

Sublating Christianity or Christ and “Sex”

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> “Hier umbe so bite ich got, daze er mich quit mache gotes.”
 > “Therefore I pray God that he may quit me of God.” > –
 Meister Eckhart, Sermon

Psychoanalytic theorists, like contemporary theorists in general, have clustered around the topic of Christianity. It seems to have a gravitational pull, in a way not exercised by the other religions of the Book, or any other religion for that matter. One might claim that, since contemporary theory is, for the most part, a development of Western culture, it is by definition tethered to that Christian world. Perhaps, then, there's no mystery here. Still, the fascinating fact is that contemporary theorists who tend to propose radical forms of social and political change, condemn hierarchy as well as Heaven, and unmistakably identify as atheists cling to Christianity. At the very beginning of *Saint Paul*, Alain Badiou, for example, insists that he draws upon Paul “without devotion,” regarding Paul (at least at first) as neither apostle nor saint: “nothing sacred” is involved. (Badiou 2003, p. 1) Yet Badiou himself seems aware of the curious strangeness of his atheistic infatuation with such a religious figure, one who is, as Badiou notes, “frequently tied to Christianity's least open, most institutional aspects: the Church, moral discipline, social conservatism, suspiciousness toward Jews.” Reflecting his own puzzlement, Badiou explains that he is “irreligious by heredity, and [was] even encouraged in the desire to crush the clerical infamy by [his] four grandparents.” The first words of this text's Prologue deem it a “Strange enterprise.”

Certain contemporary theorists concentrate on the image of Christ on the Cross, while others (such as Badiou in *Saint Paul*) are drawn to the Resurrection. Slavoj Žižek's preoccupation with an abandoned Christ locates Žižek in the former camp, at the same time as he privileges the Holy Ghost. Like Žižek, whose recent book *Christian Atheism* breathes new, especially political life into his treatment of the intersection of psychoanalysis and Christianity, Julia Kristeva, mainly in *This Incredible Need to Believe*, has probed the psychoanalytic richness of the Crucifixion. Despite their different deployments of psychoanalysis in examining the Passion of Christ, or perhaps I should say because of them, it seemed potentially fruitful to discover what sort of short circuit might be sparked by juxtaposing these two unlikely bedfellows. Žižek and Kristeva do, however, clearly share atheism, just as several major contemporary theorists who

think in relation to Christian theology (e.g., Derrida, Nancy, Badiou, Agamben) identify as atheists—testifying to Lacan’s own striking assertion in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar VII, that “there is a certain atheistic message in Christianity itself.” Lacan is in clear support of the crossroads between Christian atheism and psychoanalysis: “we Christians have erased the whole sphere of the gods”; and what “we replaced it with [is] illuminated by psychoanalysis.” (Lacan 1992, p. 260)

I am proposing that such atheistic work at the intersection of theory and Christianity sublates Christianity—cancels it to preserve it, albeit in a radically new form. Lacan himself, again in *Ethics*, reads the Christian drama that literally incarnates the death of God in terms of the German notion of *Aufhebung*. (Lacan 1992, p. 193) Christianity in Žižek and Kristeva, who also share indebtedness to Hegel, in the end reappears, tenaciously, inextricably wrapped together with psychoanalysis, in a kind of negation of that former negation. Žižek insists that “atheism cannot stand on its own, a detour through religion is necessary . . . specifically Christianity is indispensable,” crucially adding that “If we throw away the ladder, we lose the thing itself which we arrived to through this ladder.” (Žižek 2024, p. 41)

This essay focuses on the basic premises of Christian Atheism and This Incredible Need to Believe to lay out two unique ways of looking awry at Christianity, put them in conversation with one another, and ultimately consider new thought—Christ paired with “sex” (a coupling Žižek himself does not quite bring to fruition)—sparked by the short circuiting.

- i. In Christian Atheism, Žižek weaves his primary allegiances intricately together. Chapter Six is entitled “Why Politics is Immanently Theological.” Žižek even takes the following reproach to Marxism as one of its virtues: that, by committing to a “bright future,” it secularizes “religious salvation.” (Žižek 2024, p. 199)

Political theology, in his view, undergirds radical political emancipatory politics, just as “theology is political” insofar as it poses “the question of social engagement.” (Žižek 2024, p. 200) Radical politics, to Žižek, needs theology and seems to have a special craving for Christianity, mainly since Christianity accommodates psychoanalysis, in particular the psychoanalytic notion, so dear to Žižek, that the big Other

is perforated or even does not exist. It is the deprivation of support from the big Other that enables a position of genuine radicality. Žižek invokes Lacan's assertion that "we can do without [God] provided that we use [Him]" (Žižek 2024, p. 36); following this piece of advice, Žižek puts Christianity to rigorous political use. In a nutshell, Žižek's variety of Christianity "overcomes the gap that separates humans from God" as it relocates that gap within God. Referring to the Incarnation, he explains in *Surplus-Enjoyment* that the appearance of God is "an event which deeply affects god's identity. There is no human-divine relationship—but this non-relationship exists as such, in the figure of Christ, God who is a human being. In other words, Christ is not a figure of mediation between god and man . . . ; what happens with Christ is that the non-relationship between god and man is transposed into god itself. The gap that separates man from god is asserted as immanent to god," and "[w]hen this happens, God the father is no longer an obscene superego agent, and the abyss of utter despair turns out to be the other face of my radical freedom." (Žižek 2024, p. 251) It is not just Christ who expires on the Cross: "the god of the beyond itself" dies on the Cross, offering us freedom through its self-erasure, announcing that there is "no transcendent higher power," and subsequently returning in the guise of the Holy Ghost as an "egalitarian community of believers." (Žižek 2024, p. 3) This hole in "the god of the beyond itself," registering His absence and death, provides a base of negativity for Žižek's conception of the Holy Spirit. It is this "dimension of radical negativity," carved out by the Crucifixion's cancellation of the God of the Beyond, that "holds open the space for every emancipatory politics which takes itself seriously, i.e., which reaches beyond the continuity of historical progress and introduces a radical cut that changes the very measures of progress." (Žižek 2024, p. 5)

Žižek underscores in Christian Atheism that the cut that such a space of negativity introduces is politically necessary. The outcome of Christianity has the potential to be "an irreducible gap, crack, in the ontological edifice of reality itself" (Žižek 2024, p. 24) – on which both true materialism and authentic politics rely. Whereas for most believers God is a fantasy that closes the gap constitutive of subjectivity, for Žižek, Christ, Son of God, consubstantial with God-the-Father, conversely embodies the fact that there is no big

Other protecting us, no “transcendent agent safeguarding our fate,” and that “something is terribly out of joint in our world.” Atheism, therefore, cannot operate directly but must weave its way through Christianity to traverse what Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* considers an infantile delusion. This is a rudimentary psychoanalytic move, traversing a fundamental fantasy through arriving at a lacuna: “The Event of Christ stands for a radical gap.” (Žižek 2021, p. 187)

Žižek’s paradoxical God is, in typical Lacanian fashion, both lack and excess, mirroring the Lacanian Real (similarly conceived as lack and lack of lack¹).² As Žižek elaborates in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, “The notorious ‘lack’ co-substantial with the human animal is not simply negative It is a lack with regard to an excess, to the excessive presence of traumatic enjoyment.” (Žižek 2021, p. 126) The lack/excess relation is parallaxic: “Castration and excess are not two different entities, but the front and the back of one and the same entity . . . inscribed onto the two surfaces of a Möbius strip.” This proposition crucially means that “the very fact” that an entity cannot achieve its “finite form,” that “it cannot be what it is, that it is marked by an irreducible impossibility, thwarted in its core” is what “pushes” an entity “beyond its finite form.” (Žižek 2021, p. 175) Even God exceeds Himself: there is “something in god more than god itself.” (Žižek 2024, p. 41)³ In other words, “‘god’ names the fact that man is not wholly man, that there is an inhuman dimension in its core.” (Žižek 2024, p. 86) Perhaps this oxymoronic notion (God as radical negativity and excess)

¹Lacan writes in the Preface to *The Four Fundamental Concepts*: “The lack of the lack makes the real” (Lacan 1981, p. ix).

²Binding radical atheistic politics to a psychoanalytically inflected Christianity, Žižek cleverly comprehends the “a” in “atheism” not only as negation but also as the Lacanian objet a, generator of jouissance (Žižek 2024, p. 41).

³This notion concerning God echoes Lacan’s view that love targets something in the beloved that exceeds the beloved. As Lacan explains in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, when I love you, I “inexplicitly . . . love in you something more than you—the objet petit a—[and so] I mutilate you” (Lacan 1981, p. 268). There really is no object of love/desire, only its semblance. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek puts it this way: “the automatism of love is set in motion when some contingent, ultimately indifferent (libidinal) object finds itself occupying a pre-given fantasy place” (Žižek 1997, p. 15).

enables us to glimpse what Lacan had in mind in stating that “God is unconscious.” (Lacan 1981, p. 59)

Žižek’s “true” materialist approach entails an “immanent selfundermining of a religious edifice.” He presents his materialist exposé of God-as-evil (or at least stupid) as destroying “from within the very notion of divinity,” (Žižek 2024, p. 46) although early in Christian Atheism, he resituates “the divine” in the very space or gap that divides the “transcendental from the objective-realist approach”—a “‘divine’ dimension [that] refers to the experience of radical negativity.” (Žižek 2024, p. 5) Žižek endorses Christianity to reveal the evil/stupidity of its God, as part of his mission to cancel it, given that a simple atheist critique, which straightforwardly posits that God doesn’t exist, keeps the possibility of God intact, since disavowal necessarily maintains avowal underground. To Žižek, the power of religion is predicted on its central secret: that it establishes itself through “a sacred act” that is tantamount to “the supreme crime”—which helps us to comprehend Christ’s self-sacrifice as both assuming, and repenting for, the crimes of the Father. Žižek refers to horrific crimes that are transferred to the realm of the sacred, such as “ethnic cleansing” enacted to secure the territory of Israel for the Jews. (Žižek 2024, p. 152) The fictional, but also criminal, status of God must be exposed from within. Which is why Žižek calls to our attention shocking details of an unfinished drawing by Michelangelo of Christ on the Cross, in which Christ’s “attitude of angry rebellion—defiance” can be detected. Žižek notes the especially surprising missing nail in Christ’s right hand, whose forefinger juts out in “a vulgar gesture.” Christ’s famous “Why?” in his “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” is here revealed to be “aggressive, accusatory.” (Žižek 2023, p. 182) To convey his point, Žižek invokes Goethe’s “formula *Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*—no one but god himself can stand against god.” (Žižek 2023, pp. 182-183)

In turn, Žižek transfers such doubt in God Himself, His failure as it is articulated by God, this gap in/of God to reality itself, a crack in reality that keeps it from being totalizable as well as renders “everything that we project beyond this gap [as] our fantasy formation.” (Žižek 2024, p. 50) In stark opposition to Kant, Žižek rejects the notion of an in-itself beyond the phenomenal realm. The missing piece, the hole, the Void is immanent in reality rather than floats in a

Beyond outside the bounds of the Symbolic order. Žižek's Real is "immanent to the symbolic order itself." (Žižek 2024, p. 52) God has metamorphosed into an ontological crack in reality. Instead of filling the gap, God has turned into it: "an impossibility . . . gapes" in the irreducible godly gap or "heart of reality itself" (Žižek 2024, p. 50) — the ultimate political consequence of the Christian religion. Not only does Christ's/ God's demise on the Cross provide Žižek's atheism with a Void essential to his radical politics; but also "an atheist gesture is contained already in the Christian notion of the Holy Ghost." (Žižek 2024, p. 42)

To Žižek, the Crucifixion operates in tandem with the emergence of the Holy Spirit: Christ, rendered "by his death as a nothing—an outcast abandoned even by his disciples—grounds a new community of believers." Christ re-emerges "by way of passing through the zero-level of being reduced to an excremental remainder—in what comes after the gesture of 'kurc te gleda' is a new socio-political order." (Žižek 2023, p. 179) Instead of levitating to Heaven, Christ "returns" through the Holy Spirit, which assumes the form of "the community of believers [that] exists in this earthly abject world"—a community devoid of any sort of transcendent support. The crack in the big Other, obscured in conventional Christianity, is sustained and featured in the coming of the Holy Spirit: it too is conceived as "an event." (Žižek 2024, p. 43)

Žižek rereads Christianity so that it no longer covers over the Void but displays it as the operation of the Holy Spirit in the form of an egalitarian community hurled into the "abyss of freedom." (Žižek 2024, p. 46) In Žižek's more specific terms, "the creative act grounded in this harsh freedom is the Holy Ghost, the first figure of what, among other names, later was known as the Communist Party." (Žižek 2024, p. 264)⁴⁵ (Would Christ not have been a Communist?)

⁴Žižek is, however, quite clear that "any form of Marxist teleology or historicist determinism which deprives the revolutionary process of the dimension of subjectivity proper, of radical cuts of the real into the texture of 'objective reality,'" must be jettisoned. Such a form of Marxism would clash with the French Revolution "whose most radical form of Marxist figures perceived it as an open process lacking any support in a higher Necessity" (Žižek 2024, p. 206).

⁵It is well known that Jesus turned over the money-changers' tables in the Temple, condemning them for transforming the House

If one thinks of Paul's universalism, this conception of an egalitarian community may not seem far-fetched. Žižek invokes it. To him, despite Badiou's privileging of his four truth procedures (science, politics, art, and love), Badiou's most persuasive account of an Event is "that of Christianity, of Saint Paul's invention of universalism." The redoubling of the crack that Žižek insists on—the crack in the big Other imbricated with lack in the subject—lies at the heart of Hegel's concept of "Absolute Knowing," an ontologizing of "our epistemological limitation." The breach that Žižek locates in God occupies Hegel's "night of the world." There is absolutely no outside entity on which we can rely or that controls things: both the "I" (Subject) and its object (Hegel's Substance) are defective. Žižek quotes the Foreword to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to support this interdependent reflection:

The disparity which exists in consciousness between the I and the Substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. This can be regarded as the defect of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the I and its object, it is just as much a disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and substance shows itself to be essentially subject (Žižek 2024, pp. 50-51)

The theoretical challenge here is how this redoubling of "the negative" psychoanalytically maps onto Christ on the Cross. Hegel's assertion that what dies on the Cross is the God of the Beyond invites us to link that death with his night of the world, his absolute negativity (which Žižek correlates with the death drive). At the end of Christian Atheism, Žižek states forcefully that the "Christian name for this emptying is the death of God on the Cross which condemns us, humans, to

of God into a place of robbery. He was fond of a story of a vineyard owner who doled out the same pay to all his workers despite the amount of work each performed.

freedom deprived of any guarantee in the big Other,” (Žižek 2024, p. 264) a voiding/deprivation yielding freedom that is a function of Christ’s/God’s absolute negativity. And, in turn, this “abyss,” in perhaps the biggest of the big Others, God, “opens up the space for the subject to locate its authentic desire.” As Žižek explains in general, in a way that pertains directly to this evacuating of God, “The ultimate lesson is not that the subject is ‘castrated,’ deprived of its agency, but that the big Other itself is castrated.” (Žižek 2021, p. 168) For God’s separation from Himself provides the opening that enables lacking/desiring subjectivity. Christ on the Cross, detached from God, but at the same time God separated from Himself, powerfully instantiates the paradoxical operation of negativity/excess as a means of generating desire. Abandoned on the Cross, Christ indexes the Void, the night of the world, the death of the God of the Beyond; yet the forsaken Christ also shows that God is more than God, a spiritual excess. As the undead, Christ on the Cross (like Antigone) is caught between Lacan’s two deaths, a biological death and a Symbolic death, hovering in a space of surplus-jouissance. In fact, Žižek conceives the death drive as the drive to repeat surplus-jouissance. Christ is negativity/Void even as he exudes, having been begotten by God as excess, surplus-jouissance. In the vacated Christ dangling from the Cross, then, we have negativity/Void/Real built into an image of excess/Real. But perhaps what we have here is an excess of excess, a surplus of surplus-jouissance. For, like Polyneices in Antigone, Christ seems marked by vestiges of incest, especially if we think of incest as an “impossibility” covered up through prohibitions by the incest taboo that makes “the impossible symbolically manageable, approachable,” as Zupančič widens the definition of incest in *Let Them Rot*. (Zupančič 2023, p. 70) Christ’s excess partakes (as well) in his being impossibly born of a Virgin (without a biological father), rendering him uniquely attached to the maternal object, even as he is consubstantial with (more than simply attached to) God-the-Father, as well as married to Mother Church. Therefore, to secure Christ’s radical negativity, removing all traces of “incest,” Christ (like Polyneices) must be buried, in the eyes of both the Church and Žižek. To the Church, according to this logic, Christ’s burial is imperative due to its negative ontology (He must be buried so that subsequently He can gloriously rise to Heaven, resurrect), while,

according to psychoanalysis, burial is imperative especially due to His excessive excess, as a way of entrenching the negativity, turning it into a foundation rather than allowing it to roam.

Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ* 1602–1604, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Permission from Art ResourceChrist’s burial (the focal point of a plethora of Renaissance paintings by renowned artists) submerges Christ’s incestuous excess as it is imbricated with absolute negativity, even as it grants that negativity as a basis to believers. Hence we arrive, through this psychoanalytically attuned theological narrative, at the threshold of freedom and the emergence of desire. As for freedom: like the non-reproducible Polyneices in Zupančič’s riveting original reading of *Antigone* in *Let Them Rot*, the equally nonreproducible Christ must be interred for the sake of the sustenance of the Symbolic mandate, necessary for Žižek’s egalitarian community (just as “without symbolization, there is no real; there is just a flat stupidity” (Žižek 2024, p. 23)). My sense that, psychoanalytically speaking, Christ must be buried takes its cue as well from Zupančič’s argument that *Antigone* reflects the Lacanian injunction not to allow undeadness to wander freely. The surplus Real must be installed underground. Only an “absolute death” can pave the way to new life. Indestructible life that persists beyond literal death needs to be extinguished for reproducibility to ensue. Not to bury the corpse of the irreproducible—e.g., Polyneices, since *Antigone* can never have another brother; and Christ, whose particular human/Son-of-God status renders him unique—is to halt the ongoingness of life, the perpetuation of the species. In particular, again, it would block the birth and development of the community of believers that Žižek theorizes will come about as the work of the Holy Spirit. In order for the death drive itself to continue to function, incestuous undeadness must be buried, sustaining at the same time the Real of enjoyment. Only upon being interred can Christ fuel an ongoing interplay of cuts and jouissance intrinsic to Žižek’s coming community. As in *Antigone*, in which *Antigone* “elevates ‘the Oedipal abject’ (Unding) to the dignity of the Thing,” (Zupančič 2023, p. 46) raising it to a sublime level, here the burial of Christ leads to Christ’s being given the dignity of *das Ding*, which is, as we shall see, precisely how Kristeva conceives Christ in the tomb. As for desire: insofar as *das Ding* is desire’s focal

point, the burial of Christ has the power to summon desire. Without *das Ding*, desire is at a stand-still. Yet the aim here is not the goal but “the reproduction of its lack,” (Žižek 2021, p. 61) given that *das Ding* is the “impossible-real ultimate point of reference of desire,” (Žižek 2021, p. 62) leaving us no choice but to tarry with the negative. Clearly, desire never escapes the “night of the world,” for “the night of the world” refers to the very Void on which desiring subjectivity is predicated. As Hegel realized, the self itself, the desiring subject, is the negative: “The human being is this night, this empty nothing This night, the interior of nature that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful” (“Jenaer Realphilosophie”). Which brings us back to Christ, whose cancellation of God in the Beyond transpires in “the night of the world,” producing a gaping negation, a Void, an irreducible excess of negativity, from which freedom/subjectivity/desire can emerge. In Christian Atheism, Žižek expounds on desire by contrasting the Christian production of it with the Buddhist denial. Whereas Buddhism calls for ceding one’s desire, Christ effects the conditions that enable it.⁶

Žižek takes this compatibility between Christianity and psychoanalysis further in crediting Foucault with the insight that Christianity generates the very excess it tries to contain—“sex”—a process that began with the early Church via its meticulous descriptions of, if not obsession with, potential “sexual temptations” that “retroactively produced what they fought.” (Žižek 2024, p. 86)⁷ Zupančič contributes to this line of reasoning. Her analysis of the Church’s fixation on the partial drives, in its own ironic way, fortifies the idea that the Church ended up pointing to the ontological negativity of “sex” by exerting itself to avoid it. In *What is Sex?*, Zupančič quotes Lacan to argue that, contrary to the common view

⁶In his chapter “Why Lacan is not a Buddhist” (in *Christian Atheism*), Žižek points out that in Buddhism desire is the main source of suffering, and so, one must jump off the “wheel of desire”.

⁷I have demonstrated this idea in detail in “The Subject of Concupiscence: Psychoanalysis Embedded in Christian Theology as Revealed in Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*,” forthcoming in a special issue of *Cultural Critique*, edited by Russell Sbriglia and Chris Breu.

that the Church promoted heterosexual intercourse for procreation against perverse drive sexuality, “everything that followed from the effects of Christianity . . . is exhibition of the body evoking jouissance . . . without copulation.” (Lacan claims he acquired this knowledge from having just visited an “orgy of churches in Italy”⁸) To Zupančič, the Church senses something “profoundly disruptive at stake in ‘copulation’” (Zupančič 2017, p. 13) — which is precisely why sex becomes the punishment for original sin as well as the site of its protraction. Zupančič makes her case that the Church circumvents, and thereby attests to, “sex” through the fixation of canonized saints on Imaginary objects of the drive as they are depicted in Renaissance art. Her prime examples are Lorenzo Lippi’s Saint Agatha, whose breasts appear on a platter in front of her, and Domenico Beccafumi’s Saint Lucy, whose eyes look out from an oblong cylinder hovering before her. The Church, to Zupančič, celebrates bodily jouissance, partial drives, passion, satisfaction—as they exclude sexual coupling. “Pure enjoyment, ‘enjoyment for the sake of enjoyment,’” is not at all banned or repressed. Rather, any “link to sexuality” (Zupančič 2017, p. 14) is the problem. The Church dabbles in polymorphously perverse drive satisfaction, separating enjoyment from the sexual, and holds back from “natural sexuality” because of sexuality’s “abyssal negativity.” (Zupančič 2017, p. 15) It’s as if the Church intuitively—but disavows—that “human sexuality is the point at which the impossibility (ontological negativity) pertaining to the sexual relation appears as such, ‘registers’ in reality as its part . . . in the singular form discovered by Freud as that of the unconscious,” the unconscious being “the very form of existence of an ontological negativity pertaining to sexuality (‘there is no sexual relation’).” Yet the unconscious inevitably breaks through, again in the story of Adam and Eve—in my view, the Church’s myth of the invention of the unconscious. Zupančič entertains the fascinating idea that the knowledge imparted to Adam and Eve upon eating the forbidden fruit was “the ‘(signifying) structure of knowledge as such,’” as the unconscious is “constitutive of [that] knowledge.” To Zupančič, Adam and Eve’s shame was ontological, as it appeared at the site of the “lacking signifier (-1).” (Zupančič 2017, p. 17)

⁸Encore, qtd in (Zupančič 2017, p. 12).

Their punishment therefore corresponds to their crime. Having opened up the unconscious, having gained knowledge of the unconscious, unconscious knowledge, Adam and Eve must suffer its pangs, as they enter the tempestuous world of disruptive, unsatisfiable desire. In light of this sense of their downfall, Christ might therefore be conceived (from the Church's point of view) as achieving the forgiveness of the—and especially Adam and Eve's—sin of “sex.” And the Church's insistence on burying Christ may be regarded as a way to submerge the abandoned Christ, the Christ of abyssal negativity, as it resides in the unconscious—whose failure actually enables identification with what he forgives—in turn raising him up to a sexless heaven. Žižek's revision of Christianity rescues Christ from such a regression.⁹

ii. Distinct from Žižek's objective to dissolve traditional Christianity (to aid its depletion, from within), Julia Kristeva's engagement with this religion aims to rescue a centuries-old institution due to its revelation of unconscious truths and psychoanalytic efficacy. Kristeva is attuned to the “psychic reality” produced in the believing subject by religious events, through their “representations or . . . phantasms.” (Kristeva 2009, p. 57) My contention is that (nevertheless) both psychoanalytic theorists sublimate Christianity, erase its conventional meanings to raise it to a psychoanalytic level. Though exceptions exist (such as Mari Ruti and of course myself), most Žižekians tend to bypass Kristeva, and most Kristevans do the same regarding Žižek. Kristeva is no Marxist and only sporadically invokes Lacan.¹⁰ Although Žižek occasionally shows

⁹Žižek has his own conception of heaven, explored in his *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism and Heaven in Disorder*. In *Christian Atheism*, he understands politics to mean that “heaven itself is in disorder. Political conflicts are not just conflicts under Heaven, between particular groups, they are struggles about how to conceive Heaven itself, the common Good” (Žižek 2024, p. 163).

¹⁰There are at least two key theoretical differences between them. 1) Maternal passion plays a crucial part in Kristeva's work, especially in her theory of melancholia, whereas the mother or mOther seems conspicuously set aside in Žižek's oeuvre. In considering ways that religious beliefs and “spiritualities accommodate, encourage, or make use of precise psychic movements” that enable “speaking being,” Kristeva “evokes the importance of the law,”

awareness of Kristeva, for the most part, he ignores her, even when working out a lengthy, penetrating analysis of melancholia in Lars von Trier's eponymous film. Yet, major (unrecognized) general points of intersection wed the two: an appreciation of European culture, in particular its Enlightenment values; a condemnation of the victory of the image over the breach in the Symbolic; concern about "subterranean anger" over "the thick network of prejudices (Kristeva 2009, p. 82) and exclusions that determine the daily life" of immigrant youth especially in France (Žižek 2024, pp. 256-257); and, obviously, ways that Christianity lends itself to psychoanalytic concepts. Both subscribe to the idea that "God is unconscious."¹¹ To Kristeva, it is Christianity's distinctive focus on suffering that testifies to "its extraordinary awareness of psychic life." Christianity is the sole religion that not only addresses suffering intimately but also "tames it." Further coinciding with Žižek, even before publishing *This*

celebrates "the paternal function, [and] the role of maternal passion in the sensory and prelinguistic support of the child" (Kristeva 2009, p. 24) — ideally followed by symbolic matricide that leads to an interiorization and representation of the mother's absence. 2) As mentioned, Žižek conceives the death drive as the repetitive urge to achieve surplus-jouissance. He reminds us that Lacan's jouissance is "beyond the pleasure principle," the name for which is, in Freud, "death drive" (Žižek 2021, p. 114). The death drive is a psychic (rather than biological) "stance," a "readiness to go on beyond the limits of life," "a perverted life-force which bears witness to a 'deranged relationship towards life'" as well as toward jouissance since it is this excessive enjoyment that leads us to "neglect or even self-sabotage our vital needs and interests" (Žižek 2021, p. 175). Rather than a "morbid thrust towards self-obliteration," to Žižek, the death drive is "almost its opposite, libido as something that insists beyond the cycle of life and death"—itself a "name [too] for immortality, for undeadness" (Žižek 2024, p. 264). To the contrary, Kristeva accepts the more traditional Freudian sense of the death drive as a pull toward literal death as well as aggressivity, which is itself self-destructive and moves in the same deathly direction. Kristeva's emphasis is on the need to convert the drive, as it is tied to the death drive, into a creative act. In fact, I would say that the notion to which she is most devoted is this understanding of sublimation.

¹¹Lacan proposes in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, "The true formula of atheism is not God is dead . . . the true formula of atheism is God is unconscious" (Lacan 1981, p. 59).

Incredible Need to Believe (2009), and three and a half decades prior to *Christian Atheism* (2024), Kristeva concentrated on Christ's "dereliction" upon being forsaken by the Father as well as on how Christ's abandonment might include and thereby affect us. (Kristeva 1989, p. 113) In 1989, in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, she asks with some incredulity, "how is it possible for God to die?" Kristeva is in awe of Christ's words that foretold "his violent death without referring to salvation." (Kristeva 1989, p. 130) It is in her chapter "Holbein's Dead Christ" that Kristeva reads the rupture of the bond between Christ and his Father as introducing into the Subject "a fundamental and psychically necessary discontinuity," a "caesura," a "hiatus" that "provides an image, at the same time a narrative, for many separations that build up the psychic life of individuals." (Kristeva 1989, p. 132) (Žižek insists similarly that "there is something like subject [in the sense of the subject of the signifier and/ or the unconscious] only insofar as there is no big Other." (Žižek 2021, p. 167)) Responding to the challenge posed earlier of mapping the notion of the hole in the big Other as it lines up with the gap in the subject onto Christ, Kristeva connects the chasm that Christianity locates "at the very heart of the absolute Subject—Christ"—to various splittings that psychoanalysis conceives as necessary for subjective autonomy. Moreover, she links such severings—"birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration" that "necessarily structure our individuation"—to Hegel's "'work of the negative,'" (Kristeva 1989, p. 132) to her, the source of Christianity's therapeutic value. It is especially Kristeva's reaction to Hans Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (which echoes Prince Myshkin's deeply disturbed response in *The Idiot*) that appears to have catalyzed Kristeva's psychoanalytic embrace of Hegelian negativity. This early Holbein masterpiece triggers for Kristeva the questions raised in Dostoevsky's novel of how belief could possibly be maintained that this martyr could rise again and whether Christ himself would have mounted the cross had he realized how ghastly he would look in the tomb. Riveted to an image of the deceased Christ, Kristeva suggests that it is as though Christ in the Holbein painting is "truly dead" and there is no "promise

of Resurrection”—“not the slightest suggestion of transcendence.” (Kristeva 1989, p. 10)

Hans Holbein has given up all architectural or compositional fancy. The tombstone weighs down on the upper portion of the painting, which is merely twelve inches high, and intensifies the feeling of permanent death: this corpse shall never rise again. The very pall, limited to a minimum of folds, emphasizes, through that economy of motion, the feeling of stiffness and stone-felt cold. (Kristeva 1989, p. 110) Holbein, *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1522, Basel, Permission from Art Resource

Holbein’s “Dead Christ” is “without a beyond,” so that “we are led to collapse in the horror of the caesura” of death. And it is that apprehension of final death without a beyond, that horror that prompts Kristeva to query if the painting invites us to transform this tomb of absolute death to “a living tomb,” (Kristeva 1989, p. 113) so that our life might become a “danse macabre.” Figured by such a “danse,” the Lacanian paradox of excess/death in relation to desiring subjectivity emerges here as well: Christ’s hair and hand spill out, as though the corpse cannot be contained. In Kristeva’s words, “this hair and this hand . . . extend beyond the base as if they might slide over toward us, as if the frame could not hold back the corpse.” (Kristeva 1989, p. 114)

The dead Christ, in occupying a space of excessive negativity, provides a site of the gaze. What clinches for me this idea that, through such images, Christianity presages the psychoanalytic concept of the Lacanian gaze—the notion that desiring subjectivity is predicated on engagement with the Real in the form of the subject’s constitutive lack—is that Holbein went on to paint his famous *The Ambassadors* (1533), the painterly paradigm of a gaze experience. Looking awry at this later Holbein painting positions the viewer to apprehend, instead of a cuttlebone (the ostensible image), a skull. Does Kristeva’s reading of the earlier Holbein work, *Dead Christ* (1522), not expose whose skull we apprehend, or at least whose “skull” provides a prefiguration? It would seem that for Holbein, if not for Lacan, the dead Christ is an early indication of the death/Void/negativity lurking at the foot of the two ambassadors (vainly decked out in all their extravagant garb). But, whereas the skull in *The*

Ambassadors serves as an objet a in the field of the visible, inciting the viewer's experience of the gaze that produces a line of sight sparking desire, insofar as it serves as its cause (objet a being the object-cause of desire rather than an object of desire), the dead Christ in the earlier painting is, as Kristeva describes it, "a monopolizing Thing." Holbein's Dead Christ unveils das Ding. This jarring work of art takes us back to, fully revealing, what needs to stay veiled. In the tomb, Christ is meant to be isolated, unseen, except perhaps by the saints. His dead, entombed body is too much to look at; Christ must be shrunk to the size of the cuttlebone, so as not to be overwhelming (as he is spilling out of the tomb) but to serve as a reference point of lack/desire, that forever elusive impossibility to which desire aspires. The younger Holbein shows the bare Thing lying in the background of the Ambassadors painting, "the impossible-real ultimate point of reference of desire." (Žižek 2024, p. 62)

Together, Holbein's paintings point to the key phases of the workings of desire, starting with the death of God. Moving on in the narrative, we might say that Christ at this point tarries with the negative, since prior to ascending into Heaven, he slips away from the confines of his tomb for a visit to Hell, adding yet another coat of negativity to his meaning. In *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva concentrates on this harrowing journey (which is especially emphasized in the Eastern Orthodox Church and significantly marked her childhood). Christ's/God's descent into Hell is expressed by the Greek noun *kénose* that "signifies 'not-being,' 'nothing,' 'inanity,' 'nullity.'" Here we have, writes Kristeva, a foreshadowing of "the modern confrontation with the 'death of God.'" (Kristeva 1989, p. 94) In this Gospel story, Kristeva finds a wrestling with the death drive; through Christ's descent into Hell, "the bonds of the drives and of life itself" are undone. For here is "the death of God himself." (Kristeva 1989, p. 61) Similarly, to Žižek, Christ "as a God who is simultaneously a mortal creature (dying on the Cross), definitely belongs to the domain of Hell." (Žižek 2023, p. 253) Žižek's rationale is that "in order to reach the abyss of the Void," God as "the supreme creature" must be expunged, and the sole place where this can happen is Hell, "where God is by definition absent." (Žižek 2023, p. 254)

Does Kristeva not once again anticipate Žižek (who regards the "speculative content" of the idea of divine kenosis

as residing in “the alienation of god from itself” (Žižek 2021, p. 21)) in proposing that Christianity is the sole religion that verges on exiting the realm of the religious, given that it presents God suffering to the horrific point of death? Not only Christ, then, but again also God Himself (not that they can simply be peeled apart) is annulled through the harrowing of Hell. Christ’s suffering and death, both the flagellation-crucifixion and the harrowing of Hell are “nihilistic catastrophe[s].” (Kristeva 2009, p. 89) As Bataille reminds us in *Literature and Evil*: “‘God is nothingness,’ said Eckhart.” (Bataille 2001, p. 18) Echoing Eckhart, Lacan adds his voice to this chorus: “Now God’s power resides in the capacity to advance into emptiness.” (Lacan 1992, p. 196)

But I have perhaps sown confusion in including Žižek’s (at least implicit) conflation of Christ’s/God’s absence and death, His negativity, with castration/lack. Žižek insists that we learn the lesson that the big Other is “castrated” at the same time as he conceives God as one of the most imposing variations on the big Other. “Lack” is a tricky term here, given that it easily equates with negativity but in psychoanalytic theory serves as a synonym for desire. Christ on the Cross, however, is by no means a lacking/desiring subject. I prefer to reserve the term “lack,” then, for the latter meaning (coupling it with desire) especially because I associate Christ (as does Žižek) with negativity/excess, a site productive of lack/desire, or in other words at the site of the gaze. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in fact, Lacan in a sense conflates the two Holbein paintings in substantiating this idea of Christ, in bringing to the attention of his seminar members “a polished cylinder that has the function of a mirror.” He explains that when viewers stand at an angle in observing this object, they envision in the cylindrical mirror “a beautiful anamorphosis of a painting of the crucifixion copied from Reubens.” (Lacan 1992, p. 167) Rather than being castrated, although situated in “the night of the world” at the nadir of subjective destitution, Christ in the anamorphic place of the gaze (of our constitutive lack) has the capacity to effect castration. Žižek, however, at times seems to equate the abyssal negativity of God/Christ with lack/castration, even though lack/castration/desire entails pulling away from (a distance Žižek himself insists on) a certain underlying pre-ontological negativity/das Ding. And yet, in some of his most conceptually complex writing, Žižek comes to terms with this

apparent inconsistency (one that badly needed sorting out, not just in his work but in general) in the section “The Two Vacuums: From Less than Nothing to Nothing” in *Sexuality and the Failed Absolute*, in describing two variations on Nothing. Žižek designates a “nothing that is ‘less than nothing,’” a “void of pure potentiality,” (Žižek 2021, p. 292) “a weird pre-ontological ‘something’ which [again] is less than nothing.” This pre-ontological nothing, he explains, must be negated for “Something” to emerge. (Žižek 2021, p. 293) What I find especially helpful here is Žižek’s distinction between *den* or “‘less than nothing’” and *objet a* or “‘more than one, but less than two,’ a spectral supplement which haunts the One, preventing its ontological closure,” rendering it incomplete. (Žižek 2021, p. 294) There is an original nothing out of which One emerges; then, through its emergence, there appears a Nothing, preserving a link to that original nothing or less than nothing. The *objet a* serves as “an *x* that has to be added to a preontological vacuum to make it the Nothing against the background of which actual objects can appear.” (Žižek 2021, p. 299) We start with a “‘less than nothing,’” a “pure Real,” out of which a *Dasein* arises that “holds open . . . the site of Nothing.” Elaborating through Heidegger, Žižek posits that *Dasein* is “the ‘operator’ of the transformation of the pre-ontological Void into the Void of ontological Nothingness.” (Žižek 2021, p. 300) Arising out of the pure Real, subjectivity in turn gives rise to the Nothing. The Sub/ject (barred) is a “kind of glitch in the pre-ontological field” that “triggers its ontological actualization,” an “ontologically constituted reality” that is “never fully actualized,” and thus “needs to be sutured by a paradoxical object, *objet a*,” the subject’s “anamorphic inscription into reality.” Returning now to the Christian narrative: Christ on the Cross, Christ in the tomb, and Christ in Hell may be seen as situated in the pre-ontological nothing, the pure Real, or the less than nothing whose remnant becomes the Nothing/lack on which the Sub/ject depends. Situated in the “pure Real,” Christ (*das Ding*) has the capacity to become the cause of desire (*objet a*) upon being apprehended within that incomprehensible space. In this way, which for the most part dovetails with how Žižek reads this Christian story, Christianity gives the gift of desiring subjectivity. The pre-ontological nothing that Christ inhabits turns into the missing piece or *objet a* that sustains a bit of that pre-ontological nothing/Real. We are approaching

here, therefore, the relation of Christ and “sex,” insofar as our focus on Christ is a matter of desire.

iii. Despite Kristeva’s privileging of the Imaginary Father who enables both speech and belief in the child, the Law of the Father, and the paternal metaphor, in her reading of the undead/dead Christ/God (on the Cross, in the “open” tomb, and descending into Hades), she leans in (prefigures) Žižek’s direction. Her opposition to what she calls “ideality” enhances the kinship. A major emphasis in *This Incredible Need to Believe* is that today’s adolescent believes that “the Great Other” will give satisfaction. She asks, what happens when Paradise does not come true? Her answer: self-punishment/destruction, sadomasochism, drug addiction, anorexia, depression, suicide. Kristeva’s Great Other is akin to Žižek’s big Other (it too does not exist), and both concepts/fictions seem grounded ultimately in the Christian paradigm of radical negativity.

[T]he adolescent takes pleasure in the syndrome of paradise, which may also become a source of suffering, if absolute ideality takes a turn toward cruel persecution. Since he believes that the other, surpassing the parental other, not only exists but that he/she gives him total satisfaction, the adolescent believes that the Great Other exists, which is bliss [jouissance] itself. The least disappointment in this syndrome of ideality hurls him into paradise’s ruins, in the form of punitive behavior. (Kristeva 2009, pp. 15-16)

Kristeva has in mind, in particular, severely frustrated Muslim adolescents in the suburbs of Paris, youth who are excluded, blocked from integration, and seek recognition and respect. But she also claims that “All of us are adolescents when we are passionate about the absolute.” (Kristeva 2009, p. 14) The “adolescent” to Kristeva “believes in the existence of the erotic object (object of desire and/or love).” “Adolescents” are convinced that it exists. “Faith implies a passion for the object relation: faith is potentially fundamentalist, like the adolescent. Romeo and Juliet are its blazons.” And here her thinking overlaps strikingly with Žižek’s brilliant thesis that sexuality is the failed absolute. An image in Kristeva’s work on Holbein provides a curious conjoining of the undead

Christ, as He embodies ontological negativity, and Žižek's conception of sex as a "disturbing excess." (Žižek 2021, p. 157) In Holbein's small Gothic diptych Christ as the Man of Sorrows, Kristeva in *Black Sun* observes a "strangely athletic, brawny, and tensed" figure whose right hand appears spasmodically "curled up before the sexual organ" (Kristeva 1989, p. 112) — an encapsulation of "what Lacan called lamella" or the "undead/immortal life of non-castrated jouissance." (Žižek 2024, p. 197)

Holbein, Christ as the Man of Sorrows 1519–1520, Basel

As he wears his crown of thorns, Christ's face aches, and his mouth gapes—expressing "a morbid suffering beyond vague eroticism." Kristeva poignantly asks, "From what passion did such a pain arise? Would the man-God be distressed, that is, haunted by death, because he is sexual, prey to sexual passion?" Kristeva drops these fascinating questions. But we can read Holbein's Gothic diptych as evocative of an astonishing connection: the coalescing of her and Žižek's conceptions of the undead Christ and "sex." In Christian Atheism, soon after characterizing Christ as a "monstrous frozen monument to the lack of any transcendent agent safeguarding our fate," (Žižek 2024, p. 31) Žižek refers to an "excess of negativity discernible in sex." (Žižek 2024, p. 33) Both Christ and "sex" reside in the realm of the undead, where they take the form of the psychoanalytic *das Ding* (recall Kristeva's reading of Holbein's Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb). Žižek designates "sex" as the (failed) Absolute or "the impossible real-Thing" insofar as it is "accessible only as the always-missed point of reference of detours and distortions" (Žižek 2024, pp. 121-122); Kristeva exposes the adolescence of those who naively believe in the erotic object. In Christ as the Man of Sorrows, Holbein captures the double disaster. Revisiting Caravaggio's *Entombment* of Christ (see image above), we can discover this same doubly failed Absolute. Christ's dead body is the only fully exposed body, well-lit, radiant. Unlike the Church, Caravaggio faces "sex." Christ's body gains mass as it is gently laid upon the stone beneath him. Is it a bed? The falling drapery (a sheet?) features his partially exposed buttocks; the foregrounding of Nicodemus (hunched over like a farmer sowing seeds), without the expected presence of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, augments the sexual implications. It does appear that Nicodemus is on the verge of sex with

Christ or at least contemplates it, although he will surely, inevitably come up short. And we can supplement Žižek's sense of the radicality of Michelangelo's unfinished drawing of Christ on the Cross (referred to earlier) with another version of the crucified Christ sculpted when Michelangelo was merely eighteen years old, while living with Augustinian monks at the Basilica of Santo Spirito in Florence. This depiction of Christ on the Cross, now residing at this same Basilica, hardly needs interpretation to bring out its cross between Christ and "sex." For Christ's loincloth is missing or has not yet been added, his sex on display. The most salient feature here is the tiny size of his genitals, even their resemblance to female genitalia, as the scrotum appears to divide into two vaginal lips, forming a slit, thus broaching the idea of Christ as Lacan's feminine not-all, which certainly enhances the conception of Christ as embodying Other/feminine jouissance. Both Christ and "sex" (here conjoined on Michelangelo's cross), we can therefore posit, contain an excess that disturbs. Michelangelo's Christ aligns with the "subject in its feminine mode," which "incompletes reality" and serves as a "'less than nothing'" that, when added to reality, renders that reality inconsistent-fractures, thwarts, destabilizes it, throws it off. Žižek establishes in *Sexuality and the Failed Absolute* that sexuality is "a force of negativity which disrupts every ontological edifice," that our contact with the Absolute is sexual experience as "failure," and that such failure enables us to redouble "the crack in the positive order of being" or in other words in the Real. Žižek insists that the gap cannot be overcome through a joining up with the Absolute (Bataille's misguided approach), but that "the gap" must be transposed "into the Absolute itself." (Žižek 2021, p. 20) And it is at this point, early in *Sexuality and the Failed Absolute*, that Žižek presents the question, which appears, in this text on "sex," to be out of the blue, "What is the revolution, then, of Christianity?" (Žižek 2021, p. 21) It seems to me that Žižek's subsequent book, *Christian Atheism*, becomes the fullblown response to such a question posed by his theorizing "sex" in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*. Christianity is revolutionary in projecting the alienation of man from God onto God. God falls from himself to become a mortal cast out by God, implying that the chasm that divides man from God ends up connecting him with God. Christ on the Cross and "sex" carry the same philosophical weight: Žižek even

designates “intense sex” as “our most meta-physical experience, a transubstantiation”—an extremely charged term whose use here succinctly reflects the overlap of Christ and “sex.” (Žižek 2024, p. 64)¹² Such a commensurability is clearly true in Žižek but also in Kristeva through her attention to kenosis (Christ) and the failure of ideality, specifically in the form of romantic/erotic disappointment (“sex”). Žižek in fact suspects that the Catholic Church downgrades non-procreative sex to the level of animality because “it intuitively very accurately that sex is its great competitor, the first and most basic . . . properly meta-physical experience.” (Žižek 2021, p. 115) Both sites of radical negativity but also excess, Christ and “sex,” in other words, serve as the failed Absolute—which is of course the only Absolute. What then is the nature of the sublation of Christianity in Žižek’s work, to revisit this question one last time? In Christian Atheism, Žižek sets out to “deplete” Christianity, for the sake of the Holy Spirit as that Spirit metamorphoses into an egalitarian community. A “community of believers bound by love,” (Žižek 2024, p. 172) this ideal community would of course still be riddled with antagonisms, predicated on the Void, shot through with immanent negativity, rendering it what I call a “desiring community.” Curiously, one can find (albeit vague) support of this idea in Lacan’s Ethics seminar at the very moment when Lacan refers to the German notion of *Aufhebung*, since here the death of God resurfaces in Lacan’s mind as “the only commandment . . . henceforth,” one remaining commandment: “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’” (Lacan 1992, p. 193) But Žižek leaves his exemplary egalitarian community nebulous, up to our theoretical imagination, while Christ grabs his prolonged attention. In fact, Žižek hints at the need to carry His Cross. By invoking Verdi’s *La Traviata* (in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*), where “they sing . . . ‘croce e delizia’ cross and joy, i.e., bearing the burden of the cross with joy,” Žižek yokes the burden of sexual love (as in *La Traviata*), which inevitably fails, with carrying the Cross of

¹²Perhaps we can understand this notion that “intense sex” involves transubstantiation in terms of the transformation of the beloved from an ordinary person to a fascinating love “object” for the lover, once the psyche of the lover locates the object in that other. The “accidents” of the common person become the “substance” of the compelling beloved, as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ.

Christ. Just as “carrying the cross [is] part of the joy,” the pain of sexual love inheres in the pleasure or rather jouissance. And here we do well to return to the source, to travel back in time from Žižek, to Kristeva, to Lacan. In his Ethics seminar, Lacan locates Sadean thought at a certain limit held within a “fundamental fantasm” illustrated in images that manifest “human desire.” The “fantasm involved here is that of eternal suffering.” Suffering, proposes Lacan, is “in itself nothing but the signifier of a limit”—“a stasis which affirms that that which is cannot return to the void from which it emerged.” From Sade, Lacan shifts gears to Christianity, at the same time (in my mind) aligning Christ with Antigone—who provides the audience of Sophocles’ play with “the line of sight that defines desire.” (Lacan 1992, p. 247) For Christianity has “erected in the place of all the other gods, a limit that takes the form of the exemplary image which attracts to itself all the threads of our desire, the image of the crucifixion.” Lacan at this point risks shocking his interlocutors with the proposal that what we have here is what “we might call the apotheosis of sadism.” But what that turns out to mean is “the divinization . . . of the limit”—which again “attracts to itself all the threads of our desire”—“in which a being remains in a state of suffering.” (Lacan 1992, p. 261) Christ hangs in the place of excruciating pain, a site of the gaze—as a way of generating desire—imaging the idea that Sex is our Cross.

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