

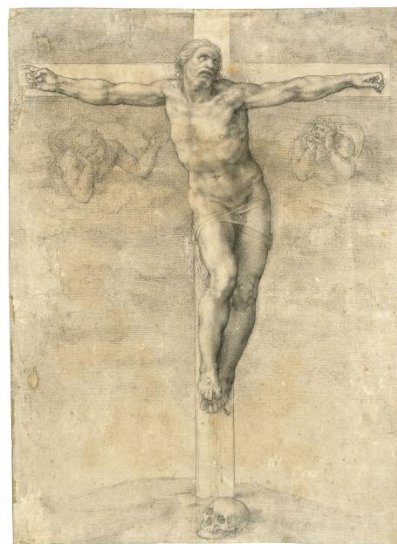
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ABSOLUTE CHRIST OR “WDCD?”:
THE QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN MATERIALITY IN
THE MONSTROSITY OF CHRIST: PARADOX OR DIALECTIC

When we discussed the idea for a special issue of the JCRT focusing on The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?, we made the decision not to over invest in the “review format.” Rather, we thought that these pieces primarily should work as “engagements” – short essays that would prompt a conversation that would, hopefully, carry our ideas beyond the immediacy of the special issue. For my part, I thought it was important to engage the questions, “what does Christ demonstrate” (WDCD?) about materiality and in what ways could a reconfigured demonstration of Christ’s materiality (the materiality of materiality) lead to new and different concepts of Christian theology? So, in the spirit of that early decision, “this is not a review.”



The Crucifixion of Christ
(Kaufmann Crucifixion), c.a., 1340



Michelangelo, *Christ on the Cross*, c.a.
1541

This book is about not a disembodied belief but the true radical nature of Christianity and its political import. In other words, this debate is not merely about the rejection of reason for the sake of it; rather, it is better to see that it rejects a certain *type* of reason, namely, self-repeating, ideological reason that only reproduces the political and economic status quo.

- Creston Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*

I have prefaced this essay¹ with two highly disparate yet, I believe, theoretically connected epigraphic visual texts relating to the conceptualization of materiality in Christian theology as it is debated and explored in Davis, Milbank, and Žižek's *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* In the first image, *The Crucifixion of Christ* (The Kaufmann Crucifixion, c.a. 1340), which I have selected to illustrate Milbank's Christian materialist ontology, we see an expansive, "flowing" scene of the crucifixion that is quite different in its depiction of materiality from that of the second, Michelangelo's visually sparse and restricted depiction of Christ in *Christ on the Cross*,² c.a. 1541, which, I believe, captures Žižek's understanding of an atheistic Christian materialist ontology and which also appears on the volume's cover with "Ceci est un dieu" written across the bottom of the image. While a comprehensive art historical analysis of the two works beyond a "shout out" to René Magritte is not the intent here or even directly a part of the discussion in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, let us nevertheless begin to open a discussion of the "absolute reality" of Christ with an analysis of some common elements in these two respective images, most obviously the *body* of Christ, before moving on to their more profound differences and the ways in which each image "demonstrates" a particular conceptualization of Christ's material reality, which, as I see it, is at the center of the debate in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*

The Crucifixion of Christ and *Christ on the Cross*, when superimposed, the latter over the former, give us several shared elements, a body, a cross, two angels, and a skull. In a sense, these four basic images become the necessary incommensurable or dialectical or paradoxical coordinates of a Christian materiality . . . in all its configurations, as we shall see. What is also important to note is the fact that between these two depictions of Christ one can find a deeper contest between visions of the absolute reality of Christ and the subsequent political theologies that may issue from those respective visions, which, as I see it, marks the significance of Davis's precise description of the book as addressing the "true radical nature of Christianity and its political import."³ It is this contest over the "true radical nature" of Christianity or, to phrase it differently, the *body* of Christ that establishes an important context for the debate.

¹ Portions of this essay are from a work in progress entitled *Jesus, Absolute Multitude* in which I examine the issue of subjectivity and political agency in "Christologically" informed literary texts.

² Image provided by The British Museum Image service.

³ Creston Davis, Slavoj Žižek, and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Dialectic or Paradox?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), p. 19.

In both artistic depictions, the *body* of Christ is the locus of materiality, even as the texts may differ in their presentations of materiality as an ontological necessity or condition. The cross, as a piece of “cosmic” architecture, too, performs an important function in this shared Christ-centered cosmology by becoming synonymous with the limit(lessness) of Christ’s materiality—Michelangelo’s Christ does not exceed the “dimensionality” of the cross, for instance, while *The Crucifixion of Christ* shows Christ’s materiality as pure excess, spilling out past the coordinates of the cross into the plane of the world through the forceful outpouring of blood, his open, wounded body and, ultimately, his flowing “presence” which reaches beyond the span of the blood-soaked timber at the foot of which we see a gathering of humanity, mourners and soldiers—beings that also are included within the scope of Christ’s “materiality.” These opposed conceptualizations of Christ’s *body*, I’ll argue, point toward the particular understandings of a Christian materialist ontology that ultimately guide and shape the discussion in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. One could ask, which “absolute Christ” is more appealing? “The Kaufmann Crucifixion” or *Christ on the Cross*?

Žižek and Milbank, while disagreeing on the formulations of materiality or, better said, the “materiality” of materiality, begin with a shared interest in affirming or creating what they believe would be a post-post-modern Christian theory of materiality that attempts to address or, for that matter, resist and transform a world, as they believe, that is articulated currently by and through (post)modern metaphysics, secular reason (Milbank), and late capitalist social relations, conditions of production, and global systems of commodity exchange.

If we view the cross as the eminent historian of religions Huston Smith does, as cosmic architecture in which we can identify a vertical orientation toward the divine and a horizontal orientation toward the world, we have at the center the figure of Christ, which, according to this particular view, mediates the relationship between the two. Whether it is Smith’s bi-directional cross or some other spatial model, the primary tension to be discerned is between two seemingly (1) incommensurate or (2) dialectical, or (3) paradoxical planes of reality—the sacred (vertical) and the profane (horizontal), Divine and human, Forms and sensible things, infrastructure and superstructure. In a sense, the Žižek/Milbank debate is, at its core, an ancient contest over fundamental reality or the “materialization” or demonstration of ontology; however, this is not to say that the result of such an engagement is not worthwhile. Philosophical theology, more or less, begins and ends with this metaphysical concern and it is perfectly appropriate to revisit it now before attempting to put forth a purportedly “new” political theology that would contest the world as we know it and offer, potentially, a transformed reality upon which to establish a new Christian (a)theological order. After all, wasn’t it just this sort of critical inquiry into the onto-theological-linguistic condition that marked the primary intervention of Derridean deconstruction? The radical deracination of founding axioms and the work of binary logic? “There is nothing outside the text” thus, in many ways,

prefigures “There is nothing outside the *body* of Christ” – a statement with which both Žižek and Milbank would agree upon, but from within two very different logical systems. The question is, however, which *body* and which *nothing*?

In light of this question we need to return to the artwork and the wider conflict between Žižek’s Christian atheism, which very simply, chronologically “following” Thomas J.J. Altizer⁴, says that “God is dead” and with that *complete* death we have the absolute emptiness of the divine plane—an empty, *nothing* “remaining” of the divine after the dead body of Christ— and Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy, which affirms a continuity, albeit paradoxical, of the sacred and profane through the infinite “Risen” *body* and love of a “simply one” Trinitarian God—a *nothing* as an impossibility of a meaningful excess beyond God or the *body* of Christ. The void/world (Žižek) and sacred/profane (Milbank) binaries that shape the contours of this debate can be seen in the figures of the angels, on either side of the body of Christ (above Christ’s arms in the former and below his arms in the latter), and the skull at the foot of the cross, with Christ mediating the two.

What is the metaphysical relationship between the floating “ethereal” nature of the angels and the “bone” of the skull? Are the angels, in Michelangelo’s drawing, “not fully there,” vanishing with the fading life of Christ, leaving in death’s wake only a skull (Žižek)? Or, as in the case of the *Crucifixion of Christ*, do we have fully “present” angels and a skull *overturned*, death conquered by the Resurrection (Milbank)? These images, I’ll argue, represent the greater or more general polarization of the infra-material/super-material incommensurability or dialectic or paradox in Christian or atheistic Christian materialist ontology. It is this tension between these schemas, represented first by the artistic renderings of Christ, and the positioning of materiality within or against a general infrastructure/superstructure ontology that, as I see it, captures the essential politico-theological conflict addressed in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Dialectic or Paradox?*

Although realistic in its rendering, Michelangelo’s body of Christ in *Christ on the Cross*, in contrast to *The Crucifixion of Christ*, is removed from its infra-material/super-material condition—aside from the upward gaze and the angels, which are “overruled” by the text on the image—there is no “really real” transcendent plane anchoring the dying Jesus.⁵ As the text states, this “man” is a God or this “God” is a man, with all his finite limits and vulnerabilities—there is no big Other here or there. That is to say, Michelangelo’s body of Christ, while realistic (reduced to its so-called super-material features), is lacking in a thoroughly Medieval (Catholic) Christian infra-materiality, which only can be expressed, paradoxically, in the gross physicality of the body--flesh, bone, and

⁴ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Godhead and Nothing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

⁵ Žižek, in Creston Davis, et al, *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), provides a detailed analysis of Michelangelo’s *Christ on the Cross*.

blood. Traditional (Catholic) Christian materiality, then, theorized during the Medieval period, would best be expressed not by Michelangelo's Renaissance *Christ on the Cross*, with its bloodless Christ, but by the Christ figure in *The Crucifixion of Christ*, which is "opened, wounded," spurting and dripping "Holy" blood. Not only is *The Crucifixion of Christ* the better example of traditional conceptualizations of traditional Christian (Catholic) materiality it also resonates with early Christian and Medieval Catholic notions of transfiguration, which will be important to the development of any post-postmodern metaphysical future offered by either Milbank or Žižek. In other words, the question of materiality or the *materiality* of materiality (the *body* of Christ) must fit perfectly with any theory of (theological or political) change—in particular a change in materiality itself and/or a change in material conditions. In other words, we cannot have a substantive, metaphysical theory of change and resting upon it a political "alchemy" of change—there must be commerce between these two in order to claim a "new" Christian politico-theology.

In Caroline Walker Bynum's excellent book, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*,⁶ one finds a thorough and fascinating discussion of a central concern of any Christian discourse on materiality, the resurrection—Jesus's resurrection and, presumably, everyone else's resurrection, too. As Milbank is aware, any formulation of materiality must be consistent with the "fact" of the resurrection in traditional Christian theology. In other words, every formulation of materiality *must not* exceed the *body* of Christ since the *body* of Christ is the materiality of materiality—it is one with God. Fortunately, for Žižek, his "materiality of materiality" doesn't have to account for or be consistent with this traditional "belief"—more on that later. As Bynum describes it, concepts of materiality and resurrection must be totally compatible. For instance, in her first chapter entitled "Resurrection and Martyrdom: The Decades Around 200," Bynum discusses the metaphysical and material problem of burial and the proper collection and "storing" of the body in preparation for resurrection.

Maintaining and collecting the "remains" of the deceased was critical for early Christians insofar as it was believed that the actual physical body would be resurrected after death—not some celestial body (Docetism and Gnosticism) or various pagan forms of the body that would be magically reformed, e.g. the Phoenix or Dionysius. For early Christian martyrs, in particular, materiality needed to be unlinked from a demand for the spatial "closeness" of body parts or, more generally, the proximity of parts to the totality of the body itself. As Bynum discusses, early Christian martyrs, within a revised metaphysics of materiality in and around the first century, could feel assured that even after being torn apart and devoured by ravenous beasts "God [could] still find the human bits to reassemble" . . . even after they have been digested.⁷ This example

⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1995).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 33

from Bynum shows that to the late Ancient and Medieval mind every particle of the body is enclosed and “resurrectable” within a paradoxically totalizable totality and that “totalizable totality” is God presented as the *body* of Christ—the ultimate sacred/profane paradox. This, I believe, captures an early Christian understanding of the theology of materiality, which, as I see it, also shapes and informs concepts of bodiliness in today’s Catholic metaphysics. Clearly, in this view, God has the power to resurrect bodies no matter how far and wide their “particles” are scattered—everything, within this framework, is “submissible” to and re-constitutable by God, which also has serious implications for reconciling political discourses... back to the Godhead.

This example also shows what I see as the troubling implication of Milbank’s understanding of the *body* of Christ as it is extended from physical materiality to discursive “materiality”—that it simultaneously and paradoxically *is* and *belongs to* a totality of materiality and a total realm of discursive possibility that ultimately renders all difference as sameness . . . even its difference from itself, God/Christ. In other words, Christ/God becomes/is the “set of all sets” as he dies *and* resurrects himself. I understand that preserving the concept of the “simple oneness” and ultimacy of God allows for all of creation to be paradoxically “collectable” and “unifiable” by the homogeneity of the divine—God in the “last instance,” which, I believe is the point of Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy. In this sense, difference submits to sameness, which typically in the history of philosophy is the way the story goes. However, what isn’t logically necessary, as I see it expressed in Milbank, is what to do with difference itself. In other words, it is one thing for God to “collect and sort ‘different’ physical particles” and properly unite them with their bodies and, ultimately, with himself and quite another to “sort,” “collect,” and thereby eradicate, through a submission to spirit, all difference in general, even different ideas.

Milbank, to my understanding, moves from the theological-metaphysical to the theological-political by equating, at the level of materiality, difference with violence. That is, without God’s loving reconciliation of difference to sameness (Himself), we are left simply with a difference that would necessarily be, by nature, agonistic. I just don’t see the inevitability of this and even if differences are by nature agonistic and irreconcilable it doesn’t mean that this is necessarily bad or violent. One could just as easily posit the opposite with much more historical credibility—difference as maintained and respected as difference is “justice,” not violence. In fact, peace as homogeneity is excessively violent insofar as it represses difference itself. In other words, what Milbank refers to as “peace,” I could describe as theological (heading toward political) “hegemony,” and this would be my problem with any politics that would flow from Radical Orthodoxy . . . it becomes, sorry to say, difference-less totalitarianism and cutting it with the divine doesn’t make it any easier to swallow. In this conceptual structure, there is only the *body* of Christ in the world and it is only through that *body*, as defined by a specific theological discourse, that one finds Truth, Value, and Order. Of course, this is by now an old “differend” and much of the debate

between those in Radical Orthodoxy and postmodern studies has centered on this dispute over the issue of totalization.

Here I will again show my postmodern, Lyotardian sensibilities [which I am sure Žižek also would disavow] and simply remind readers of his [Lyotard's] call to "wage a war [metaphorically] on totality," "witness to the unrepresentable," and "activate the differences and save the honor of the name." Perhaps Lyotard, removed from his historical context, is now too easy of a target for Milbank and Žižek, but it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* also challenged the dominance and limitations of "reason," particularly instrumental reason, in a post-industrial capitalist world.⁸ Even if we have moved past Lyotardian "politics," and I am not sure that we have⁹, there is a trajectory of his thought that is very much alive and highly significant here—namely the work of Jacques Rancière whose concept of "disagreement" echoes Lyotardian concerns about the "differend" in "justice" and engages the issues associated with positing difference as a critical social, political concept. I mention this to point out that Milbank's "postmodern" theological thinking, in the formal space of theology, is enlightening and intriguing, especially his recasting of figures such as St. Augustine, Cusa, and Eckhart. It is also important to note his careful and thorough treatment of the history of philosophy and theology. These are all facets of his work that deserve much greater consideration than I have the space for here. However, it is when we leave the plane of philosophical theology, with its critique of Enlightenment reason, and when this "postmodern" theology, in the form of Radical Orthodoxy, becomes decidedly "unpostmodern," when theology forms the rules of political action that, in my view, particular concerns about the possibilities for "justice," "equality," and "dissensus" arise.

As I see it, any world, under a difference-less understanding of the ultimate materiality of materiality as Christ's *body*, would need to be totally consistent with and completely determined by the totality of God or the totalitarian meta-discourse of/about God, which would be, in effect, the condition of itself—God, then, paradoxically, becomes the condition, without condition, of "Himself" and everything else . . . an absolute subject without difference. This, I believe, Milbank would view as an acceptable and paradoxical asset and I would view it as a terrific ontological liability given, as I have already indicated, that any conceivable difference that is not construed within the totalizable totality that is God would be repressed or, less dramatically, neutralized with a "snarky" dismissal or, quite possibly, something much worse given the degree to which it could activate the levers of political power within a "soft-Fascist" "Red Tory" ideological landscape, as Žižek describes it: "This is the heart of Milbank's 'Red

⁸ Lyotard's critique of post-industrial capitalism, unfortunately, was muted by Fredric Jameson's rather narrow and widely read preface to the University of Minnesota Press translation.

⁹ See Rodolphe Gasché's "Saving the Honor of Thinking" in *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Tory' utopia: a democratic patriarchy in which opposites are reconciled, in which we have market freedom, but within hierarchic harmony, in which we have corporatist democracy, in which we have a secular order organically grounded in the sacred."¹⁰

If there is *nothing* outside this "hierarchic harmony," the *body* of Christ (that he is absolute reality), then there is no "real" difference . . . only and necessarily self-sameness—Christ/God is paradoxically identical with "Himself." As a theological statement this, I believe, is fine. One could assert the very same concept of "hierarchic harmony" within Hinduism, perhaps the most "metaphysically unifying" of all the world's religions—*Brahman*. The problem, however, with this formulation, as I see it, is not with its paradoxical theological nature—as I've said that part is fine; it is religion after all—but with the political maneuver one must necessarily make out of this Christ-centered-self-same ontology. In other words, at the level of "description" it is a particular (one of many) insular theological discourse predicated on a certain *belief* in God, e.g., God both can and cannot make a rock too heavy for Himself to lift. Philosophically, it is paradoxical, but so what?

Here is where things become more complicated, however. Everything, essentially, is united with the *body* of Christ as the pinnacle of a "hierarchic harmony" and, therefore, everything *must* be or changed to be united with that *body* of Christ, thought, politics, art, et al. All discursive practices also would have to be justified to the materiality of materiality of this "hierarchic harmony," which would be, again, the *body* of Christ as configured by Milbank's theology. Yes, in this perspective, nihilistic capitalism would have to be ended or transformed (modified) to be compatible with the *body* of Christ, but the pressing question would then be, nihilistic capitalism or what? What is the other option? How would we know if it is better if, as an order, it merely had to justify itself to itself—just like CAPITALISM?! There is nothing outside the *body* of Christ and there is nothing outside the *body* of capitalism. Or, better asked, which variety of totalization do you prefer? My point, here, is again Lyotardian. Milbank's "materiality of materiality" as the *body* of Christ becomes a problem when it moves from "description" to "prescription"—that is, when it is activated as "live" grand narrative. Again, we are back to difference and its relationship to the "materiality of materiality," which is why, I would argue, we need a theological and political materiality with a persistent sense of ontological difference and without a big Other at the top of the cosmic pyramid.

So far we have remained largely within the field of the first image, *The Crucifixion of Christ*, in which Christ's blood spurting and blood dripping open, wounded body is the absolute material body through which all bodies, greater humanity and all discursive formations, is said to join with the divine. Ultimately, as Milbank affirms, it is the "demonstration" of the absolute, self-same materiality by Christ's *body* that represents the *materiality* of materiality—the infrastructure

¹⁰ *The Monstrosity of Christ: Dialectic or Paradox*, p. 250.

of all superstructures. My purpose in mentioning this is twofold: first, from a traditional (Catholic) Christian point of view, when God becomes incarnate, assumes a body, the very ontological condition of bodiliness radically transforms. Given this, all bodies, even physicality itself along with time and space, undergo a transfiguration that rewrites or recodes the very essence of “materiality,” finding an end in the Resurrection in which “materiality” is reclaimed by the totality of the divine, which paradoxically already had reclaimed it. Second, for Milbank, absolute reality only can be configured in relation to the body of Christ, which means that materiality, in its absolute, unconditioned, conditioned reality, is the materiality of Christ, which is one with God, and nothing more. This, of course, is well beyond any concept of materiality that Žižek would be willing to accept because his *body* of Christ is a *body* that is predicated on the void – Žižek’s body of Christ dies and stays dead, which means that without an agreement on the actual resurrection of Christ’s *body* as the ultimate infra-structure of all superstructures the discussion simply collapses.

If Milbank and Žižek have indeed reached an impasse with their contrasting understandings of the *materiality* of materiality, why, then, continue with these most basic metaphysical questions about absolute reality in relation to what could be described as the “monstrosity” of Christ? For this reason alone . . . the way in which this absolute reality is understood, dialectic or paradox or some other possibility, perhaps incommensurability, will determine and form the foundation of a Christian praxis or, more generally, a political theology that is activated in the world. While it may be in a certain sense, a step too far, even Žižek must account for Christ’s materiality if he is to produce a political-theological discourse, which, as I see it, is exactly his purpose in entering into the discussion in the first place. In other words, we know that Milbank is absolutely serious about Christ’s materiality and we should not assume that Žižek is not “really” serious about the very same metaphysical, material question, too.

If we must begin with Christ, then we have to look at several contemporary options. Instead of limiting ourselves to the very popular (ethical) “WWJD?” (What Would Jesus Do?) or, for some, the eyebrow raising epistemological “WWJD?” (What would Jesus Deconstruct?), we have, as an option, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, the metaphysical “WDCD?” (What Does Christ Demonstrate?). It is this last question, as I understand it, which brings Žižek and Milbank back into conversation after their previous departure.

We know that Milbank views materiality or matter as an extension of the divine. It is this Catholic view that makes “holy water” more than just water and “Eucharist” more than just bread. Materiality, from this perspective, is not exhausted by the nine “accidents” of an object because its true reality lies also in its substance and that substance is continuous with God—it belongs to the moment in which God spoke all of Creation. As I have indicated earlier, this particular “line of flight” from Christ’s *body* leads, for Milbank, to the agenda set forth in his Radical Orthodoxy movement, which is opposed to the nihilism of

late capitalism, but not necessarily affirming of a fundamental human liberty, as secularists would understand it, within a social order. So, we become free but only within the totality of God in the form of Christian hegemony.

Now, the question is, does Žižek's concept of the *body* of Christ as representative of the materiality of materiality move us in a different direction from Milbank. The answer is "yes" and "no." Let's begin with "no." Insofar as the radical nature of Christianity leads to the eradication or adjustment of nihilistic capitalism, as advanced by Davis, both Žižek and Milbank are on the "same" track . . . just from different directions. Žižek, of course, does not subscribe to Milbank's harmonic-hierarchical materialism. There is, for him, no God that functions as the big Other keeping the universe in an ordered, harmonious play. Also, to clarify, for Žižek, there never was such an entity, which separates him from the first part of Thomas J.J. Altizer's death of God theology—God never really or actually existed to either "die" or be "resurrected." These are, for Žižek, mythological narratives used to explain various metaphysical, ethical, and socio-political predicaments. So, then, for Žižek, what does Christ demonstrate (WDCD)? Christ represents a possibility for a Christian theology predicated on the absence of a transcendental signifier, God—the complete opposite of Milbank's "radical true nature of Christianity." This atheistic Christianity, then, has two possible directions. The first would be a Tolstoyan Christianity in which one would de-emphasize the "supernatural" elements of and in the Christian narrative and focus almost exclusively on the "social message" within the discourse—largely the precepts underwriting social justice in "The Sermon on the Mount."¹¹ On this point, traditional Christian theology and demythologized Christian theology are in agreement—nihilistic, dehumanizing social systems, in all their manifestations, must come to an end. There are many examples of this overlapping of politics and theology, with "liberation theology" as one.

Žižek, however, is not directly advancing the discourses of Tolstoyan Christianity or a Christian "liberation theology," although one could imagine that he and Milbank both would be sympathetic to each perspective's respective opposition to political (Czarist) oppression and capitalist ideology and practice in the case of the latter. It is in this general area of progressive Christian politico-theological discourse that Žižek and Milbank would find some common concern. With this said, it is important to re-emphasize the point of difference, the materiality of materiality in relation to theology.

For this discussion, I would like to leave the confines of Christ's materiality found in *Monstrosity* and deal with Žižek's analysis of the issue through Michelangelo's crucifixion drawing in "A Meditation on Michelangelo's *Christ on the Cross*" in *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*. Žižek, in this short analysis, is clear—the way to "the radical true nature of Christianity," as Davis describes it, is through Christ's atheism.

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy, *The Gospel in Brief*, trans. Isabel Hapgood, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Michelangelo's Christ is a defiant figure whose final hand gesture signals not an act of resignation, but one of defiance.¹² To paraphrase Žižek, Christ's death is God's death and in this "self-annihilation of God" we are born into our historical materiality, without a Milbankian grand redemption of all materiality by the divine harmonic-hierarchy. We should see ourselves, then, in the final parallax moment of Christ's life as he sees not the Father above his head, but a void, a *nothing* upon which a commitment to an "egalitarian community of believers," "outcasts," will form a new progressive social movement.¹³

If the goal is to reach a post-exploitative social order through a shared commitment to egalitarianism, then how do we begin? This is, as I see it, the critical point of *The Monstrosity of Christ*. For Žižek, unlike his interlocutor, the materiality of materiality preserves difference. However, this difference is not a "difference" that would translate into some cosmic law of the universe or "market multiplicity" or pluralism or relativism. To his credit, Žižek, in this debate, takes on the more difficult task by resisting an appeal to a Euthyphro-like "it is good because it is loved by the gods." So, what is the "difference" that Christ demonstrates (WDDCD?)? As Žižek discusses in "A Meditation on Michelangelo's *Christ on the Cross*," Christ is in a dialectical relationship with God that perpetuates an unbridgeable "gap." That is, Christ demonstrates a difference and distance from the Godhead, which eventually results in the collapse of divine Oneness into *nothing* or *nothing* outside the *body* of Christ which is dead and stays dead. What is important to note here in terms of Christian materialist ontology is that we are "different" from God and uncollectable by God because . . . there is no God. It is because of this difference created by the death of God that we must see the world beyond any liturgical *corpus* that presumes to provide us with a "higher meaning": "I claim that Christ died on the cross precisely to reject such attempts at finding a higher purpose or meaning. Rather, the message is: 'Your standards matter to me. I throw myself into creation, and abandon my place up there.'"¹⁴

The difference that makes a difference between Milbank and Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ* is "difference" itself. Through an "anti-super-real," historically material difference created by the death of God, we are able to avoid being trapped in a totalized super-material, harmonic-hierarchical matrix; that is to say, it is only through "absolute Christ," a Christ predicated on or conditioned by a void (death), that the "radical true nature of Christianity" can emerge. I will even go so far as to say that what Christ demonstrates, for Žižek, is the absolute possibility of cutting ourselves free from so-called "higher meaning" all together. In other words, it is only through Christ's death, as he [Christ] shows us, that we can find the imperative for forming a new "community of believers."¹⁵ In this sense, Žižek is truly Christian and it is this "true *radical* nature of Christianity,"

¹² *Paul's New Moment*, p. 171.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 180-81.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 179.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 181.

reconfigured as atheism, that calls upon us to submit to Christ's love and, finally, to allow Him to die, completely, so we can live as Christians.

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