

Christian Socialism Versus Mystical Materialism

John Milbank

To an important degree, Slavoj Žižek, the wild Slovenian populariser of already wild French theory, is now a notable voice of sanity. Most commentators are drawn into either liberal or populist excesses, in however nuanced a way. But Žižek stalwartly opposes ultraliberal wokeism, while insisting that what is best in the western liberal legacy retains universal relevance, for all the mistaken conflicts that have been undertaken in its supposed defence. He may be an unrepentant Communist, who believes that liberal democracy is ultimately to be surpassed, but for the moment he is still the defender of an older progressivism. That may have something to do with both his age (he's a fellow Boomer) and his Slavic origins, with their direct experience of a totalitarian regime.

Thus, he is clear that denial of biological gender is both illusory and oppressive to women, and that valid concerns with race and sexual oppression cannot be allowed to override an ultimately more pervasive and universally structuring capitalist oppression. He is equally clear-headed in resisting any left tendencies to celebrate every form of anarchic disorder as legitimate revolutionary protest. The law may serve capitalism, and be ultimately grounded in state crimes and hidden "obscene" modes of self-preservation, but nevertheless the substitution of police or mafias as vigilantes for coercive force under state control is still a regression, and a further horrendous stage in the evolution of neoliberalism. The genesis and history of the latter makes it clear that capitalism would prefer to do without democracy and therefore that democracy, even in the limited form that we know it, puts some constraint upon capitalist extremity.

Similarly, the liberal valuing of the dignity and freedom of the individual places some constraint upon a digital capitalism that is evolving in a "feudal" direction of technocratic control of people as if they were parts of a machine. At the same time, Žižek does not buy into what is commonly (but dubiously) taken to be a postliberal position concerning a new foreign policy realism. Just because Ukraine is corrupt and American motives there are compromised does not alter the fact that Ukrainians are rebelling against a criminal aggressor and that they mostly seeking a measure of democratic autonomy. In the same way, just because a new mode of political-economic total surveillance is emerging everywhere, does not mean that we should overlook the degree

to which the Chinese fusion of Communism and Capitalism is truly a new mode of fascism, whose influence is to be resisted.

His remarks on ecology exhibit a similar, well-weighted sanity: although ecological emergency is deployed to assume evermore emergency powers and as an excuse to impose yet more austerity and regulation upon workers, nonetheless mounting hydra-headed catastrophe is all too real. Part of that threat is artificial intelligence, but not because it can really match or displace human subjectivity. Rather, because hegemonic human subjective powers will manipulate it to their own advantage, or allow it an excessive ultimate say which they will not be able to control. Žižek is, in his own gloomy and perverse way, a humanist: the reflexive irony that defines subjectivity as such, its (for him) mysterious extra-voidness, cannot in principle be matched by any material thinking-machine. To this degree Žižek is admirably free of the materialist mystifications indulged in by some Anglo-Saxon rationalists.

There is something then, that with the passage of time, has come to seem agreeably old-fashioned about Žižek. He not only defends the legacy of emancipation and enlightenment, but rightly insists that this emerged specifically in the West, and not for accidental reasons. To the contrary, as Hegel saw, it was rooted in Christianity. By seeing this, Hegel, as far as Žižek is concerned, at once fulfilled and surpassed enlightenment. But at the same time, he fulfilled and surpassed the merely religious form of Christianity. This thesis lies at the heart of Žižek's latest book *Christian Atheism: How to be a Real Materialist*. Despite almost unbelievably bad editing by Bloomsbury which renders it hard to read (misprints or solecisms on almost every page, besides uncorrected howlers like confusing the Virgin Birth with the Immaculate Conception, and stating that Christianity "presupposed Judaism"), it is perhaps the best available summary of the comprehensive range of Žižek's thought and of its ultimate foundations.

As regards theology, the pivotal point is that, for Žižek, atheism is not a sort of natural cultural residue that has been overlain by superstition, which one then has to account for. To the contrary, the only route to genuine atheism and to authentic materialism lies through religion and more narrowly through Christianity. If religion is merely denied as

false assertion, then other, equally idolatrous, consoling and illusory assertions will take its place: new gods will replace the old. The implication here, to put things simply, is that the most profoundly mystical aspects of Christianity are what ultimately engenders a more disillusioned atheism whose core is denial and accepted disillusion – or rather, for Žižek’s Lacanianism, an acceptance of the inevitability of illusion and yet an attempted detachment from this inevitability.

What are these mystical aspects? Žižek openly names them the “theosophical”, in a predominantly Teutonic tradition that stretches back to Jacob Boehme, the extraordinary cobbler-speculator of the Seventeenth Century, who was also well-known to Jacques Lacan, Žižek’s intellectual master. Whereas many mystics have spoken of a mystical “dark night”, Boehme located this obscurity ultimately in God himself. We experience finite reality as a strange fusion of unconscious nature and conscious mind, and constantly both witness and repeat the birth of the latter from the former. Since God is the source of all of reality, Boehme projected all these things into the godhead, and not merely the daylight of mental clarity alone. In doing so, he offered much that has often been considered heterodox from the point of view of traditional Christianity.

Yet in a way he was obedient to the radical implications of Creation out of nothing: the finite and the material, in their very principles, do not derive from a perennial “chaotic” source other than God, as often for pagan philosophers. Equally, the “theosophic” attempt to penetrate internal divine processes was already opened up by the doctrine of the Trinity, which Boehme elaborated in his own manner. But if the finite has its origin in God, then also, for Boehme, God is elaborated in finite processes which cannot be simply unnecessary, if they are of divine origin. There must rather be some sort of unique perfection in imperfection itself: in immaturity, time, change, vulnerability, the possibility of error. Ultimately, in the Incarnation, God is drawn into full identity with his Creation and renews it by suffering all its limitations and distorted directions.

Hegel read Boehme in a specific way, which Žižek debatably takes to be canonical. In coming to his eternal self-birth God himself passes through a conflict that is the source of finite evil and violence. Moreover, he does not just emerge eternally from a pre-existential “dark ground” of wanting or

“drive” and does not just express himself partially in finite. Created terms. Instead, God only merges from a primordial nothing by creating and only fully becomes God in the Incarnation. Further demythologised, or indeed psychoanalysed by Žižek, this amounts to “Christian atheism”. The death of God the Son upon the Cross is really the death of God the Father in human consciousness.

Yet the atheism involved here is not simply the recognition of past illusion. To the contrary, it is the relocation of seriously divine properties in the human community: the site of the Holy Ghost as “Church” that will eventually become the project of communism. The mystical which has here been captured by the atheistic is above all the counter-intuitive primacy of negation. Translated into materialist terms, the theosophic implies for Žižek, ontologically, that first there was “a real nullity” and that being is an inexplicable and meaningless lapse or deviation from this nullity. Subjectivity is the point at which this truth at the core of reality somehow re-surfaces, such that consciousness is inherently the drive and desire to be united with an underlying plenitude which was never there in the first place, and which subjectivity must posit as its own precondition of a constitutive lack that can never be satisfied.

Matter is, as it were, suspended between an ontological and a subjective void, and yet even its solidity is a mysterious a-voidance, that must therefore (one could surmise) always be hollowed out. This explains why the Lacanian “real”, so often invoked by Žižek, is at once the truly solid outside the symbolic order and yet something so entirely elusive that it is itself in a way yet more virtual. It may seem strange to insist that such mystical atheism is the “real” atheism, but the point would seem to be that, if matter is entirely penetrable by reason, then this implies that some sort of divine Logos is still in charge, or even that matter can think and God himself is material as well as cognitive. (This was true for the Latin Church Father Tertullian.) But if, to the contrary, all was originally nothing and reality is only the negation of this nullity and subjectivity the negation of that negation – reducing everything to the pure residue of empty accident – then reason is no longer sovereign.

This is why Žižek is drawn to the most radical implications of Quantum Physics and rightly resists facile revisions: at the bottom of material reality, nothing really makes sense

- though he seems to overlook the fact that indeterminate waves are not “nothing”, and that Quantum phenomena include mysterious remote co-ordinations, besides exhibiting assertoric variations. There are three ways in which one can call Žižek’s overall vision into question.

First, there is the question of its philosophical conservatism. The reading, after Alexander Kojève and Lacan of Hegelian resolution as nonresolution (which may well be correct) permits Žižek to offer an attractive *mélange* of the modern and the postmodern, which accounts for much of his campus appeal - keep up with the new hip, while hanging onto all your old teenage faves. As for postmodernism, uncertainty is enthroned, but not in the Bergsonian-Deleuzian manner of a purely creative positivity which tends to disallow any foundationalism, or any immanent “grand narratives” based on such foundations. Instead, by rendering negation both foundational and determinative, the grand-narrative of Marx, based on the Proletariat as supposedly finally human because negatively-emptied subjectivity, and of Freud, based upon the supposedly all determining scenario of infancy (including the greater proximity of the male to the cultural), remain in place.

Behind these grand narratives, and anchoring them, persists also a totally conventional and unchallenged Lacanian view of Cartesian dualism as disenchanting nature and so permitting a rationalist science, along with a true subjectivity, forever lost in an alien cosmos. Equally, the Kantian “transcendental” turn to investigating the conditions of how we know being as appearance rather than directly studying the structures of being in itself, is taken to be pivotal and irrefutable. Yet in all these cases the most truly critical thinkers of our era have challenged these big stories and genealogies ever since the Nineteen Sixties. Nothing in the passive position of the oppressed guarantees their positive embracing of justice in history. If anything, capitalism is inherently (as is only now becoming fully apparent) the “feudal” distortion of otherwise not necessarily exploitative productive by usurious finance and rentier capital, and therefore “all the people”, producers and smalltime owners besides workers, are equally possible, but not certain agents of transformation.

Likewise, nothing in our personal biographies guarantees that the earlier dominates the later; instead, the

earlier is often retrospectively transformed by later trauma or epiphany. In the history of modern science non-dualist vitalisms and panpsychisms have always challenged pure mechanism. As to Kant, far from it being the case that the transcendental has been historicised, as Žižek assumes, it is rather true that from Kant's own time onwards the very possibility of separating epistemology from ontology was denied by those who insisted "metacritically" upon the historical, natural, humanly corporeal and linguistic entanglement of ideal with real processes. Among those figures were F.W.J. Schelling and Franz von Baader.

And this leads me to my second critical remark. Žižek is fully aware that there existed another, more Romantic interpretation of the theosophical legacy, strongest in the case of Schelling and sustained by the Russian Sophiologists, whose most important thinker, Vladimir Soloviev, he discusses in some careful detail. For this other reading, if there is tension within God, there is nonetheless no evil (perhaps qualifying Boehme) but rather an always already overcome unification of diverse powers. Evil is instead only present in a fallen finitude, through a contingent failure to integrate potentially warring components, especially Paternal authority and Filial succession. This is possible because a continuity rather than rupture is posited between nature and subjectivity.

For this vision, which was inherited, as Sean McGrath has emphasised, by the early Jung, the unconscious is neither void, nor illusion, nor necessarily repression, but rather a positive source of the mysterious emergence of thought as always most fundamentally a groundless intuition. Schelling and other Romantics (including Félix Ravaisson and the real Bergson) now point the way to a "post-secular postmodern" that refuses even the fated immanent limitations of the creative, as espoused by the Stoic immanentist Deleuze. Žižek is by contrast again very conventional in regarding Schelling as but a "vanishing mediator" towards the more rational and properly disillusioned Hegel. But arguably, the latter's mode of mysticism is just as obscure. If no third thing, or "point of indeterminacy" mediates the real and the ideal, or nature and mind, then they tend simply to displace each other in a dialectical oscillation that ultimately obliterates both.

Is this literal nihilism really easier to believe in than orthodox theology? In reality, Hegel only proclaims the ultimate to be negation by claiming to close the gap between

our understanding and the preconditions of our understanding, yet in such a way that effectively hypostasises and ontologises this interval as negation. But then just because the gap is absolutized, and claimed to be not just epistemologically but also ontologically unbridgeable (as if there were a real hole in reality) does not mean that a dogmatic and arbitrary move has not been made. Kant's dubious confinement of thought to appearances, reserving a sublimely unknowable margin, is here, with even less justification. Read back into reality itself, thereby identifying the sublime both with our own unknowing and the residue of "the real".

Instead of all this, Schelling and the Romantics suggested that we sustain a faith in our dynamic participation in an obscure divine linkage that nonetheless allows us to remain with our common-sense affirmation of the reality of the self, of nature and of their occult interaction. My third point concerns just this issue of common-sense. I began by saying that Žižek exhibits much of it in relation to his reading of our current politics. Yet in the end the limit of his common-sense is his espousal of disillusionment. That may be much preferable to the illusions of our time, but it is not enough.

To say, for example, that sexual difference is neither natural nor cultural, but rather (anti) ontological is not enough if the lurking Freudian naturalism of the inevitable familial generation of this difference goes unchallenged, as it well might be. Then one can only defend the ultimate and humanly-constitutive value of sexual difference through a "Schellingian" perspective that allows that we are naturally a cultural animal in a teleological way. It is also not enough to say that working people have been diverted from their true and empty subjectivity by the false identitarian obsessions of the left, as this fails to see that today they feel deprived even of the residual and positive self-organising dignity that remained to them under industrial capitalism. There is a failure here to see that workers genuinely wish to sustain their humanity as workers in the face of a new and yet more malign bourgeois elite, and not entirely to remove all hierarchy, which is impossible save as a kind of anarchically mystical dream.

Especially and finally, it is not enough to say that, since desire is illusory, human beings can never really come together, and secretly find even their babies to be persecuting annoyances. The upshot of this is that since, as Žižek

declares, socialist equality would unleash a terrifyingly uncontrolled degree of envy and resentment, it could only be managed by universal psychoanalysis, supposedly ensuring mass disenchanted resignation on the part of all. Communism would then require an enforced Christian atheism, enforced by a Lacanian priesthood. But what are the grounds for Žižek's admirable decency (save for his endorsement of socialist rather than liberal terror)? Why would a supposedly "feminine" sacrifice of everything for nothing in the face of ontological horror (as in Paul Claudel's play *The Hostage*) bend necessarily in an ethical direction? Why should not those alerted to the emptiness of desire commit violence with indifference, after the path of the Bhagavid Gita?

Žižek refuses that path, just as he rightly refuses the mainline Buddhist renunciation of desire as obliterating our humanity every bit as effectively as the abolition of sexual difference or submission to AI. But isn't that because he is more substantively Christian even than he thinks? If we are in solidarity with the other, then this cannot be a solidarity in the abyss which is indifferent to that solidarity. It must instead imply a lure towards ineffable community, to the possible linking through affinity of individuals and groups, and therefore a faith in the teleological lure of matter towards ontological spirit that cannot be just its empty epiphenomenon.

It is more naturally mystical to suppose that what is in excess of reason is not an implausible hypostasisation of logical negation, but rather the unfolding and unpredictable positivity of both nature and history. It was in this sense that Schelling thought that a more plausibly rational allowance for the primacy of the real and of the actual (which we cannot derive a priori from logical potential) actually aligns with the religious and specifically Christian idea of "revelation". Through the influence of Soloviev (whose politics was actually liberal-constitutional and whose "free theocracy", contra Žižek was a bit like Anglicanism...) Schelling's legacy informed one strand of Christian socialism in the thought of Sergei Bulgakov (a big influence on Rowan Williams whom Žižek respectfully criticises as too "Russian") and others. One should not see this entire legacy as merely "ethical" in comparison to the Marxist tradition, but also as more metaphysically and historically coherent.

Capitalism is not on any immanently fated agenda, but is rather, as the Christian Socialist Karl Polanyi taught, a contingent “disembedding” of the economic from the social. Any possible re-embedding, on a more egalitarian basis than “feudal” pre-modernity, has to involve an inspiring faith that reality bends towards peace rather than towards violence. And that requires a mystically intuitive insight into Schelling’s plenitudinous Absolute as uniting obscure prompting with open vision, not Hegel’s sophistic celebration of abyssal conflict. Of course, Žižek is right to say capitalist ideology disguises antagonisms. But much more fundamentally, modern liberal politics is openly committed, ever since Hobbes, to a thesis of “ontological violence”, combined with the lie that this can be formally and consensually mediated. The problem with left-Hegelianism and Marxism is that they tend to sustain exactly this liberalism in an exacerbated form. Unlike mystical materialism, Christian Socialism, beyond merely negative “emancipation”, has trust in, and works asymptotically and constructively towards, a universal sympathetic reconciliation of human with human, and humanity with nature. It holds a rational faith which can be gradually justified through practical realisation, instead of seeking implausibly to overcome sublime horror through its apparent refusal which is also, and often admittedly, its embrace.

Bibliography