizek isn’t the first Marxist to write theologically. His title refers to philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin’s story of a “puppet called ‘historical materialism’” whose actions were guided by a little dwarf—theology—which, while “wizened and out of sight,” made the puppet “a match for anyone.” But Zizek is the first Marxist to write theology in a post-Marxist, post-secular age. Historical materialism, he writes, now must operate “under cover,” at the same time that religion and theology have been granted “a new lease on life” in a deconstructed world where the sacred and the secular are no longer in opposition. So Zizek reverses Benjamin’s thesis: The puppet called *theology* must now enlist a dwarf named *Marxism*, who animates and guides believers while concealed.

Orthodox Christians might reject this kind of compliment, but Zizek’s theological turn is neither cynical nor shallow. For Zizek, the “perverse core of Christianity”—its abolition of the opposition between humanity and divinity as embodied by Jesus as God’s human son—is identical to the kernel of Marxist materialism. Indeed, Zizek advises every Marxist to “go through the Christian experience.”

Zizek affirms Christian orthodoxy against both New Age beliefs (exemplified in Buddhism) and the postmodern Judaism of Jacques Derrida, the French critic known for his “deconstructions,” and Emmanuel Levinas, the French philosopher whose meditations on “otherness” have permeated philosophy, theology and post-colonial theory. According to Zizek, these religious constellations, which are protected among educated Westerners by the protocols of multiculturalism and diversity, disable critical consciousness and dampen political passion.

The Buddhist call for “compassion,” “oneness,” and “harmony,” he argues, marks it as “the paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism,” enabling its devotees to participate in market competition while effecting the appearance of serenity. (Zizek sees no distinction between Western and Asian Buddhism here, noting that the origins of “corporate Zen” lie in Japanese military and managerial ideology.)

As for postmodern Judaism —what Zizek calls “the hegemonic attitude of today’s intellectuals”—its insistence on the utter inviolability of “the other” is a betrayal of “the most precious elements of Jewish spirituality itself.” Judaism is not a simple “respect for the other,” but rather an experience as “the other” that is structured by adherence to Talmudic law, which differs from pagan or secular law in two crucial respects. First, Jewish law is both social and divine, and this divine justice, which is radically different from social law, relativizes all human laws. Second, divine justice seeks not the restoration of a “balance” disturbed by human hubris, but a messianic “event” wherein “all wrongs done to individuals will be undone.” Thus, playing with an old anti-Semitic canard, Zizek affirms that diaspora Jews are rootless cosmopolitans in their distance from “the society in which they live.”

But as Zizek reminds us so unecumenically, Christianity is the messianic arrival, that is, a religion for living “in the aftermath of

the event.” More forcefully than ever, Zizek argues that Christian theology anticipates Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism.

To Zizek, the concept of sin—the estrangement between us and God—must be understood as an illusion in order for us to reclaim personal agency. Bridging this chasm, “the law”—a term central to both Judaism and Lacanian psychology—is arduous, demanding and reparative. Particularly in its Jewish form, the law mandates a social solidarity that points to messianic reconciliation and justice. For Christians, says Zizek, Christ overcomes this gap by paying for passage over it with his life. “We are one with God,” Zizek writes, “only when God is no longer one with himself, but abandons himself”—a kind of divine suicide and submergence in humanity that enables and even forces us to recover political agency.

When translated politically, this pursuit becomes Marxism, whose liberating orthodoxy is illustrated, for Zizek, by St. Paul and the 19th Century English Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton. Following Paul, Zizek contends that redemption is not rejection of the law but rather the end of that condition in which “the subject experiences its relationship to the law as that of subjection.” In psycho-political terms, redemption is the realization that “the law” is our genuine desire, and that complete identification with that desire requires collective action for its fruition. Thus, Paul was the first Leninist, and the early Christians were a revolutionary party, a dress rehearsal for Bolshevism, “a new collectivity held together ... by fidelity to a cause,” an “unconditional universalism” that suspended all social distinctions.

Chesterton’s conviction of “the thrilling romance of orthodoxy” serves Zizek as a model for revolutionary ardor. Chesterton pointed out that paganism’s reminder of the death that awaits even the most pleasurable life leads to the deepest *and most apolitical* form of melancholy. But Christians, believing that creation is good and that life is eternal, know, as Zizek puts it, “an infinite joy beneath the deceptive surface of guilt and renunciation.” (Pointing to Tolkien’s books, Zizek remarks that “only a devout Christian could have imagined such a magnificent pagan universe.”) Zizek also affirms Chesterton’s portrayal of orthodoxy as “daring and perilous.” Contemptuous of the fashionable and anemic suspicion of transcendent causes—incarnate in the calorie-counting hedonism of our “health-conscious” middle classes—Zizek asserts that real life consists in “*the very excess of life*: the awareness that there is something for which we are ready to risk our life.”

But still we will perish and rot, at least, in the terms of Zizek’s post-secular theology. Zizek’s Christianity is a Cross without a Resurrection, and I would maintain, as a Christian and a socialist, that this neglect both obscures his theological vision and undermines his political hope. (Here, I ask readers—a mostly secular audience, I’m sure—for their indulgence.) Because he still sees the atonement as a cosmic yet incomplete debt cancellation, Zizek doesn’t fully appreciate Paul’s point: that we rise as well as *die* with Christ—that is, all debts are erased in what Zizek calls this “New Beginning.” Moreover, for Christians, the “infinite joy” at which Zizek marvels rests on a belief from which he recoils. Christians’ collective experience of joy in the world is inaugurated by faith in a triumph over death, a victory won by God’s power—a power we share but which we are not. Zizek’s Pauline theology collapses because, to put it squarely, it does not assert the exterior reality of God, on which Christian joy and political commitment must inevitably rest. However empowering Zizek’s formulation seems, it rests on an interiorized—and, Christians must maintain, ultimately empty—space through which we end up pursuing our own shadows.

If socialists must confront the “core of Christianity” for existential and political wisdom—and I think Zizek is right to assert that they must—then they must engage its *religious* form. As Zizek, Eagleton and other Marxists are realizing, left intellectuals must at least suspend if not cease their hostilities toward theology. When they do, they’ll discover a rigorous and vibrant tradition of social criticism and moral imagination. Welcome, it says, to the Paradise of the Real. ■

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