

THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF

THE PERVERSE CORE OF CHRISTIANITY



SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF

SHORT CIRCUITS

Slavoj Žižek, editor

The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity, by Slavoj Žižek

The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two, by Alenka Zupaničič

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The Perverse Core of Christianity

Slavoj Žižek

THE MIT PRESS CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS LONDON, ENGLAND

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This book was set in Joanna MT & Copperplate 33bc by Graphic Composition, Inc., Athens, GA, and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zizek, Slavoj.

The puppet and the dwarf : the perverse core of Christianity / Slavoj Zizek.

p. cm. — (Short circuits)

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 0-262-74025-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Christianity—Essence, genius, nature. 2. Historical materialism. I. Title.

II. Series.

BR121.3.Z59 2003

230—dc21

2003051043

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SERIES FOREWORD

A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a "minor" author, text, or conceptual apparatus ("minor" should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not "of lesser quality," but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a "lower," less dignified topic)? If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions. This is what Marx, among others, did with philosophy and religion (short-circuiting philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, that is to say, economic speculation); this is what Freud and Nietzsche did with morality (short-circuiting the highest ethical notions through the lens of the unconscious libidinal economy). What such a reading achieves is not a simple "desublimation," a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text,

which brings to light its “unthought,” its disavowed presuppositions and consequences.

And this is what “Short Circuits” wants to do, again and again. The underlying premise of the series is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a privileged instrument of such an approach, whose purpose is to illuminate a standard text or ideological formation, making it readable in a totally new way—the long history of Lacanian interventions in philosophy, religion, the arts (from the visual arts to the cinema, music, and literature), ideology, and politics justifies this premise. This, then, is not a new series of books on psychoanalysis, but a series of “connections in the Freudian field”—of short Lacanian interventions in art, philosophy, theology, and ideology.

“Short Circuits” intends to revive a practice of reading which confronts a classic text, author, or notion with its own hidden presuppositions, and thus reveals its disavowed truth. The basic criterion for the texts that will be published is that they effectuate such a theoretical short circuit. After reading a book in this series, the reader should not simply have learned something new: the point is, rather, to make him or her aware of another—disturbing—side of something he or she knew all the time.

Slavoj Žižek

THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF

INTRODUCTION

THE PUPPET CALLED THEOLOGY

Today, when the historical materialist analysis is receding, practiced as it were under cover, rarely called by its proper name, while the theological dimension is given a new lease on life in the guise of the “postsecular” Messianic turn of deconstruction, the time has come to reverse Walter Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history: “The puppet called ‘theology’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.”

One possible definition of modernity is: the social order in which religion is no longer fully integrated into and identified with a particular cultural life-form, but acquires autonomy, so that it can survive as the same religion in different cultures. This extraction enables religion to globalize itself (there are Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists everywhere today); on the other hand, the price to be paid is that religion is reduced to a secondary epiphenomenon with regard to the secular functioning of the social totality. In this new global order, religion has two possible roles: *therapeutic* or *critical*. It either helps individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the voices of discontent—in this second case, religion as such tends toward assuming the role of a heresy. The contours of this deadlock were outlined by Hegel; sometimes, we find in his work something I am tempted to call a “downward synthesis”: after the two opposed positions, the third one, the *Aufhebung* of the two, is not a higher synthesis bringing together what is worth maintaining in the other two, but a kind of negative synthesis, the lowest point. Here are three outstanding examples:

- In the “logic of judgment,” the first triad of the “judgment of existence” (positive-negative-infinite judgment) culminates in the “infinite judgment”: God is not red, a rose is not an elephant, understanding is not a table—these judgments are, as Hegel puts it, “accurate or true, as one calls them, but nonsensical and in bad taste.”¹
- Twice in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. First apropos of phrenology, in which the whole dialectic of the “observing Reason” culminates in the infinite judgment “the Spirit is a bone.”²

- Then, at the end of the chapter on Reason, in the passage to Spirit as history, where we have the triad of the “law-giving Reason,” the “law-testing Reason,” and the Reason that accepts its impenetrable foundation. It is only by accepting the positivity of the law as its ultimate given background that we pass to history proper. The passage to history proper occurs when we assume the failure of Reason reflectively to ground the laws that regulate the life of a people.³

And it seems that the three modes of religion with which *Glauben und Wissen* and other early theological writings deal⁴ form the same triad:

- The “people’s religion [*Volksreligion*]”—in Ancient Greece, religion was intrinsically bound up with a particular people, its life and customs. It required no special reflexive act of faith: it was simply accepted.
- The “positive religion”—imposed dogmas, rituals, rules, to be accepted because they are prescribed by an earthly and/or divine authority (Judaism, Catholicism).
- The “religion of Reason”—what survives of religion when positive religion is submitted to the rational critique of Enlightenment. There are two modes: Reason or Heart—either the Kantian dutiful moralist, or the religion of pure interior feeling (Jacobi, etc.). Both dismiss the positive religion (rituals, dogmas) as superficial historically conditioned ballast. Crucial here is the inherent reversal of Kant into Jacobi, of universalist moralism into pure irrational contingency of feeling—that is to say, this immediate coincidence of opposites, this direct reversal of reason into irrational belief.

Again, the passage from one moment to the next is clear: first, (the people’s) religion loses its organic *Naturwüchsigkeit*, it changes into a set of “alienated”—externally imposed and contingent—rules; then, logically, the authority of these rules is to be questioned by our Reason. . . . What, however, would constitute the step further that would break the deadlock of universalist moralism and abstract feeling converting directly into each other? There is no clear solution. Why do we need religion at all in our modern times? The standard answer is: rational philosophy or science is esoteric, confined to a small circle; it cannot replace religion in its function of capturing the imagination of the masses, and thus serving the purposes of moral

and political order. But this solution is problematic in Hegel's own terms: the problem is that, in the modern times of Reason, religion can no longer fulfill this function of the organic binding force of social substance—today, religion has irretrievably lost this power not only for scientists and philosophers, but also for the wider circle of “ordinary” people. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel claims that in the modern age, as much as we admire art, we no longer bend the knee before it—and the same holds for religion.

Today, we live (in) the tension designated by Hegel even more than people did in Hegel's own times. When Hegel wrote: “It is a modern folly to alter a corrupt ethical system, its constitution and legislation, without changing the religion, to have a revolution without a reformation,”⁶ he announced the necessity of what Mao called the “Cultural Revolution” as the condition of a successful social revolution. Is this not what we have today: (the technological) revolution without a fundamental “revolution of mores [*Revolution der Sitten*]”? The basic tension is not so much the tension of reason versus feeling, but, rather, the tension of knowledge versus the disavowed belief embodied in external ritual—the situation often described in the terms of cynical reason whose formula, the reverse of Marx's, was proposed decades ago by Peter Sloterdijk: “I know what I am doing; nonetheless, I am doing it. . . .” This formula, however, is not as unambiguous as it may appear—it should be supplemented with: “. . . because I don't know what I believe.”

In our politically correct times, it is always advisable to start with the set of unwritten prohibitions that define the positions one is allowed to adopt. The first thing to note with regard to religious matters is that reference to “deep spirituality” is in again: direct materialism is out; one is, rather, enjoined to harbor openness toward a radical Otherness beyond the ontotheological God. Consequently, when, today, one directly asks an intellectual: “OK, let's cut the crap and get down to basics: do you believe in some form of the divine or not?” the first answer is an embarrassed withdrawal, as if the question is too intimate, too probing; this withdrawal is then usually explained in more “theoretical” terms: “That is the wrong question

to ask! It is not simply a matter of believing or not, but, rather, a matter of certain radical experience, of the ability to open oneself to a certain unheard-of dimension, of the way our openness to radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment. . . .” What we are getting today is a kind of “suspended” belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. Against this attitude, one should insist even more emphatically that the “vulgar” question “Do you really believe or not?” matters—more than ever, perhaps. My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible only to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.⁶

Was there, however, at any time in the past, an era when people directly “really believed”? As Robert Pfaller demonstrated in *Illusionen der Anderen*,⁷ the direct belief in a truth that is subjectively fully assumed (“Here I stand!”) is a modern phenomenon, in contrast to traditional beliefs-through-distance, like politeness or rituals. Pre-modern societies did not believe directly, but through distance, and this explains, for instance, why Enlightenment critics misread “primitive” myths—they first took the notion that a tribe originated from a fish or a bird as a literal direct belief, then rejected it as stupid, “fetishist,” naive. They thereby imposed their own notion of belief on the “primitivized” Other. (Is this not also the paradox of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*? Newton’s wife was not a naive (“innocent”) believer in her husband’s fidelity—she was well aware of his passionate love for Countess Olenska, she just politely ignored it, and acted as if she believed in his fidelity. . . .) Pfaller is right to emphasize how, today, we believe more than ever: the most skeptical attitude, that of deconstruction, relies on the figure of an Other who “really believes”; the postmodern need for the permanent use of the devices of ironic distantiation (quotation marks, etc.) betrays the

underlying fear that, without these devices, belief would be direct and immediate—as if, if I were to say “I love you” instead of the ironic “As the poets would have put it, I love you,” this would entail a directly assumed belief that I love you—that is, as if a distance is not already operative in the direct statement “I love you” . . .

And perhaps that is where we find the stake of today’s reference to “culture,” of “culture” emerging as the central life-world category. When it comes to religion, for example, we no longer “really believe” today, we just follow (some) religious rituals and mores as part of respect for the “lifestyle” of the community to which we belong (nonbelieving Jews obeying kosher rules “out of respect for tradition,” etc.). “I don’t really believe in it, it’s just part of my culture” effectively seems to be the predominant mode of the disavowed/displaced belief characteristic of our times. What is a cultural lifestyle, if not the fact that, although we don’t believe in Santa Claus, there is a Christmas tree in every house, and even in public places, every December? Perhaps, then, the “nonfundamentalist” notion of “culture” as distinguished from “real” religion, art, and so on, is in its very core the name for the field of disowned/impersonal beliefs—“culture” is the name for all those things we practice without really believing in them, without “taking them seriously.” Is this not also why science is not part of this notion of culture—it is all too real? And is this also not why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as “barbarians,” as anticultural, as a threat to culture—they dare to *take their beliefs seriously*? Today, we ultimately perceive as a threat to culture those who live their culture immediately, those who lack a distance toward it. Recall the outrage when, two years ago, the Taliban forces in Afghanistan destroyed the ancient Buddhist statues at Bamiyan: although none of us enlightened Westerners believe in the divinity of the Buddha, we were outraged because the Taliban Muslims did not show the appropriate respect for the “cultural heritage” of their own country and the entire world. Instead of believing through the other, like all people of culture, they really believed in their own religion, and thus had no great sensitivity toward the cultural value of the

monuments of other religions—to them, the Buddha statues were just fake idols, not “cultural treasures.”

One commonplace about philosophers today is that their very analysis of the hypocrisy of the dominant system betrays their naivety: why are they still shocked to see people inconsistently violate their professed values when it suits their interests? Do they really expect people to be consistent and principled? Here one should defend authentic philosophers: what surprises them is the exact opposite—not that people do not “really believe,” and act upon their professed principles, but that *people who profess their cynical distance and radical pragmatic opportunism secretly believe much more than they are willing to admit*, even if they transpose these beliefs onto (nonexistent) “others.”

Within this framework of suspended belief, three so-called “postsecular” options are permitted: one is allowed either to praise the wealth of polytheistic premodern religions oppressed by the Judeo-Christian patriarchal legacy; or to stick to the uniqueness of the Jewish legacy, to its fidelity to the encounter with radical Otherness, in contrast to Christianity. Here, I would like to make myself absolutely clear: I do not think that the present vague spiritualism, the focus on the openness to Otherness and its unconditional Call, this mode in which Judaism has become almost the hegemonic ethico-spiritual attitude of today’s intellectuals, is in itself the “natural” form of what one can designate, in traditional terms, as Jewish spirituality. I am almost tempted to claim that we are dealing here with something that is homologous to the Gnostic heresy of Christianity, and that the ultimate victim of this Pyrrhic “victory” of Judaism will be the most precious elements of Jewish spirituality itself, with their focus on a unique collective experience. Who today remembers the kibbutz, the greatest proof that Jews are not “by nature” financial middlemen?

In addition to these two options, the only Christian references permitted are the Gnostic or mystical traditions that had to be excluded and repressed in order for the hegemonic figure of Christianity to install itself. Christ himself is OK if we try to isolate the

“original” Christ, “the Rabbi Jesus” not yet inscribed into the Christian tradition proper—Agnes Heller speaks ironically of the “resurrection of the Jewish Jesus”: our task today is to resurrect the true Jesus from the mystifying Christian tradition of Jesus (as) Christ.⁸ All this makes a positive reference to Saint Paul a very delicate issue: is he not the very symbol of the establishment of Christian orthodoxy? In the last decade, nonetheless, one small opening has appeared, a kind of exchange offered between the lines: one is allowed to praise Paul, if one reinscribes him back into the Jewish legacy—Paul as a radical Jew, an author of Jewish political theology. . . .

While I agree with this approach, I want to emphasize how, if it is taken seriously, its consequences are much more catastrophic than they may appear. When one reads Saint Paul’s epistles, one cannot fail to notice how thoroughly and terribly indifferent he is toward Jesus as a living person (the Jesus who is not yet Christ, the pre-Easter Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels)—Paul more or less totally ignores Jesus’ particular acts, teachings, parables, all that Hegel later referred to as the mythical element of the fairytale narrative, of the mere prenotional representation [*Vorstellung*]; never in his writings does he engage in hermeneutics, in probing into the “deeper meaning” of this or that parable or act of Jesus. What matters to him is not Jesus as a historical figure, only the fact that he died on the Cross and rose from the dead—after confirming Jesus’ death and resurrection, Paul goes on to his true Leninist business, that of organizing the new party called the Christian community. Paul as a Leninist: was not Paul, like Lenin, the great “institutionalizer,” and, as such, reviled by the partisans of “original” Marxism-Christianity? Does not the Pauline temporality “already, but not yet” also designate Lenin’s situation in between the two revolutions, between February and October 1917? Revolution is already behind us, the old regime is out, freedom is here—but the hard work still lies ahead.

In 1956, Lacan proposed a short and clear definition of the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit is the entry of the signifier into the world. This is certainly what Freud brought us under the title of death

drive.”⁹ What Lacan means, at this moment of his thought, is that the Holy Spirit stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of “life”—lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions, or, to put it in Kant’s terms, the “pathological.” When we locate ourselves within the Holy Spirit, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one. And is not this Pauline notion of life grounded in Paul’s other distinctive feature? What enabled him to formulate the basic tenets of Christianity, to elevate Christianity from a Jewish sect into a universal religion (religion of universality), was the very fact that he was not part of Christ’s “inner circle.” One can imagine the inner circle of apostles reminiscing during their dinner conversations: “Do you remember how, at the Last Supper, Jesus asked me to pass the salt?” None of this applies to Paul: he is outside and, as such, symbolically substituting for (taking the place of) Judas himself among the apostles. In a way, Paul also “betrayed” Christ by not caring about his idiosyncrasies, by ruthlessly reducing him to the fundamentals, with no patience for his wisdom, miracles, and similar paraphernalia.

So yes, one should read Paul from within the Jewish tradition—since precisely such a reading brings home the true radicality of his break, the way he undermined the Jewish tradition from within. To use a well-known Kierkegaardian opposition: reading Saint Paul from within the Jewish tradition, as the one located in it, allows us to grasp “Christianity-in-becoming”: not yet the established positive dogma, but the violent gesture of positing it, the “vanishing mediator” between Judaism and Christianity, something akin to Benjaminian law-constituting violence. In other words, what is effectively “repressed” with the established Christian doxa is not so much its Jewish roots, its indebtedness to Judaism, but, rather, *the break itself*, the true location of Christianity’s rupture with Judaism. Paul did not simply pass from the Jewish position to another position; he did something with, within, and to the Jewish position itself—what?

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CHAPTER 1

WHEN EAST MEETS WEST

A proper starting point would have been to ask the Schellingian question: what does the becoming-man of God in the figure of Christ, His descent from eternity to the temporal realm of our reality, mean for God Himself? What if that which appears to us, finite mortals, as God's descent toward us, is, from the standpoint of God Himself, an ascent? What if, as Schelling implied, eternity is less than temporality? What if eternity is a sterile, impotent, lifeless domain of pure potentialities, which, in order fully to actualize itself, has to pass through temporal existence? What if God's descent to man, far from being an act of grace toward humanity, is the only way for God to gain full actuality, and to liberate Himself from the suffocating constraints of Eternity? What if God actualizes Himself only through human recognition?¹

We have to get rid of the old Platonic topos of love as Eros that gradually elevates itself from love for a particular individual, through love for the beauty of a human body in general and the love of the beautiful form as such, to love for the supreme Good beyond all forms: true love is precisely the opposite move of forsaking the promise of Eternity itself for an imperfect individual. (This lure of eternity can take many forms, from postmortal Fame to fulfilling one's social role.) What if the gesture of choosing temporal existence, of giving up eternal existence for the sake of love—from Christ to Siegmund in Act II of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, who prefers to remain a common mortal if his beloved Sieglinde cannot follow him to Valhalla, the eternal dwelling-place of dead heroes—is the highest ethical act of them all? The shattered Brünnhilde comments on this refusal: "So little do you value everlasting bliss? Is she everything to you, this poor woman who, tired and sorrowful, lies limp in your lap? Do you think nothing less glorious?" Ernst Bloch was right to observe that what is lacking in German history are more gestures like Siegmund's.

We usually claim that time is the ultimate prison ("no one can jump outside of his/her time"), and that the whole of philosophy and religion circulates around one aim: to break out of this prison-house of time into eternity. What, however, if, as Schelling implies,

eternity is the ultimate prison, a suffocating closure, and it is only the fall into time that introduces Opening into human experience? Is Time not the name for the ontological opening? The Event of “incarnation” is thus not so much the time when ordinary temporal reality touches Eternity, but, rather, the time when Eternity reaches into time. This same point has been made very clearly by intelligent conservatives like G. K. Chesterton (like Hitchcock, an English Catholic), who wrote, apropos of the fashionable claim about the “alleged spiritual identity of Buddhism and Christianity”:

Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces. . . . This is the intellectual abyss between Buddhism and Christianity; what for the Buddhist or Theosophist personality is the fall of man, for the Christian is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea. The world-soul of the Theosophists asks man to love it only in order that man may throw himself into it. But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it. . . . All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls.²

And Chesterton is fully aware that it is not enough for God to separate man from Himself so that mankind will love Him—this separation has to be reflected back into God Himself, so that God is abandoned by himself:

When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.³

Because of this overlapping between man's isolation from God and God's isolation from himself, Christianity is

terribly revolutionary. That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already; but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents for ever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king.⁴

Chesterton is fully aware that we are thereby approaching "a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss . . . a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to approach. But in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt."⁵ In the standard form of atheism, God dies for men who stop believing in Him; in Christianity, God dies for Himself. In his "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" Christ himself commits what is, for a Christian, the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith.

This "matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss" concerns what cannot but appear as the hidden perverse core of Christianity: if it is prohibited to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why did God put it there in the first place? Is it not that this was a part of His perverse strategy first to seduce Adam and Eve into the Fall, in order then to save them? That is to say: should one not apply Paul's insight into how the prohibitive law creates sin to this very first prohibition also? A similar obscure ambiguity surrounds the role of Judas in Christ's death: since his betrayal was necessary to his mission (to redeem humanity through his death on the Cross), did Christ not need it? Are his ominous words during the Last Supper not a secret injunction to Judas to betray him? "Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so'" (Matthew 26:25). The rhetorical figure of Christ's reply is, of course, that of disavowed injunction: Judas is interpellated as the one who will hand Christ over to the authorities—not directly ("You are the

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