

An Interview with Slavoj Žižek “On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love”

Joshua Delpech-Ramey

Journal of Philosophy and Scripture

(Note: An unpublished article by Slavoj Žižek which complements and extends the discussion pursued in the following interview will be included in the Fall 2004 issue of JPS)

JPS: Of late, the writings of St. Paul have become for you, as well as for Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, a touchstone for radical thought. You seem to see in Paul’s works something of a revolutionary manual, and in the founding of the community of believers a supreme example of the structure and effect of an authentic revolutionary act. For Badiou, Paul articulates a general structure of universality. But how separable is Paul’s gesture in founding Christianity from the particularities of Christianity itself? How general are the lessons one can learn from Paul? Can or should those lessons be separated out, as form from content, from their particularity as aspects of the history of Christianity, itself? Or are the particularities of Christianity somehow, of the essence of this gesture?

SZ: My problem with Badiou, although I admire his book very much, is that Badiou . . . allows for only four truth procedures: science, art, politics, and love (and then philosophy is just the study of these genetic procedures . . .). The point is that his supreme example of a truth-procedure—event, and so on—its implicit model is a kind of religious interpellation. So no

wonder that the best example, it’s religious! But paradoxically there is no place for religion. You know the irony is that the supreme example of the seminal structure of truth event that he tries to articulate, and it doesn’t count as a truth-event.

So what he does is something similar to Heidegger—there is a long history to this. As we know the early Heidegger started with the same reference, St. Paul. He [Heidegger] I think used the term *formales anzeigen*, formal indication. The idea being that, as Heidegger would have put it, religious experience is just an ontic experience, it doesn’t really have this transcendental dignity, and so on, but you find there a certain formal structure which can be then generalized, abstracted from its particular context into a kind of transcendental a priori. But still what is not answered, as you said, is that we cannot simply arrange this and say it’s a simply empirical concept. Why this structure?

The second point I want to make here is, I think the reason that Badiou does not deploy this, as I tried to develop in the long chapter on Badiou and St. Paul in *The Ticklish Subject*, the key question for me is negativity in the sense of death. For him, in Badiou’s reading of St. Paul, the death of Christ, as he puts it, has no inherent meaning whatsoever—it’s just to prepare the site for the event. All that matters is resurrection life. This is connected with a very complex philosophical-theological topic . . . you may have noticed if you read Badiou, Badiou has some kind of natural, gut-feeling resistance toward the topic of death and finitude. For him, death and finitude, animality and so on, being-towards-death, death-drive—he uses the term sometimes in a purely non-conceptual way, “death drive, decadence” as if we were reading some kind of naïve Marxist liberal optimist from the early 20th century. This is all somehow for me interconnected. Although I am also taking St. Paul as a model, a formal structure which can then be applied to revolutionary emancipatory collectivities, and so on, nonetheless I try to ground it in a specific Christian content, which again for me

focuses precisely on Christ's death, [his] death and resurrection. I am trying even to identify the two. The idea that resurrection follows death, the idea that these are two narrative events, this is at the narrative level of what Hegel would have called *vorstellungen*, representations. Actually, the two of them are even united. That is to say that Christ's death, in the Hegelian reading, is the disappearance of disappearance. It is in itself already what becomes for itself the new community.

What interests me is how precisely to distinguish Christ's death from this old boring topic—and all the old materialist critics of Christianity like to point this out: what's the big news, don't you have this sacrificial death of God in all pagan religions? Ah ah! You don't. The structure is totally different if you read it closely: already at the most superficial level, after Christ's death what you get is Holy Spirit, which is something totally different than in previous societies. All this about Isis, and so on, this rather boring circular myth, where basically god dies . . . you know, it's like, people are disordered, things go bad, but then there is the phoenix, everything is good again—no wonder this version is so popular, like even in *The Lion King*, where you have a kind of Hamlet-version where king dies, son redeems, there is a new king and so on . . . Christianity precisely is not this.

This brings us to two further topics. Now in Badiou's reading of psychoanalysis, he totally dismisses death drive. But the paradox for me, as I try to develop in my work, is that death drive is a very paradoxical notion if you read Freud closely. Death drive is basically, I claim, the Freudian term for immortality. Death drive has nothing to do, as Lacan points out, convincingly, with this so-called nirvana principle where everything wants to disappear, and so on. If anything (and because of this I like to read Richard Wagner's operas where you have this), death drive is that which prevents you from dying. Death drive is that which persists beyond life and death. Again, it's precisely what, in my beloved Stephen King's

horror/science fiction terminology he calls the “undead”: this terrifying insistence beneath death, which is why Freud links death drive to the compulsion to repeat. You know, it can be dead, but it goes on. This terrifying insistence of an undead object.

Point two: This is the big lesson to be learned, with all my criticism (criticism is the vulgar word, my difference of horizon), from Heidegger. The big breakthrough of Heidegger is to totally reconceptualize the notion of finitude. Already we have this in the early Heidegger with special reference to Kant. Already you see precisely how the other of finitude, the big stuff—infinity, eternity, and so on—is a category, modality, horizon of finitude. This was, for Heidegger, Kant's big breakthrough: transcendental as opposed to transcendent is a category of finitude.

All this somehow gets lost, in Badiou. [But] the whole category of “event” works only from the category of finitude. There are events only in finite situations. You can prove it only from his own position. Only for a finite being do you have this infinite work, what he likes to describe, in Christian terms, this trinity of faith, hope, love. Faith that the event did take place, hope in the final state (in Christianity universal redemption, in Marxism I don't know, communism at the end) and love as work, as what is between the two, fidelity to the event and so on. But . . . when in his last work, Badiou tries to articulate the structure of totalitarian danger, he calls “forcing the event,” which means simply to ontologize the event, as if the event were not an infinite process whose place you have to discern in reality, as if the event totally permits its irrealities. But the gap between event and reality, that which is covered up by totalitarianism, is precisely the gap of finitude—so there is something missing at this level in Badiou.

JPS: A fourth term for that triad, as it were, of faith, hope and love?

SZ: Yes, yeah, maybe, but also . . . in these terms, I would say it: what I do like in

Badiou is his clear awareness that the authentic Christian notion of love is something basically very violent and unilateral, it's totally different for me from the pagan notion where love is this kind of universal balance, you love the whole universe, you say yes to everything—no! Love—you find this in Christianity—is one-sided, unilateral. Love means “I love you more than everything”: love is precisely what Buddhists would have called the origin of evil. Love is a kind of radical imbalance. Here I think you get (as I tried to put it in my *Fragile Absolute*) a very fine analysis of this logic of finitude already in the Bible, already in Paul, in Corinthians. It's very mysterious, that part, that paragraph on love [I Corinthians 13]. The mystery is the following one. He [Paul] oscillates basically between two versions, and the key point I think is to read them together. The first one is a kind of radical affirmation of love's priority, in the sense of “even if I got to know everything, and have all the power, without love I would be nothing, etc.” But then two paragraphs later, he says—as if since now we don't know everything—all that we have is love. And I think that the two are to be read together. This is the paradox of Christianity, for me, that it's not God sitting up there and was a good enough guy to come to us . . . what we have to think, in a way, is the self-limitation of divinity itself.

The basic message is that I think there is a certain dimension of Christianity which for more complex reasons is missed, I think, by Badiou, because of his overall view that there is no place for finitude, as for example in his critique of Heidegger where he misses the point. He even goes into this mode where being-toward-death is just the animal level of being threatened . . . although I don't identify Heidegger's being-toward-death with death drive, Badiou is also missing that, because he cannot elevate finitude to its transcendental a priori dignity. He remains precisely, at a certain level, a pre-kantian metaphysician.

JPS: Next let's talk about this idea of the incarnation, as you read it in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, as symbolizing an internal difference, a lack in God. The other side of that speculative judgment is the way you read Christ, from the perspective of finitude. Now for orthodox Christianity, Christ is the icon of God: what can be known of God is seen in Christ. Now for your materialist idiom, you want to say something like “Christ is the icon of humanity, or of what in humanity is not quite human”—is that what is breaking through from the perspective of finitude?

SZ: One thing I would like to specify is that nonetheless I violently reject this so-called “humanist” reading of Christianity, which says that simply, in a kind of Fuerbachian boring statement, that God is only the projection of various aspects of being human, and so on. No, I think this “more in the human than humanity”—you have to take it very radically. The basic message of religion, to put it in a nutshell, is that humanity cannot stand on its own, that you need an otherness, not a natural otherness like the earth or the all-embracing feminine . . . Here I may be approaching not so much gnosticism as certain not a little bit heretical twists, because I want to say not only that humanity only knows God through Christ but that only through Christ does God know himself. We all know that this is a well-known gnostic, or not so much gnostic as a certain mystic tradition or heretical move, this idea that our knowledge of God is divine self-knowledge, and so on.

But this is also how I read Jewish iconoclasm. I don't think Jewish iconoclasm is opposed to Christianity. Those who claim Jews got it correctly, let's not conceive God in an anthropomorphic way, Christians screwed it up in a half-pagan way—no! They don't get it. The true lesson already of Jewish iconoclasm is against this gnostic fake mysticism. The only terrain of the divine is contact with other humans. The divine is not [there] in this gnostic way, you withdraw into some absolute knowledge. Images of God [are not proscribed] because

God is tout autre, beyond, and every image betrays him, but because the space of the divine is not up there, it's here, in human interactions, and I think this is perhaps only brought to a conclusion in Christianity.

But again I cannot emphasize enough, I am not playing the old game, "theology is just the alienated self-image of humanity" and so on. The whole problem is precisely that humanity never coincides with itself.

JPS: Does this have to do with why for you the true anti-type of Christ is not Adam, but Job. Why is that, exactly?

SZ: On the one hand, as we all know, this is one of the standard readings of Christianity, that Job's suffering in a way points towards Christ's suffering.

JPS: But you also, in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, propose the character of Job as the first great critic of ideology. What is uncanny about Job however, is that unlike the modern liberal subject who considers herself as having the legal right to the criticism of the state, of religion, of any authority, etc., Job does not presume that he has the right to criticize God. After God's "answer" to Job—an answer which takes the form of a kind of obscene slide-show of the history of God's power—Job remains silent. How, then, can you claim that Job is the first critic of ideology? How and in what sense are we to interpret Job's silence as critical?

SZ: There is sympathy with God: Job correctly reads this very strange text, this divine boasting: "I created monsters, sea serpents, who are you?" [Job replies:] "I sympathize with you, I know that this is a show to conceal that you are impotent. . ."

Where I see this critical-ideological dimension is more in this—I would really like to write about these three or four guys who confront Job. In these three or four guys you see a spontaneous categorization of different modes of ideology. The first guy is a pretty brutal, simplistic ideologist. He says God is God, you suffer because you

must have done something wrong. The other guys have more and more refined versions and so on. But again, the shocking news for me is that when God appears, you remember he says "every word that Job says is true." In a way Job doesn't even have to answer because God, in a way . . .

JPS: God answers for him?

SZ: Yes, God says everything Job says is true and everything those four ideologists said is false. So God clearly takes sides. This is for me really the single maybe most radical theological breakthrough, especially if you read it with Rene Girard. I don't always follow Girard but here I think he was right that what matters is this parallax as such, that is so uncanny. It's not simply who is right: in a way, nobody is right. The point is not simply that God was wrong . . .

I tend to agree with historicist critics of Christianity about this first scene with the devil. Probably this was a remainder of some previous pagan tradition where you have something like this, a gentleman's conversation between God and devil, let's make a deal, and so on . . . but I wouldn't make too much out of that. OK, they took it, OK! Bricolage, it's how you write sacred books! What interests me more is that you have two perspectives, and you cannot say this or that is the true one. You cannot say simply Job was right, God was cruel, you cannot say it was just illusion, there is this undecided openness. This is for me such a tremendous breakthrough. Why? It's not the usual oriental openness, where all our perspectives are finite. . . it's not just different finite perspectives on some more primordial maternal chaos or whatever. No, the gap is between God and man . . . Never forget this.

That's my thesis: you just have to transpose this radical gap back into God himself and you get Christ. This is the big mystery I'm struggling with. This is in the subtitle of the book [*The Puppet and the Dwarf*], "the perverse core of Christianity." In a way I am sorry for that subtitle because some of my more vulgar materialist

antitheological friends misread it and thought that I was saying Christianity is in itself perverse, and that I want to point to some perverse core in a negative way. Or some people even misread it as if in a kind of vulgar Deleuzian way that I want to assert “yes, Christianity is perverse!”—you know, people who praise perversion as liberation, and so on. No, no none of it!

My desperate problem is how to draw, how to extract the Christian notion of redemption from this financial transaction logic. This is what I’m desperately looking for. Here I think it is crucial to read Christ’s sacrifice not literally as paying a debt. It is also—we should just trust our intuitions here—because the message of Christ’s sacrifice is not “now I take it for you, you can screw it up again.” No, it just opens the space for our struggle, and this is the paradox I like. This is what I like in what maybe is the best chapter of this book, the fifth one [of Puppets]. To put it in very simple terms, Christ’s redemption doesn’t mean that, OK, now we can go watch hard-core movies because we are redeemed each time. No, it’s done, the Messiah is here, it’s done, means that the space is now open for struggle. It’s this nice paradox that the fact that the big thing happened does not mean it’s over. It precisely opens the space for struggle. This is what I find again so incredible. Which is why to the horror of some of my Jewish friends, who doesn’t like this idea that in Christianity everything happened whereas in Judaism the Messiah is always postponed, always to-come, and so on. No, I like here this crazy radicality of Christianity which is that, no, it happened, it already happened. But precisely that doesn’t mean everything is already decided. No, again, what intrigues me is that I find here such a shattering revolution of the entire economy. . .

And another aspect which is linked to this entire economy—and here I do agree with Badiou—I do not agree with his critics who think Paul’s famous “for me there are no Jews nor Greeks” simply means everybody can become a member, it is universally open. Then you can play all these games: if

you are out, then you are not even human, there are only my brothers and if you are not my brother you are not even people. OK, OK, but my point is that Badiou nonetheless is still more precise. I speak here ironically of Badiou’s Leninism. The shattering point is that truth is unilateral, that universal truth, no less universal for that reason, is accessible only from an engaged position. We don’t have, “you are saying this, I am saying that, let’s find the neutral position, the common.” Truth is unilateral.

This is where I think Agamben misreads Badiou (because Agamben’s book is explicitly in polemic with Badiou) precisely concerning universality. What Agamben tries to prove is that Paul’s position is not universality but even double division—you cut a line, a division between those who are in and those who are out within every community. But I would say that precisely this is the Paulinian-Hegelian notion of universality, not universality as a positive encompassing feature. Universality is a line that cuts universally and this is, how shall I put it, absolutely unique in Christianity and this is what we are losing with these gnostic wisdoms and even with political correctness, tolerance, and so on, because the notion of truth there is not that of a fighting truth but that of differences, space open for everything. This notion of truth as painful, truth means you cut a line of difference . . . which is why for me, as I claim, you know that mysterious statement of Christ’s “I came here not to bring peace but a sword”—I don’t think this should be read as “kill the bad guys.” It is a militant work of love.

JPS: A cut within ourselves?

SZ: Yeah, yes! This is why again, in a totally different way (you put it wonderfully) this too, is in a movie that I like, *Fight Club*, where at first, you hit yourself. This is the most difficult part. The change is a change in you. Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, so sadly forgotten today, put it in a very nice way in his essay on liberation, “freedom is the condition of

liberation.” In order to liberate yourself you must be free.

We see this today, with feminists, that the first step in liberation is that you perceive that your situation is unjust. This already is the inner freedom. The problem is not, at first, that the situation for women was bad, but [rather] that they just accepted it as a fact. Even in revolution it goes like this. If you look at the French Revolution, the shift was purely ideological. They overthrew the king when they started to perceive that position as unjustified. Look at it in an objective way. The *ancien régime* was, in the second part of the 18th century, much more liberal and open than before. It’s just that the implicit ethical standards changed. My big obsession with Christianity is that there is something extremely precious in this legacy that is being lost today.

JPS: This is a question about idolatry, one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest theme of monotheistic religion, and of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures. You claim provocatively in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that “the ultimate idolatry is not the idolizing of the mask, the image, but the belief that there is some hidden, positive content beyond the mask” (138). What do you mean, exactly, by this phrase?

SZ: The key point for me is that Hegelian statement which I make all the time, which is that what dies on the cross is not a finite representative of God, but the God beyond himself. So that “Holy Spirit” means precisely, we are on our own, in a way. This terrible opening, this freedom, which, and here I am quite dogmatic: what we really mean by freedom was opened only through Judeo-Christian space. Freedom in this radical sense only is or appears as a correlate of what Lacan would have called desire of the Other qua Other. Without the abyss of the other, without perceiving the other in an abyss, without not knowing what the other wants, you are not free. If you know what they other one wants, and you are the object of his desire . . . Here it can be said also why

Christianity is the religion of love. It’s a positive ontological constituent of love: you only love someone who is an abyss, whom you don’t know. Love always means this. . . . In order to love someone, it should be an abyss . . . it should be a lacking in perfect being, but at the same time a being with an impenetrable excess. There is no love without this. You have all that mystical stuff where you say yes to the universe, but that’s not what is uniquely Christian love.

And here I think, again, as for the essence of Christianity Kierkegaard got it first. When he emphasized that it is totally wrong to read Christ as a metaphor in the sense that first the truth appears just as a person but then with the Holy Spirit we know that it’s not a person but just a universal notion of love, or whatever. The greatness of Kierkegaard is to show that our only access to eternity is through temporality. Not in this fake Hegelian sense that eternity is just the totality of the movement of the temporal, but this crazy paradox that in a specific historical moment something happened. Only through that passage do you get eternity. That is to say, if you go directly to eternity, you get nothing, you miss eternity itself. So if I were to pick out one writer here who got it, it would have been technically Kierkegaard. It’s also clear that the Kierkegaardian triad aesthetic-ethical-religious is so clearly the Lacanian imaginary-symbolic-real. It fits so perfectly.

Also, what interests me in some of my works is to explain this relation between sexuality and love. Not in some cheap New Age religious sense where the ultimate religious experience is to have good sex, because you get the yin-yang balance and so on . . . what I think is that something is missing for me, in Kierkegaard. I develop this, I think, in my Wagner book. It’s that you have a.) the aesthetic mode of sexuality which is, basically—I know it’s more complex than this—seduction, Don Giovanni, blah blah. Then you have the ethical mode which is marriage. Then where is the religious mode? I think it is courtly love, this absolute logic, and so on. But something is missing there. And the whole

trick of it, and Kierkegaard was approaching it, is how (we should never forget it) with Kierkegaard, it's either/or: the three are not at the same level, you always have to make a choice between the two. Which is why (and in some of his most radical formulations Kierkegaard did get a presentiment of it), paradoxically, once you make the fundamental choice and you opt for the ethical, from within the ethical the only step toward the religious is, often in its appearance, a regression towards the aesthetic.

Which is why I refer, in the last pages of my *On Belief*, to that weird English catholic novel by Evelyn Waugh *Brideshead Revisited*, where you have exactly this. For the heroine, it would be ethical to marry the guy, now [at the end], because she is divorced. But she says no. Her only way to maintain fidelity to God is to go on changing lovers like crazy. Ethical would be, as Kierkegaard puts it (in a wonderful way apropos Abraham) the ethical is sheer interpretation itself. To act ethically, as opposed to religiously . . . from a religious perspective ethics is not something you should stick to against temptation. The ethical, as such, is the temptation. Which is why, again, this crazy leap of faith into the religious, can well appear, to external observers, to those not within the event, as merely aesthetic, as some kind of aesthetic regression. And again I think that to return to a diagnosis of where we are today, I think that precisely what I find horrible in these new forms of spirituality is that we are simply losing our sense for these kinds of paradoxes, which are the very core of Christianity. ■