

Monstrosity Exhibition

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*Asylums with doors open wide,
Where people had paid to see inside,
For entertainment they watch his body twist
Behind his eyes he says, 'I still exist.'
This is the way, step inside...*

*You'll see the horrors of a faraway place,
Meet the architects of law face to face.
See mass murder on a scale you've never seen,
And all the ones who try hard to succeed.
This is the way, step inside.*

–Joy Division, “Atrocity Exhibition”

Creston Davis has pulled off a remarkable encounter by setting John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek up against each other in *The Monstrosity of Christ*.¹ His introduction lays out the theological stakes of this exchange, which involves both the reevaluation of Hegel’s philosophy for philosophical and theological thinking, and more importantly, the resources of theology to oppose contemporary capitalism (4). In the 1990s, both Milbank’s invigorated Radical Orthodoxy and Žižek’s strikingly fresh Hegelian-Lacanian philosophy jolted readers out of their moribund complacency with regard to capitalism. Both offered new resources to think and act against and beyond the suffocating “infinite undulations of the snake,” as Gilles Deleuze puts it in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”² Today, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we are much better placed to evaluate their respective contributions. This exchange on paradox vs. dialectic is a clear and illuminating encounter that shows not only how united Žižek and Milbank are on what they oppose, but also how profoundly divergent their theological visions are.

In this book, Žižek throws his lot in with Protestant death of God theology, as fundamentally shaped by Hegel’s thought and expressed theologically in the work of Thomas J.J. Altizer, whereas Milbank elaborates his positive Catholic vision of Christian harmony and transcendence. Structurally, however, this is not an equal exchange, and Žižek has both the first (after Davis’s introduction) and last word, with Milbank caught in the middle. Furthermore, this debate spills beyond the book into the pages of a recent issue of the journal *Political Theology*,

where both reiterate their positions and where ultimately, as Žižek admits, “our exchange has exhausted its potentials.”³ Žižek is correct in the terms in which it takes place, although that does not mean that the questions themselves are exhausted; in fact, in the same issue of *Political Theology* Joshua Delpech-Ramey raises an important question, namely, whether it might be possible to foresee and hold open other versions of transcendence besides the orthodox Catholic one that Milbank champions.⁴

So who is right? Well, to employ Žižek’s provocative understanding of the Hegelian triad, we have to understand first that neither Milbank nor Žižek is fundamentally correct in their theological understanding of the Christ. Second, there is the temptation to imagine that the correct position is “between” Žižek and Milbank, and this is how sublation is usually understood. But we cannot sublimate Milbank and Žižek and get to the authentic, true version of Christ. What Žižek’s interpretation of Hegel teaches us is that to get to the right meaning of something, Christ in this case, you have to subtract. So, the correct interpretation is a subtraction from Žižek’s position. In this sense, the “true” theological position lies not between Žižek and Milbank, but rather between Žižek and John D. Caputo, as I will explain. I will also associate this position with Deleuze, and reflect briefly on the monstrosity – the Crucifixion and Resurrection – of Christ and the death of God from the perspective of Deleuze’s thought.

Another lesson of Žižek’s interpretation of Hegel is that you cannot get to the correct reading directly; you have to go through the wrong ones. So, in the spirit of Hegel and Žižek, I will go through the reading of Milbank on paradox and then the reading of Žižek on dialectic and show why they are “wrong,” before turning to the right interpretation. In his response to Žižek, Milbank elaborates his impressive Catholic vision of transcendence. In contrast to Žižek’s dialectical version of Christianity, Milbank claims that “there is a radically Catholic humanist alternative to this, which sustains transcendence only because of its commitment to incarnational paradox” (117). Dialectics, Protestant Christianity, and all of secular modernity is wrong, because it forecloses Catholic transcendence and ends up with an atheist nihilism. Material reality can only be meaningful if there is “recognition of a mediating link between matter and spirit” that atheistic materialism denies (125). Milbank’s incredible erudition is marshaled to force an unavoidable either/or: either dialectical atheist nihilism or paradoxical Catholic transcendence that can along retrieve and restore beauty in a harmonious world (158, 165). He gives a phenomenological account of driving along windy roads in the mist, from which things emerge and stand out in an evocatively intense way (160–63). The background mist and the forms that stand out from it exist “in a mutually constitutive tension” that is experienced as “mutually affirming” (163). Ultimately, transcendence mediates material reality in a way that allows it to be experienced as beautiful and meaningful in itself, and without this Catholic transcendence we lose the thread that stitches our world together for us as a world. This “genuine mediation [...] *remains to the end* – even in God and as God” (166).

It is because we have meaningful, true and beautiful experiences that we know and trust that transcendence mediates and provides for the possibility of these experiences in a paradoxical way. Milbank claims that “the soil of the finite, within our experience [...] paradoxically ‘runs

out' into the sands of the infinite" (168). I do not want to deny the richness of either Milbank's language or these phenomenal experiences, but I do think that he exploits them in order to paint his over-arching metaphysical picture of a harmonious, transcendent world that is ultimately an illusion. Not that beauty does not exist, but it's not the only thing that does exist, and the existence of beauty does not exclude its opposite. Milbank wants to have his transcendent cake and eat it materially too. Is that too much to ask? Yes and no. It's natural to want cake but that doesn't mean that some grain or wheat doesn't have to die in order for you to bake and eat it.

The idea of the God-Man, which is the paradox of the Incarnation, "may be an absurd mystery, but it strangely seems to clarify the mystery of the huge gulf between human beings and mere animals" (170). Here Milbank sets up a gulf in material physical reality that seems odd given his desire for material and metaphysical harmony. Why are animals "mere" animals? Because they lack "creativity, self-mutation, and new accessions of power" that are the provenance of human beings (170). Milbank wants to re-enchant nature, all of it, although he still runs up against some difficulties, such as, in this passage, the gulf between humans and animals. His Anglo-Catholic vision is no doubt appealing, but it seems incredible in relation to the complexity of experience, unless that experience is honed and shaped into the forced choice that Milbank wants us to face. On the one hand, modern culture operates with an explicit or implicit notion of progress, such that non-modern values are seen as irrelevant and obsolete. Milbank paints us an attractive picture of a non-modern world, and these non-modern values are important insofar as they provide alternatives to modern and contemporary capitalism and its value system. On the other hand, Milbank's project seems impossible and undesirable in its attempt to restore a Catholic world that is medieval at its heart, because it is based on an imperial vision of Christianity that is incompatible with a pluralistic world no matter how dressed up in postmodern terms.

Milbank stresses the contingency of Western history. He claims that "one should ascribe the historical triumph of the modern rather than the ancient model not to any outworking of a material logic but to contingent processes of ideological and political struggle" (183). He asserts the contingency of Protestant modernity, and he appeals to this contingency to counter the inexorability of its processional logic, but he fails to radicalize that contingency to Christianity itself. Why should Christianity have emerged as the religion of the West, other than as a result of processes of "ideological and political struggle"? Why not Stoicism, paganism, Buddhism, or Islam? Milbank sees the problem with Protestant/modern/dialectical supercessionism, and he offers an alternative, but at the same time he legislates an unavoidable and unsurpassable medieval worldview. He claims that "we are still living out a 'certain' Middle Ages that is univocalist, voluntarist, nominalistically equivocal, and arcanelly gnostic," that we mistake for modernity (218). "It is time," however, "that we abandoned the paganism of progress and recovered a more authentic Middle Epoch" (218). This Epoch would necessarily be Christian and Western.⁵

Žižek pursues to its radical end this logic of contingency and necessity, which is also necessarily Western and Christian. But he also perceives that the universality of Western

Christianity is simply the flip side of the universal logic of capital, which is truly universal at a global level. Žižek's gospel is not ordinarily seen as "good news," but he is a better theologian than Milbank, at least in terms of radical theology as opposed to orthodox theology. Žižek says that "my claim is that it is Milbank who is in effect guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism: in my atheism, I am more Christian than Milbank" (248). Most forms of orthodox theology are heretical in the etymological sense – they consist of picking and choosing histories, rules, doctrines, and beliefs that are then imagined as a tradition and a truth. Žižek opposes this fantastic wishful thinking of theology with his hard-core Christian atheism. Here the truth of Christianity is that God dies on the cross: "Incarnation is the birth of Christ, and after his death, there is neither Father nor Son but 'only' the Holy Spirit, the spiritual substance of the religious community" (33). The lesson of Christ's life and death is that God becomes human and dies, really dies, and does not continue to exist. Of course Žižek does not believe that God really expires, but rather that what the crucifixion teaches us is that God does not exist, but not in the stereotypically atheist way. God really doesn't exist, and the Other does not exist, and the crucifixion is the dialectical gap between God and Godself, which is the same gap at the heart of human being, as well as reality as a whole.

Žižek appeals to Altizer's apocalyptic Hegelian theology as a counterpoint to the "soft postmodern theology" of Caputo, which in its post-secular guise of religion without religion is "aseptic, lifeless, bloodless, lacking the properly religion passion [...] in comparison with someone like Altizer" (260). Žižek ends up affirming the radical core of Christianity over against post-secular religious appropriations of postmodern insights dressed up in Christian garb. This can be rhetorically appealing, but it is also somewhat disingenuous, because Žižek appropriates these same postmodern insights and then positions himself as somehow beyond them. Notions like violence, truth, hardcore theology and sexual frankness appeal to him as ways to tweak the political correctness of contemporary multiculturalism, even though Žižek personally is not nearly as monstrous as he wants to appear at times. This is not in any way to dismiss Žižek's philosophy, which is incredibly important. His reading of Hegel and German idealism through Lacan is absolutely stunning and brilliant, and his analysis of popular culture through films, music and other phenomena is sharp and powerful. Furthermore, Žižek is resolutely Leftist and refuses to compromise with corporate capitalism. Finally, his religious insights are sincere and extremely relevant. I just think that he exaggerates his distance from postmodernism and its representatives like Derrida, Caputo, and others, in order to appeal to readers who are turned off by stereotypical distortions of these thinkers. At the same time, there is a sense in which the movement of postmodernism is a politically conservative phenomenon, which is why Derrida resisted the term, despite its embrace by so many English speaking readers.

So in his reading of Hegel and Christianity, Žižek emphasizes irreducible conflicts, deadlocks that he exaggerates in his dialectical readings, and this is from where Milbank draws the conclusion of nihilism. But I think that Milbank goes too far; these dialectical deadlocks are not nihilistic because they are ultimately resolved, but the resolution is not a conventional sublation. Rather, the resolution is the cutting of a Gordian knot, the dissolution of the conflict as such.

However, the question remains to what extent Žižek has over-emphasized the conflictual nature of the deadlock itself in order to provide his own brilliant solution. Žižek asserts that “something traumatic erupts in death-of-God theology, something that is covered up by postmodern theology,” which is the insight that all of Christianity consists of a psychoanalytic defense mechanism deployed against “the traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/ resurrection” (260). So the event of Christianity is an incredibly traumatic event, as one might imagine the death of Christ on the cross should be, but Christianity itself as a religion consists of an incredible repression of the reality and truth of that event. But there is always a return of the repressed and this traumatic apocalyptic kernel keeps insisting itself, which is what keeps Christianity going, and also what drives Western history. So is the spirit of Christianity also the spirit of the West? And what relation does this spirit have to the spirit of capitalism? Does capitalism also have a traumatic core, or is its core the complete absence of trauma, at least at its center? Does not capitalism always spit out squashed birds at the margins, like a Hegelian machine run amuck?

Žižek says that “for Christianity, the true miracle is not the dead Christ walking around, but the love in the collective of believers” (291). But isn’t that also what Caputo says in *The Weakness of God* when he opposes the miracle of the event to magic and resuscitated bodies? Maybe it’s simply that Caputo doesn’t devote enough time to what Žižek says is the condition of the miracle, which is “the bird’s body squashed somewhere – like Christ on the Cross, this supreme squashed bird” (291). The reference here is to a magic trick from the film *The Prestige*. A little bird disappears, seemingly killed, and then reappears miraculously. When a little boy asserts that they are not the same bird, the magician denies it, but later you see him, as Žižek explains, “throwing a squashed bird into a trash can – the boy was right” (286). Hegelian synthesis seems like a cheap trick, but you have to keep in mind there is always a squashed bird somewhere. Christianity fastens itself upon the squashed bird. In her novel *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood has an unnamed narrator come upon a dead heron senselessly killed and strung up in the Canadian wilderness. Her character reflects:

Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn’t kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing deer, that is Christ also. And we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks.⁶

Žižek says that Hegel is the true Christian philosopher, because his speculative dialectical standpoint demonstrates that the Crucifixion and the Resurrection “should be perceived not as two separate events, but as *a purely formal parallax shift on one and the same event*: Crucifixion

is Resurrection – to see this, one has only to include oneself in the picture. When the believers gather, mourning Christ’s death, their shared spirit is the resurrected Christ” (291, Žižek’s emphasis). This is correct; the only distance is the necessary temporal delay that is required to shift from the first position (Crucifixion) to the second (Resurrection). And also to keep one’s eye on the trick, because there are always at least two birds. Christianity focuses one’s attention on the broken body of Jesus precisely so that believers do not pay any attention to the other bird(s), whether Jewish or pagan. Or today, Muslim.

The fact that according to the interpretation of René Girard Christianity is the sole religion that exposes the mechanism of mimetic violence and scapegoating does not mean that it ceases to function; it functions all the more effectively and insidiously for all that by scapegoating the religions like Islam that do not overcome substitutional violence. Take also the more traditional claim, that Christianity is the religion that absolutizes Christ’s sacrifice in order to put an end to sacrifice. But sacrifice does not end; it gets taken to a whole ‘nother level, as Nietzsche pointed out in *The Genealogy of Morals*. We could say, with Weber, that capitalism is the highest and most sublime spirit of Christianity, because sacrifice is entirely overcome, and the most selfish greed accords with the best and most perfect wealth. There is something monstrous about all of this, including the elimination of externalities that allows us to drive birds and other animals to extinction while celebrating them in zoos and on nature shows.

I claim that Deleuze offers resources to better understand the death of God and the monstrosity of Christ than either Milbank or Žižek. Deleuze’s notion of the death of God is less Christocentric than Žižek’s, and in *Difference and Repetition*⁷ he explains it in reference to time. In Chapter 2, “Repetition for Itself,” Deleuze elaborates three syntheses of time, which roughly correspond to present (habit), past (memory), and future (eternal return). The transition from the second to the third synthesis occurs along a break that is opened up by Kantian transcendental philosophy. According to Deleuze, “if the greatest initiative of transcendental philosophy was to introduce the form of time into thought as such, then this pure and empty form in turn signifies indissolubly the death of God, the fractured I and the passive self” (87). Instead of setting the self in time in an ontological sense, Kant places time within the self, and this division between the active (apperceptive) and passive self splits the self in two.

Why would the splitting of the self lead to the death of God? Because Descartes founds the modern idea of God upon the self as the *cogito*. “God survives as long as the I enjoys a subsistence, a simplicity and an identity which expresses the entirety of its resemblance to the divine” (86). Deleuze claims that the pure and empty form of time that Kant isolates at the heart of the self also accomplishes the death of God. This is a non-dialectical, non-Hegelian version of the death of God.⁸ The pure and empty form of time constitutes the third and final synthesis of time for Deleuze, and it is the break or *caesura* of this form of time that opens onto a future. The past, the present and the future are all distinct forms of repetition, and it is the third form of time that concerns the eternal return, and Deleuze’s appropriation of Nietzsche.

The “repetition of the future as eternal return” is a kind of repetition that “affects only the new, what is produced under the conditions of default and by the intermediary of

metamorphosis” (90). The conventional reading of Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return is the return of the same; the idea that everything returns exactly and identically. Deleuze claims that this is a misunderstanding of the eternal return: only what becomes returns, or what becomes differently. The eternal return is repetition by excess, and it excludes all identity, including “my own identity, the identity of the self, the world, and God” (91). If Deleuze is right, and only that which is different returns, then there is no self-identity that can be substantialized or eternalized, including that of God.

To think the death of God is to think the death of the self, and the impossibility of human and divine identity. This death, however, is an opening, a passage not to some higher form of identity, but to a future that is different because it returns, or repeats. This death does not lead to a future resurrection, but in fact it is directly resurrection. Resurrection properly understood is the new, the different that emerges out of the process of repetition or iteration that becomes the future. We can attempt to cling to our identity, but it is a false identity, and a more reactionary kind of death, death as claustrophobic suffocation.

With Deleuze, though, we can think about the death of Jesus as the death of God, as the death of identity that opens onto a future, a repetition of difference beyond identity. In terms of Deleuze’s book *The Logic of Sense*,⁹ Jesus offers up a body that suffers passion and death, which is the reality of his crucifixion, whereas his resurrection refers to the *sense* of this death, which appears nonsensical in conventional terms. For Deleuze, there are two series: a series of signs and a series of bodies, and the series of signs express what the series of bodies endure (23). An event is the sense that the series of signs express, but the impetus for an event is embedded in (a) body, and occurs as a wound. Events are actualized in sense as the expression of a trauma, a cut, or a wound, which is why “every event is a kind of plague, war, wound or death” (151). Christ is the sign of a death/body that is proclaimed by his followers like Peter and Paul as life, an event that has revolutionary sense. The cut of the crucifixion is the intensity that drives the repetition that constitutes Christianity, and this process is singular to Christianity but not exclusive to it. We could also think about cosmic Buddha-bodies, ethical Jewish bodies, whirling Sufi bodies, and subtle Hindu bodies, among others, that constitute different dispersals, and distinct relations between body and sense.

It is not that Jesus dies, and then he is resurrected, and that event holds the promise for our own resurrection after death so long as we believe in it. It is not that Jesus dies, and he is then resurrected in us, the community of believers in Christ, as Žižek has it. It is that the message of Jesus’ death is the resurrection, purely and simply. Christ dies, and this is precisely good news. Everyone dies. In his book *The Weakness of God*,¹⁰ Caputo provides a thinking of resurrection that has affinities with Deleuze, even though Caputo does not explicitly refer to Deleuze in his discussion.

In chapter 11 of *The Weakness of God*, in his reading of the Lazarus story, Caputo claims that “rebirth and resurrection – that is what the kingdom is all about” (237). This resurrection, that Jesus performs in the case of Lazarus, is the “singular transformation from death to life,” but it is a not a magical transformation that reverses the decomposition of a rotting body (238). Caputo

discusses the time of the world in terms of ruined time, which is evil. Not that worldly temporality is evil, but the crushing of possibilities is evil, the destructive power of pain and death. In contrast to ruined time, Caputo brings in what Levinas calls “the time of salvation,” which pertains to the event. Salvation means “being saved from ruined time for a new time” (241).

The redemption of a person like Lazarus seems to mean either the resuscitation of his body or the elevation of his soul to a state of eternal life, but I do not think that Caputo’s view of time is either reversible or dialectic/dualistic. Salvation is a miracle of new life, but it is wholly situated “not in a heavenly pleasure but in the pain of the present” (252). We can only be saved by the other, by the appearance of a new birth, a child as the miracle of a new beginning, beyond death but not outside of death. Lazarus is also a squashed bird. According to Caputo, “Neither time nor salvation, neither rebirth nor resurrection, is possible in the solitary ego” (252). Reading Caputo in the context of Deleuze, resurrection can be understood not as the self-transcendence of the ego into another, higher (soul) form of ego. Rather, life is a resurrection or rebirth, because it is predicated upon and conditioned by death, even as death is only possible for what lives. Lazarus is not a person who was dead and then was physiologically restored to life by some magic spell cast by Jesus, and Jesus is not another (very special, even super-human) person who was physiologically restored to life magically by a transcendent divine being.

As I read Caputo and Deleuze, the message of Jesus is that death is resurrection and rebirth, and that the only kind of death that does not constitute resurrection is the suffocation-death of an enclosed or imprisoned ego. So long as we try to preserve and maintain our ego, our persistent identity, we can only die. But only insofar as we release our identity and recognize that we are not, the death of the self is the resurrection because it is the gate by way of becoming anew. Becoming is becoming differently, becoming in and as difference, and the death of God and self are the only possibilities for resurrection, because that death is resurrection itself, which is immediately divine. We can either reactively cling to life, which delivers it over to death, and then our death seals this death-in-life cutting it off in an impossible manner; or we can embrace and accept death as the opening up and out of ourselves as we recur differently and eternally, but not as us.

As I read Milbank and Žižek, Milbank wants a theology in which death simply has no place – there are no squashed birds. Žižek, on the other hand, comes incredibly close to the position I have just set out in terms of Deleuze and Caputo, but he wants to assert a quasi-dogmatic mode of Christianity along with the formal parallax that he explicates. Žižek’s Hegelian framework threatens to overwhelm and over-determine the process of repetition, insofar as history appears as the working out of an internal (Protestant) teleology. So to sum up my response to this extraordinary book: the correct theoretical understanding of the monstrosity of Christ lies precisely between Žižek and Caputo, held together by the tension between Caputo’s affirmation of Jesus’ genuinely paradoxical – as opposed to Milbank’s contrived paradoxes – anarchic logic of the kingdom in *The Weakness of God* and Žižek’s dialectical elaboration of the Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).
2. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992), 3-7, <http://www.n5m.org/n5m2/media/texts/deleuze.htm>
3. John Milbank, "Without Heaven There is Only Hell on Earth: 15 Verdicts on Žižek's Response," *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010): 126–35; Slavoj Žižek, "The Atheist Wager," *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010): 136–40, 136.
4. Joshua Delpech-Ramey, "Supernatural Capital: A Note on the Žižek-Milbank Debate," *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010): 121–125.
5. See Milbank's recent essay pitting the Christian West against Islam in stereotypically conservative ways: "Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Islam," August 24, 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2010/08/24/2991778.htm>
6. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Random House, 1998), 141.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
8. We could say that Deleuze is right ontologically, that there is no separation between death and resurrection, but Žižek and Žižek's interpretation of Hegel is right epistemologically or in terms of conscious recognition: there is always a delay between the recognition of death as death and the realization of death as resurrection. So thinking and understanding operate dialectically, but the truth or reality of the matter is that it resurrection as repetition of difference is a non-dialectical process.
9. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
10. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).