

Christological Controversies: Will the Real Catholic Žižek Please Stand Up?

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Summary

Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* contains the infamous ontological bombshell, the so-called Third Man argument. This argument involves a *reductio* criticism of the forms, arguing that the *reductio* premise – roughly, 'there cannot be any ontological interpenetration between the One and the many' – is false. The argument intimates that the only way for thought to move beyond the forms is to accept the 'impossible' object, the nonsensical One-*and*-many. This article calls any ontology which accepts this Third Man argument and attempts to answer it on its own terms, 'material dialectic'. The high-profile debate between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ* brings the relevance of this dialectic into stark relief. Both authors accept the material dialectic and mobilise it toward competing christological theses. Yet it is important to navigate the Third Man argument in such a way as to keep a dyophysite Christology in order to satisfy orthodox theological pressures. I will therefore advance two conclusions: first, that the material dialectic is a valid analytical project; and second, that neither Milbank nor Žižek espouses an orthodox Christology: Milbank's is monophysite while Žižek's is patripassian. Following Milbank, I will call the final (dyophysite) corrective the 'Catholic Žižek' – only, contra Milbank, it will be the *real* Catholic Žižek.

Keywords

John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, ontology, dialectic, materialism, monophysitism, dyophysitism, Christology

1. Preamble

Let me begin with a puzzle which lies at the centre of ontology, and which has been everything from inadequately contested to suspiciously forgotten to erroneously underestimated in parallel traditions of scholarship. To provide a snapshot of this case history, I start by distilling the argument present in Plato's *Parmenides*, 130c, where the aged philosopher Parmenides reportedly furnishes an argument against Socrates' two-tier ontology of forms and their participants:

What about a form of human being, separate from us and all those like us? Is there a form itself of human being, or fire, or water? ... And what about these, Socrates? Things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else totally undignified and worthless? Are you doubtful whether or not you should say that a form is separate for each

of these, too, which in turn is other than anything we touch with our hands?¹

I follow the traditional labelling of this argument and call it the 'Third Man' (3M).² Parmenides archives the problem whether the human being's form (as 'One') requires a mediator between itself and its instances (as 'many'). It is good to think of this mediator as a mapping function between form and participant. 3M hinges on a *reductio ad absurdum* approach to Socrates' position and has two variants. Both call into question the *reductio* premise that ontology must proceed with two relationally mediated but substantively separated categories, a 'One' (form) and a 'many' (participants). It should not come as a shock to ask exactly what to do with the conclusion, since the *reductio* premise, that One and many are mutually exclusive in the ontological register, seems reasonable on nearly every grain of theoretical resolution, and yet given 3M it turns out to be entirely untenable.

These two variants of 3M imply the existence of an object which is One-and-many, an object 'impossible' to construct given Socrates' premise. There is no need to label the variants of the argument; they amount to the same thing, only in reverse.

The first variant maintains that a form must include the multiplicity inherent in its instances, or else the form necessarily has one (One) participant and so, importantly, cannot be different from its participant – since the only rationale for inferring the existence of a form is its ability to cluster multiplicities (participants). In short, the *relation* between the form and its participants must itself have a form, or else form is not different from its participants, and so the form does not exist. And if the form does not exist, neither do its participants, since multiplicities are multiple only with respect to the clustering operation of forms.

The second variant claims that forms of excrement, hair, dirt, etc., in other words the 'lowest of the low', also must have their own forms, that which includes them in the realm of eidetic perfections. But (as with the first variant) the mediation itself is unaccounted for, since the forms themselves are supposed to be the 'perfect originals' of their participants – yet here the most *imperfect* is included in the most perfect, short-circuiting the separation. Again, form and participant turn out to be indifferent; but in this

¹ See Plato 1997. There are in fact five separate arguments in this dialogue, documented by Dolar 2004. My aim here is merely to provide the core insight of each. See Žižek 2012: 39-69 for an extended discussion. Without realising it, Alain Badiou's introductory 'Meditation 2' proceeds from similar presuppositions as here (Badiou 2006: 31-37).

² There is some tension here: Rickless 2020 follows a voluminous literature in calling not 130c but 132a-b the Third Man and 130c the 'Whole-Part Dilemma'. On the surface at least, this does not make sense to me. It is 130c which speaks of the form of human being, and 132a-b which seeks the forms of qualities such as 'large'; it would stand to reason that it is the former and not the latter which is the originator of the Third *Man* problem. I wish instead to follow Dolar (2004: 70-71) and say that the Third Man is a systemic feature which 'lurks' (Dolar's term) within the five arguments throughout the dialogue. What I am adding is only that this lurking feature has two discernible variants.

version, it is participants which do not really exist, since they cannot have form. In either variation multiplicity is lost.

To sum: in 3M, multiplicity must be included in the One, and yet the One, as one, cannot be multiple. And hair, dirt or excrement, as many (since they include both the perfection *and* the limitation of this perfection) must include in themselves the One and yet, as multiple, they cannot. They cannot – and yet they must. 3M thus predicts the existence of an object which ought to be impossible on Socrates' reading, which I propose to call the One-and-many.

I also propose to call any system which both begins with the impasse generated by 3M and attempts to construct the 'impossible' (One-and-many) object, the 'material dialectic'.³ Yet further, I also propose to call any such system which hinges on the material dialectic 'materialism'. The relevance of the material dialectic to scholars of both ontology and theology is best exemplified in the dialogue, titled *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, which supplies the topic of discussion in this piece,⁴ between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek. Both authors here offer rivalling materialistic accounts.

The initial impression of Milbank's materialism reveals that

the Catholic perspective achieves a materialism in a joyful, positive sense ... for matter to 'matter' there must be a recognition of a mediating link between matter and spirit which allows us to recognize, in a neo-Aristotelian manner, that the human being is an integrally 'eroto-linguistic' animal.⁵

Milbank has in mind an ontology which sees the forms (as the unity of divine ideas)⁶ present in participants as superimposed 'doubles', providing a 'reversible hierarchy between substance and spirit'.⁷ The 'reversibility' here is due to theurgic operation: matter is matter precisely because it is immersed in the divine perfection which is always-already indwelling it. Let me call this Milbank's 'theurgic materialism'.

The initial impression of Žižek's materialism reveals that

a truly radical materialism is by definition nonreductionist: far from claiming that 'everything is matter', it confers upon 'immaterial' phenomena a specific positive nonbeing ... [thus] either subjectivity is an illusion, or reality is *in itself* (not only epistemologically) non-All.⁸

³ Žižek (2014: 5, but also *passim*) explains why it must be *material*. See also Žižek 2006: 167. Milbank (2011: 4, 40-42) arrives at the same spot in a different way.

⁴ Žižek and Milbank 2009.

⁵ Milbank 2009: 125.

⁶ Milbank here is of one mind with Cunningham (2002: 219-234), who presents what he calls a 'theo-logic' in which he connects (Neo-)Platonic forms with divine ideas.

⁷ Milbank 2011: 4.

⁸ Žižek 2009B: 100. Hereafter, all emphasis in quotations is original.

Žižek's point is to present a view of matter as incompleteness ('non-All') as such: matter is matter because there is always an excess virtual/immaterial component which mediates the difference between something (form) and itself (participant), with this virtual component achieving a positive ontological status without a corresponding positive ontological substance. It is not nothing, it is *a* nothing.⁹ Let me call this Žižek's 'dialectical materialism'.

Both authors operate at the cutting edge of theoretical research in philosophy and theology. John Milbank, on the one hand, is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham in the UK. And Slavoj Žižek, on the other, is international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London, also in the UK, but is better known internationally as a public intellectual. *The Monstrosity of Christ* text offers their longest and most sustained discussion on theological ontology, and so serves as the launching point for the following discussion.

2. Thesis and plan

The thesis in this article comes in two stages. In the first stage, I will offer an argument to the effect that the material dialectic exemplified in 3M validly predicts the existence of an 'impossible' object – a prediction which Milbank and Žižek attempt to work out in competing ways. I will not defend the soundness of the material dialectic, although I will make clear the conditions outlining what it would take to demonstrate soundness. In the second stage, I will apply these results to the field of Christology. At first glance this should seem reasonable: the two-in-one feature of Christ, as God and human together, seems to be formally structured as an 'impossible' object predicated by 3M, and so *a posteriori* is a natural territory for its application. In fact, both Milbank and Žižek advance a Christology as a necessary outcome of, and in fact a precondition for, their respective ontologies. The argument in this second stage will be that the Christologies presented by Milbank and Žižek are 'heterodox', and as such should be rejected for theological reasons. We should then ask: if the material dialectic presents a problem space which intersects theology with ontology, then how might someone navigate this dialectic to remain christologically orthodox? I am confident I can supply the answer here.

My motivation for this project is that it is interesting to theologians based on at least the following consideration. The territory opened by 3M reveals *a priori* conceptual affinities between ontology and theology, affinities which can and should be explored by theologians. The consequence of this intersection is that 3M asks us to *occupy the space of difference itself*,¹⁰ a space which theologians would do well to occupy – if for no other reason than that it may help to find a common space both *between* confessional boundaries and between ecclesiastical spaces and so-called 'secular' spaces. Yet this is

⁹ This will be elaborated later. For this characterization, see Ruda 2016: 152.

¹⁰ A notable author who has generally lucidly presented a case for this and has been formative for Žižek's own thought is Kojin Karatani; see Karatani 2003: 3, 60-76 and Karatani 2020: 108-109. This space of difference will be clarified in the following section.

not a so-called 'ecumenistic' conclusion: the position which asserts this difference itself is singular, with well-defined parameters.

The discussion progresses as follows. I have already outlined the problem which needs to be grasped to account for what is going on in the dialogue between Milbank and Žižek (§1). Next (§3), I will unpack the validity of this ontological problem and its connection to Christology. Thirdly, in §4 and §5, I will argue that the christological accounts offered by both authors cannot be accepted from an orthodox theological standpoint: Milbank's ontology implies a monophysite Christology, and Žižek's a patripassian one. Fourthly (§6), I will show how a dyophysite Christology can be constructed from within the material dialectic; I propose to call the figure which accomplishes this task – tongue-in-cheek – a 'Catholic Žižek'. Finally, I will give brief final considerations (§7).

3. The material nexus

3.1 Difference, differentiation and negation

I will call the problem space growing out of the material dialectic the 'material nexus'. This nexus describes the theoretical parameters and the topology of the ontological territory presupposed in the debate between Milbank and Žižek. But before this it is best to deal with a commentary which operates outside of this nexus and dismisses both options completely. In a review of the debate, John D. Caputo attempts to bypass the material dialectic by directly appealing to an ontological economy whereby participants (creatures) connect with forms (God) without any ontological mediation.¹¹ Caputo first encourages a move away from the material dialectic by appealing to the absurdity of abandoning 3M's *reductio* premise:

As I do not think that matter is ultimately the matter at issue for Milbank, or that Christ is the issue for Žižek, I am also overwhelmed by a compelling sense of how unconvincing is either view. What exactly is the compelling need we are under to agree with either one of these positions or to choose between them? Why do we have to love either one of these monsters?

This criticism directly challenges the material dialectic's attempted blocking of any conceptual exit from the dynamics which produce the so-called One-and-many 'monster'. Why not just have the One (Christ) and have the many (matter)? Why be in love with the problematisation of difference? Maybe this monster isn't so unlovable if we keep in mind the etymology of the word monster: the Latin *monēre*, to warn or advise. But to warn of what? Of the existence of the object which Socrates says cannot be possible, the One-and-many 'monstrosity'.¹²

¹¹ Caputo 2009: 12. All quotations of Caputo to follow will be taken from here.

¹² I wish to distance myself from the specific notion of *monster* as the subject of Pierre Bruno's pressing critique of Žižek. Bruno (2020: 90) argues that Žižek makes every human creature into a 'monster ... that ... sets itself up as a rebel against its creator, thus depriving the creator of his own

Caputo counters with a direct appeal to the marvel of the gospel's elimination of any mediation between creatures and God, in its

promise/risk of mercy and love, of compassion and forgiveness, and that is all we know on earth and all we need to know. Does anyone really think the Sermon on the Mount has anything to do with any of this bombastic metaphysical tilting and jousting?

Note that Caputo's appeal is to a (Christian) theologisation of Socrates' favoured ontology of forms (as One) and participants (as many): creatures are collectively divinised (compassion, forgiveness) by the indwelling of the One God in whom they are so divinised.¹³ The question we are left with is whether Caputo can appeal to the non-dialectical difference between creatures and God intimated by his reading of the gospel message, or whether the material dialectic returns as a nagging feature of any ontological economy.

Caputo's attempted bypassing of the material dialectic fails, since we can simply reapply the dialectic to the difference between Caputo's thesis and its negation. The theoretical and performative dynamics of terms such as 'love' and 'forgiveness', even in Caputo's construction, still work within a set of oppositions (positive-negative), as in love-indifference, mercy-mercilessness. 3M can then be applied simply: is there, or is there not, a difference between the terms in the opposition? The question, to be clear, does not ask whether they can be *differentiated* (they obviously can) but whether the *difference between* the terms – obviously not deductively available in the grammar of either term – can be accounted for.

Cara S. Greene asks us to consider a pair of hypotheses, a 'positive' one and its negation, which differ in how they broker the reference-referent connection. She calls 'realism' the thesis which says that references map onto referents sitting in the transcendental field outside the economy of signifiers. And she calls 'conceptualism' the negation of this hypothesis, that 'there are turtles (references) all the way down', that there is no transcendental bedrock of referents outside the signifier reticulation. Greene convincingly argues that the appeal of any term to objects outside of the oppositional matrix (realism) cannot escape the need for reference deferral (conceptualism), for the simple reason that even though realism appeals to something beyond signifier opposition, *the relation of a signifier with its negation* is not itself included among the transcendental referents. The logic here is transitive: because conceptualism is the thesis

omnipotence and marking him as contingent'. Žižek here 'forecloses the transcendent'. My position is in line with Bruno (2020: 22-23), who seeks to re-evaluate this foreclosure, i.e., to reintroduce a space for transcendence beyond that of 'Void'.

¹³ An extended discussion in Caputo 2007: 92. Obviously deconstruction is not a Platonic art – though my point here is that it is one which plays on the strict hierarchy posed between Socrates' two-tier ontology. That it happens to reverse it, is inconsequential to my argument, since my target is not the order of a (reversible) Platonic hierarchy but the presence of such a hierarchy, reversible or not.

explicitly negating this possibility, conceptualism as a signified cannot be found in any transcendental field. And insofar as realism is in relation to it through negation, it cannot pull conceptualism into the transcendental field without equivocation.¹⁴

Greene is therefore right to say that we must operate in the in-between of both theses, in the space of difference itself.¹⁵ The result is that we lack referents to signifiers (conceptualism), *and* that the referential structure is itself the transcendental bedrock which sustains the economy (realism). In short, there ultimately is transcendental reference, but it is no-thing. Both Milbank and Žižek take this position.¹⁶

But Caputo does not follow this injunction to occupy the space of difference. His thesis should be viewed in realist terms: 'forgiveness', internal to its referent-reference economy, operates in such a way as to connect the 'many' – those in need of forgiveness – to the 'One' – the God who forgives – without allowing any interpenetration between these two ontological levels – without 'monsters'.¹⁷ Our pleas for forgiveness directly reach their transcendental referent. Caputo therefore means to bypass the problem of difference given in 3M, but he leaves us with a thesis that cannot provide the difference between itself (as realist hypothesis) and its negation (as conceptualist hypothesis). Otherwise, the difference is *nothing*, meaning there is no difference, and that is the key to 3M. We are left wondering how Caputo can motivate his thesis that forgiveness as a concept operates independently of the material dialectic if this gesture itself commits his position to finding indifferent forgiveness from its negation, say, from hard-heartedness. And surely *that* is not present in the Sermon on the Mount.

3.2 Mediation and difference

All this implies that the material dialectic is an undoubtedly *valid* problem: the realist hypothesis is indeed untenable and so is its negation – as both hold to the invalid premise that forms and participants are unique, nonoverlapping, separate. But I cannot defend the soundness of the material dialectic: firstly, because of the labour involved in such an argument. What would need to be demonstrated is the thesis, as Artemy Magun has it, that negativity is not simply a *latency*, but has a positive ontological status in itself: it is an *activity*, albeit an unstable one.¹⁸ And secondly, because Milbank does accept the material dialectic and yet does not accept the 'positivity' of negation.¹⁹ The argument in

¹⁴ See Greene 2022: 85.

¹⁵ Greene 2022: 97.

¹⁶ For Žižek (2012: 76), there is participation, but it participates in Nothing. (This is its transcendental referent.) For Milbank's take, see for example Milbank 1997: 136, with a special mention of Hart (2004: 250 and 291-292), to view the thesis claiming that participation indeed takes place, but the transcendental referent is no 'mere' object among other objects, but God as Being as such beyond opposition.

¹⁷ I am partial to the impulse which pins Caputo in the conceptualist category instead of the realist one. His project is in many ways one of deconstruction, after all, though Caputo 1982: 255-256 seems to provide enough to justify my categorisation here. Cf. note 13.

¹⁸ See Magun 2013: 1.

¹⁹ For the best place to access a position identical to Milbank's on the question of negation, see Hart (2010: 398), arguing that 'true transcendence must be beyond all negation'. Remember that,

§4 will critique this, but only on theological grounds. It is therefore wise to leave to another investigation whether the material dialectic is sound on ontological grounds.

Hegel famously adds the language of *vanishing* to the material dialectic. Milbank and Žižek both clearly pick up on this.²⁰ Hegel wishes to ‘vanish’ the difference between form and participant in this category of ‘becoming’. In volume one of his *Logic*,²¹ Hegel appeals to the structure of the material dialectic, arguing that becoming

is the vanishing of participant into forms, and of forms into participant, and the vanishing of participant and form in general; but at the same time it rests on their being distinct. It therefore contradicts itself in itself, because what it unites within itself is self-opposed; but such a union destroys itself. This result is a vanishedness, but it is not *form*; as such, it would be only a relapse into one of the already sublated determinations and not the result of form *and of participant*. It is the unity of participant and form that has become quiescent simplicity. But this quiescent simplicity is *participant*, yet no longer for itself but as determination of the whole.²²

What is relevant about this passage has to do with Hegel’s expression of 3M: the difference between participant and form is itself neither participant nor form – each option would collapse the difference between the two, leaving only a space of indifference between both.²³ The ‘vanishing mediator’ (this phrase will be clarified in §4 below) is Hegel’s way of articulating the One-and-many object, and it is structured as an ontologically adjusted participant: a union-multiplicity (becoming).

What to do with the mediator that ‘vanishes’ in Hegel’s system. Žižek wishes to develop Hegel’s thesis into the thesis of the ‘pure difference’,²⁴ the final, unerasable, irreconcilable opposition between form and participant. There is, on Žižek’s terms, ‘*no need for a Third element*’, that is, no need for a positive mediator, and so Nothing itself does this mediation.²⁵ Milbank for his part wishes to accept Hegel’s vanishing operator

theurgically, this transcendence indwells material things, and so, by transience, material things must be beyond real negation too.

²⁰ Milbank (in Žižek’s and Milbank 2009: 112) attests to Žižek’s mastery of Hegel. Therefore, for the purpose of mediating the debate at hand, nothing about Žižek’s idiosyncratic reading of Hegel needs to be mentioned. For Milbank’s own take on Hegel, see Milbank 1997: 29.

²¹ Hegel 2010.

²² The pericope is modified according to the following schema: *being* has been changed into ‘participant’ and *nothing* has been changed into ‘form’. The reasons justifying this decision cannot be given here. Instead, the places in Hegel’s corpus which could serve as the justification for this can be found in Hegel’s (2010: 70-72) extended discussion of Plato’s *Parmenides*, and in Hegel 2018: 62-68, 70-71.

²³ Cf. Hegel 2018: 62-64.

²⁴ This is Žižek’s way of referencing the ‘impossible’ object which is identical to the mediating difference pointed out in the material dialectic. See Žižek 2012: 608-610.

²⁵ Žižek 2012: 144.

and yet sees it as an excavating device uncovering a Being beyond opposition which does not vanish, but remains as a non-mediated mediator, an ontological sediment which is a One-and-many. For Milbank, form and participant are more properly said to be reconciled in a mediator which is 'non-vanished', which cannot be negated and so cannot be mediated. Milbank agrees that Hegel leaves no scope for reconciliation, no 'Third' (both Milbank and Žižek capitalise the word) resolving the opposition between participant and form, but he holds that this 'denial leads of itself to a new positive upshot'. For Milbank, this 'upshot' is a kind of 'ultimate identity' belonging to God (form) as sole substance lacking any opposition.²⁶ Put succinctly: after the vanishing of the operation of negation in mediation, Milbank postulates a positive remainder and Žižek postulates a positive non-remainder.

It is now time to turn to the christological implications of these rival theses. In short, for Milbank, God, in Christ, or Christ as God-Incarnate, is the non-vanishing mediator between God and creatures, precisely because Christ embodies the difference between God and creatures as such as fullness of both. By contrast, Žižek's Christ really vanishes: he dies permanently on the cross and so ceases to exist, and yet this non-existence projects ever after as a positive, virtual nonbeing. I will now unpack these two summaries in a critical look at the Christologies of Milbank and Žižek's.

4. The Christology of John Milbank

4.1 Milbank's mediator

The material dialectic is present in the Christologies of both Milbank and Žižek, in which the person of Christ functions to articulate the status of the pure difference. The figure of Christ acts as the 'exclusion' from which the difference between the transcendent²⁷ and immanent (also God and world/universe/creation, form and participant) is supposed to be uniquely seen.

Milbank sees Christ as 'the double glory of the paradoxical ... in which the human mind entertains the idea both of the divine source and of that which this source posits'.²⁸ Christ is a 'double' in that he is double in nature, as God and as human, acting as the middle elevating matter to the divine, which, in a sense, transubstantiates matter into an inconsistent 'double' of itself and its negation, God.²⁹ Therefore a 'double existence and reversible hierarchy between substance and spirit is possible', on Milbank's theurgic telling, precisely 'because there is a divine creative source of both matter and mind which is itself the coincidence of spirit with substance'.³⁰ Matter can be matter only in and

²⁶ Milbank 2006: 156; Milbank 1997: 85 confirms the reading: God's speaking is truly 'without substance'.

²⁷ Here I follow the classification in Desmond: 2003: 3, for the most radical version of the three characterisations of transcendence outlined there.

²⁸ Milbank in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 198.

²⁹ Milbank in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 183. The concept of transubstantiation as assumed in Milbank is explicated in Pickstock 1997: 133, 262-263.

³⁰ Milbank 2011: 4.

through divine interpenetration, and in Christ there is the remainder of the vanished difference between God and humanity.

On the other hand, Žižek applies the idea of the vanishing mediator to the person of Christ. In christological terms this translates to the notion that for him 'The orthodox formula "God became man so that man can become God" is totally wrong: god became man *and that's it*, nothing more, everything already happens here.'³¹ For Žižek, what is revealed after the incarnation is an empty transcendent, a Void/Nothing.³² In his view, God-the-Trinity dies in the incarnational process, leaving the universe alone with the empty difference between itself and God, irreversibly excluded from any further divine attention. Žižek claims that

Hegel's underlying premise is that what dies on the Cross is not only God's earthly representative-incarnation, but the God of the beyond (the transcendent) itself: Christ is the 'vanishing mediator' between the substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community.³³

This is the meaning of the positive nonbeing of the dead God, one whose nonbeing is itself the virtual life of his community of followers. Of course, Žižek admits that this Hegelian reading goes against the standard orthodox Christology.

It is helpful to use this intentional misreading as a foil for understanding Milbank's Christology. Milbank's stated goal is to mobilise Hegel to counter this counter-reading, using resources ignored by Hegel himself. Milbank claims that 'The specific story of Christ is not a drama performed against the stage-backdrop of a finished ontology, nor is it decoratively redundant to ontology, nor is it the fated outcome of an ontology, as for Hegel.'³⁴ Rather, he argues, 'Christian Trinitarian logic has a mediating structure which is *not* dialectical'³⁵ and so preserves a non-vanishing mediator in the form of divinity-in-materiality—that matter is itself, ultimately in Christ, the pure difference between matter and the immaterial. God is, in short, his own pure difference.

What I have written so far is enough to make sense of the two core evaluative sentences from both sides in the *Monstrosity* debate about the proper understanding of Christ as mediator. Milbank complains: 'What matters is not so much that Žižek is endorsing a demythologized, disenchanting Christianity without transcendence, as that he is offering in the end (despite what he sometimes claims) a heterodox version of Christian belief.'³⁶ But it is Milbank, in Žižek's words, who 'is in effect guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism: in my atheism, I am more Christian than

³¹ Žižek 2019: 391. Žižek often repeats himself and this statement can be seen *verbatim* in probably a dozen places.

³² Žižek 2009B: 33.

³³ Žižek 2009B: 29. Frederiek Depoortere (2008: 121-124) has catalogued and analysed Žižek's notion of 'vanishing mediator'.

³⁴ Milbank 2011: 14.

³⁵ Milbank in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 145 and more fully in Milbank 2003.

³⁶ Milbank in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 111.

Milbank'.³⁷ The issue at stake here is christological; the figure of Christ, for both authors, tells us what true materiality is.

Parsing out Milbank's Christology involves examining the so-called 'trinitarian logic' at play in his theurgic materialism. Adrian Pabst most succinctly outlines the three levels of theurgic relation which act as centrepieces for Milbank's conception of matter.³⁸ The picture here reveals the levels in which divine ideas (forms) inhere in material objects (participants), adopting the literary device of analogy to express the ontological relation:³⁹

- i) horizontal or symmetrical analogy: the relation of being to beings, whereby individual beings share being in common
- ii) vertical or asymmetrical analogy: the connection of created being to God on which the lateral relationality in (i) depends
- iii) horizontal-vertical analogy in 'the absolutely symmetric relationality between Trinitarian persons, which provides the ultimate source for the relational individuation of the whole of creation'.⁴⁰

The basic picture is that theurgy – this form of analogical indwelling of the divine in matter – represents the dynamic process by which matter is identified only with respect to the triune God, without whom there would be no-thing, no matter, at all.

The relationship between the figure of Christ and theurgy, according to Milbank and Aaron Riches, can be discerned from their views concerning the ontology that is implicit in historical Christian belief. They claim that

The basic metaphysical convertibility between Christianity and theurgic Neoplatonism lies in the way the paradox of participation entails for both a non-contrastive and non-dualist construal of the relation of divinity and even *hyle* [matter], the lowest form of creation: matter and images can therefore truly communicate the transcendent, the world is therefore truly 'sacramental'.⁴¹

The main work done by the historical tradition in Christianity, Pabst clarifies, has Christianised this theurgic (read: sacramental) schema.⁴² On the christological register, the figure of Christ is meant to be the pin holding together the hinge of divine indwelling in all material things. In Christ's doubleness, as God and as human, the true difference between God and human – form and participant in the material dialectic – is to be

³⁷ Žižek 2009A; see 248 for this line. See Žižek (2003: 7) for a congruent statement.

³⁸ For Milbank's common outlook with Pabst, see Milbank 2006: xix, 435. For the relevant points of agreement with Milbank, see Pabst 2012: 43.

³⁹ On the ontological work that analogy is supposed to do in the contemporary literature, of which Milbank is a prominent part, see Gonzalez 2019.

⁴⁰ Pabst 2012: 231.

⁴¹ Milbank and Riches 2014: xiii.

⁴² Pabst 2012: 60.

discerned with most clarity. Christ's incarnation is therefore the paradigm of all materiality.⁴³

Christ accounts for pure difference by acting as pure difference's unique concrete materialisation. According to Milbank, Christ unites the transcendent with the immanent by standing in as its definitive mediator. Christ mediates between the transcendent and the immanent. Yet this same problem of how to account for pure difference reappears precisely within the figure of Christ: what is the difference, *in Christ as transcendent-immanent mediator*, between the divine and human nature? More to the point: if Christ is himself the pure difference between God-without-humanity and humanity-without-God, then what is the pure difference between the divine nature and the human nature in Christ himself, who has already mediated between the divine and the human? Does this not suggest another, more primal, 'purer' difference – a non-vanishing mediating Christ *for* Christ, and another such Christ-mediator for that Christ, and so on *ad infinitum*?

4.2 Milbank's appeal to 'trinitarian ontology'

Milbank attempts to answer this question by developing a 'trinitarian ontology', which is meant to block the need to postulate an infinite regress, stopping the mediating buck and Christ himself. This attempt is best seen in Milbank's appeal to Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), the prodigious Russian theologian.⁴⁴ For English speakers, Bulgakov's recently rediscovered text, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, offers a view of the history of philosophy as 'heresiological' deviations from a primal, original 'orthodox' – by which he means theurgic – plenitude.⁴⁵ Bulgakov suggests that the entire history of philosophy is marked by a series of 'choices' cut out from the whole: the model ontological mistake consists in 'the arbitrary election, the choice, of some single thing or part instead of the whole: that is, precisely, a one-sidedness'.⁴⁶

Milbank calls Bulgakov's ontology a '*grammatical ontology*', which he thinks 'cannot seriously [be refuted] without lapsing into incoherence'. This is because of the alleged structural resemblance of material reality to its trinitarian source: the 'subject-predicate-copula structure of all human language reveals indeed that we can only perceive the world at all by animating it'.⁴⁷ The subject-predicate-copula is, on the trinitarian ontological reading, the 'universal logico-grammatical' structure as the triune

⁴³ Milbank and Pickstock (2000: 60) provide one place where this incarnational (theurgic) materiality can be seen. See also Milbank 2011: 41, and Pickstock 2020: 127, where she speaks of the 'porosity' of material to the divine.

⁴⁴ David Bentley Hart (2022: 181) is probably not intending to be hyperbolic in saying that Bulgakov is 'the single greatest theological mind produced by Eastern Christianity after the time of Maximus the Confessor'.

⁴⁵ Bulgakov 2020, with introduction by Milbank, cited shortly.

⁴⁶ Bulgakov 2020: 3. William Desmond suggests the same in many texts, notably Desmond 2008: 117, and Desmond 2020: 193-225. Gonzalez (2019: 246-287) explicitly connects Desmond to Milbank (and both to Hart) in terms of a shared ontology.

⁴⁷ See Milbank, 'Foreword' in Bulgakov 2020: xxiii. Milbank most recently wrote on this topic in Milbank 2022.

ontological character of reality.⁴⁸ The 'animation' Milbank spotlights is to be read in terms of theurgy, the participation of matter in the divine; and the 'copula' connecting subject and predicate is to be read in terms of the mediator, the pure difference.

This triadic grammatical structure common between God as Trinity and material reality is what Bulgakov calls 'Sophia', God as both creating subject ('divine Sophia') and created predicate ('creaturely Sophia').⁴⁹ Milbank adopts this formulation, saying that what he has in mind is 'the femininity of God which several modern Russian theologians have identified ... as 'Sophia'.⁵⁰ Elsewhere Milbank expounds this notion: Sophia must be understood ontologically as 'the "female" birth of the Creation as non-God that is also the act of God, and therefore in some sense within God'.⁵¹ The notion of instrumentality, of an act which is also itself the acted-upon, is central to the feminine imagery of God: God births creation within God, as woman does with child in womb, and so he is himself – paradoxically as divine mother – included in all the activity of the foetus-creation.

4.3 Problems with Milbank's trinitarian ontology

Nikolaos Loudovikos has described Bulgakov's ontology as superimposition of the divine nature in Christ onto the human as a kind of static, dominating, eternal 'double', as though 'the human nature of Christ existed in the Logos from the beginning'.⁵² This captures the notion of the creature existing in God 'from the beginning', as a kind of eternal non-vanishing mediator consistent with Milbank's formulations. Loudovikos' reading of Milbank seems to be justified by Milbank's own position, since he says that the eternal indwelling of creation in God is equivalent to the sophiological postulate.⁵³ Loudovikos' unfriendly description can be mobilised to criticise Milbank's Christology, that the view of Christ as non-vanishing mediator cannot account for the difference, the pure difference, between the divine and human natures in Christ himself.

The criticism here should start with pointing out the dialectical contradiction⁵⁴ which is present in the trinitarian ontology of Milbank, through Bulgakov. If the immanent

⁴⁸ Bulgakov 2020: 9. To connect this to the 'heresiological' understanding of philosophy, Bulgakov claims that any attempt to make of this tri-unity (S-P-cop) a primordial unity is the untrue axiom that makes all of philosophy a tragedy.

⁴⁹ See Bulgakov 1993: 54-81. Andrew Louth (2015: 58) connects the concept of the 'between' as an articulation of Sophia as the wisdom of God. Bulgakov's own position is clearly in ontological step with Milbank and associates in terms of their 'God as sole Substance' view. 'What is not God,' he contends, 'is *nothing*.' (Bulgakov 1993: 148) In another place (Bulgakov 2008: 103) he says that 'Sophia is ... the Divine World, existent in God and for God... This world has in itself the life of Divinity.' Hart's comments on orthodox Christology following Bulgakov can be found in Hart 2022: 18.

⁵⁰ Milbank in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 185-186 and 191, respectively.

⁵¹ Milbank 2003: 208. Žižek's take can be found in Žižek 2012: 796. Adam Kotsko (2008: 104-105) develops Žižek's line of thought.

⁵² Loudovikos 2020: 87.

⁵³ Milbank and Riches 2014: xxxii-xxxiii.

⁵⁴ See Gabriel (2011: 5): such a contradiction 'arises when the motivational structure of a theory is incompatible with its manifest propositions', whether at the level of axioms or of theorems,

is meant to carry vestiges of the transcendent in its ontological-grammatical design, then this dynamic must be present in both the *explanans* and *explanandum* of the theoretical edifice accounting for the immanent structures. In other words, the principles by which the 'gulf' between immanent and transcendent is explanatorily crossed must be applicable to both sides of the bridge by which that gulf is crossed. This is only if – as Milbank claims – the triune grammar is to function as *explanans* in the first place.

This implies that if immanent and transcendent share a trinitarian grammatical structure, then the transcendent likewise possesses such a trinitarian structure. But it plausibly does not: the transcendent, more appropriate to theological orthodoxy, does not merely possess a trinitarian structure but more properly *is* such a structure. Put this way, the trinitarian ontology is not evidence for the sophiological femininity of God, but is, in fact, identical to it. A trinitarian ontology is, in short, Sophiology's own restatement: for God to possess such a trinitarian structure, he must already have within himself the immanent 'trinity' present in matter. That is, he must have within himself the 'subject-predicate-copula' triune grammar which *already includes* the immanent within the transcendent plenitude. And this is simply the sophiological position in reverse. Sophiology is left without any evidential base in the trinitarian ontology. Milbank therefore cannot appeal to the triune grammar to explain the feminine essence of God because this femininity is already the Sophia by which he explicates his vision of the trinitarian ontology. What this conclusion leaves behind is a lacuna: given the hypothesis of Sophiology, we cannot tell whether the immanent structures are trinitarian. If they were, this would be logically independent of God's tri-unity.

Therefore Loudovikos' counter that 'there is no immediate relationship between the mystery of the Holy Trinity and these triadic structures[: the]Triune God in Himself is entirely separate from any possible 'traces' of Himself' should be accepted at face value.⁵⁵ If there was such an 'immediate relationship', then the difference between God and creation would be called into question. This is because Christ as non-vanishing mediator, the copula between God-subject and creation-predicate, is meant to function as the pure difference between the two; yet this same schema, applied to the non-vanishing mediator itself, leads to trouble. Christ himself, as mediator between God and creation, should then be in his own person a mediation between his own divine and human natures. But if Christ is the figure that embodies the pure difference between God and humanity, then the pure difference between his divine nature and human nature is left unmediated. And – to recall 3M – this would imply that in Christ's person there is no difference between the divine and the human natures. This explains why Ludovikos is so confident to label sophiologists like Milbank as possessing a sort of unshakeable pantheistic tendency, unable to locate the difference between transcendent and immanent. Perhaps the 'greatest error of the sophiologists', Loudovikos claims, is 'their inability to preserve the transcendence of God'.⁵⁶

'without a direct, logical contradiction arising *within* the already established structure of the theory'.

⁵⁵ Loudovikos 2020: 91 note 3.

⁵⁶ Loudovikos 2016: 202-204.

The error exposed in the sophiological inability to account for the pure difference between the natures of Christ within Christ, Loudovikos continues, lies in Milbank's tendency to speak of human nature possessing no substance and no essence of its own. For Milbank, it is as if 'only one essence or substance is real; what is touched by God exists only without a real essential otherness'. Consequently, Milbank struggles 'to keep both ontological sides of God intact, to wit, His unchangeable essence and His many essential realizable potencies *ad extra*, which derive from the essence without being identified with it'.⁵⁷

Milbank is faced with a dilemma: either Christ is multiple in nature and multiple in person or he is singular in both. The first horn of the dilemma rolls out from the premise that there is multiplicity in Christ's natures but unity in his person. This is the orthodox formula, but Milbank fails to show why exactly there cannot be another Christ-mediator between Christ's divine and human natures given that Christ is already an ontological mediation between God and humanity. Problematic multiplicity in Christ's person would result from a simple repetition of Milbank's logic. Therefore, accounting for the pure difference between God and creation with the 'third' of Christ (Milbank's sophiological suggestion) requires us to postulate *another* third, an additional non-vanishing mediator, accounting for the pure difference within the mediated natures of Christ's divinity and humanity, for wherever there is multiplicity there is mediation. For it is the same difference each time – that between divinity and humanity; only in Christ's case, this relation is simply internal. Milbank's Christ, the Christ-as-mediator between the divine nature (transcendent) and creation's nature (immanent) does indeed require another Christ of his own, a mediator between his own double nature – *ad infinitum*. Loudovikos' point can be paraphrased as: Milbank's schema is 'unable to preserve the difference between Christ's human and Christ's divine natures'. Unable to preserve it, that is, without infinite regress, infinite Christs.

This alleged inability to account the pure difference between Christ's multiple natures, leading to a 3M-style regress (a form for a form for a form and so on) involving a multiplication of Christ's person, can be mitigated only at the price of cancelling the multiplicity of Christ's natures. And Milbank eventually makes this move, but this is the second horn of the dilemma. In reference to this buck-stopping adjustment, Loudovikos claims that the Sophiology of the Russian religious philosophical school at the end of the nineteenth century (e.g., Bulgakov) – with which Milbank openly identifies – is monophysite.⁵⁸ Milbank surprisingly agrees:

⁵⁷ See Loudovikos 2011: 225 and 231 respectively. Milbank (1997: 85) confirms the reading: non-violent semiosis is truly 'without substance'.

⁵⁸ This judgment is itself a blending of two places in Loudovikos' writings (2016: 179 and 2020: 76). He applies this term to an enormous portion of the history of theology, West and East alike; this extension will not be commented on here. The way I intend to use the term 'monophysite' – as a subset of Loudovikos' reference class – is to use it as a kind of 'warning', a danger of excess, within the historically dyophysite line of reflection. My personal take is that so-called 'Monophysite' (capital M) texts, such as that of Pope Shenouda (2004: 151), do not remotely resemble the christological and ontological mistakes touched on in detail in this piece – but the reasons for defending this will not be explained. The perspective used for the monophysite label

Christ as in two natures has finally blended the divine and the created Sophia ... [such that] What this adds to Chalcedon is subtle but crucial[:] it is not satisfactory merely to say, with Chalcedon, that Christ is divided by nature and united by person or character. For this suggests that he is in one aspect (the personal) the God-Man or incarnate, but in another aspect (the natural), he is not.⁵⁹

Milbank argues that the dyophysite formula of Chalcedon, that Christ is dual in nature but singular in person, must be 'blended' to preserve divinity; for without this blending Christ's human nature is entirely separated from his divine person such that Christ would be naturally prevented from partaking in his own divinity.

4.4 Ontological metastasis

To reiterate the dilemma: either Christ's person is not singular (there are many Christs – first horn of the dilemma) or else Christ's nature is not plural (Christ's natures are blended into one – the second horn). Concerning the second horn, the 'blending' of which Milbank speaks is at once recognisable as the monophysite hypothesis.⁶⁰ The sixth-century theologian John Philoponus supplies an appropriate compliment to Milbank's statement here. Philoponus is targeting the 'inseparable but unconfused' clause in the Chalcedonian Creed that is used to describe how Christ can be two in nature ('unconfused') but one in person ('inseparable'):

If they [the dyophysites] say that because of their unconfusedness there are two natures in Christ after the union, namely the divine and the human, they should not say that there are two but [rather] three, that of the body, that of the soul and that of the divinity.⁶¹

The notion of *metastasis* unites the formulations of Milbank and Philoponus: assuming a 'two' in Christ – a double nature – makes it impossible to control further splitting, either between the natures within Christ's person or between the person of Christ and his human nature. Once more, either Christ's uncompounded natures are divine at the price of a malignant multiplication of natures appended to Christ's person (Philoponus), or else

here can be modelled after Waitz and Tisdale (2022: 46), who cite an example formally outlining the attitude I am trying to take here – this will also go unexplained. The canonical dyophysite take assumed here can be found in Pope Leo the Great (2016: 77). See Vasiljević (2011: 145-146) for canonical variations in contemporary dyophysite Christology. This, by contrast, *will* be explained, only later.

⁵⁹ See Milbank 2017: 45-85, esp. 80.

⁶⁰ I will skip dealing with the terminological tension between *mono*-physite and *miaphysite*.

⁶¹ See John Philoponus, *The Arbitrator*, §30, cited in Lang 2001: 197. For Lang's commentary on this portion of Philoponus' argument, see 41-88. It is worth noting that this critical comparison between Milbank and Philoponus concerns the form of Philoponus' conclusions only. Johannes Zachhuber (2020, esp. §5.2, 147-155) comments on this.

Christ can have multiple natures only at the price of splitting his divine person from his human nature (Milbank). Milbank and Philoponus present mirroring ways in which the dyophysite formula allegedly disfigures itself: if there is an irreducible 'many' in Christ, then his status as truly God is interrupted. In Milbank's words, if Christ is 'divided by nature', he can only be incarnate in person; therefore, by nature, he cannot be God.

4.5 Evaluation

What is incorrect here is not that the divine and human nature in Christ cannot be differentiated from one another or discerned in Milbank's telling. Milbank's mistake is that the *pure difference itself* is absorbed by the divine nature in his Christ, as the human nature is ontologically swallowed up, nullified. Milbank's theurgic Christ can be endorsed only at the price of losing his humanity, precisely because the human and divine natures are made indifferent.

Milbank's confident and penetrating responses to Loudovikos as he defends his Christology against the latter's objections simply cannot be entertained as orthodox dyophysitism.⁶² This is a theological problem for Milbank, but if the material dialectic were shown to be sound it would be an ontological problem too. It is still possible that dyophysitism is mistaken ontologically or dogmatically, as Milbank ends up implying, but it remains the case that the so-called 'orthodox' Christology is not monophysite.⁶³

Perhaps Milbank does not appreciate the dramatic irony of his position – appealing, as it does, to a materialist ontology that is already theurgically transformed by matter's permanent ontological borrowing from the divine, and then situating the attendant Christology within this resultant ontology. The outcome is predetermined: Milbank can at best claim that his Christology is not the result of a (Hegelian) ontology, but in doing so he appeals to another (theurgic) ontology which is christologically modified at the outset. The same 'fatedness' is active here, only this time in reverse. God, in Milbank, theurgically controls the fate of materiality itself, since all matter is 'incarnated' using Christ as the paradigm case, and so all ontology – that of God as well as that of humanity – is sourced in Christology. But Christ's ontology is always exclusively in step with God's because human nature as such is nullified. The effect of Loudovikos' critique and the dilemma derived from it in this section, the ultimate irony in Milbank's christological position, resides in the reason why this relation cannot be reversed: Milbank's case is to project christological ontology onto matter, when he could really be projecting theurgic ontology into Christ.⁶⁴

⁶² Milbank 2017: 156-164.

⁶³ Riches (2016: 8, 33) attempts to support Milbank's christological account, arguing (like Milbank does) that it is in fact dyophysite. I believe the argument to be invalid. The following argument addresses this elliptically.

⁶⁴ To my mind, Loudovikos' case, when translated to Christology proper, is stronger than what Milbank leads on: Milbank's schema, says Loudovikos (2020: 32-33), 'ends up projecting psychological categories of mankind onto the eternal Trinity' by submitting creation as such to triune structuring.

This challenge is sufficient to call into question Milbank's christological stance. Since if the dilemma is answerable, it means that Milbank's Christology is monophysite and justified; if it is unanswerable, it means that it is monophysite and unjustified. The choice is irrelevant here.

5. Christological controversy: Žižek

5.1 The place of femininity in theology

Lorenzo Chiesa claims that the material nexus must be understood in irreducibly dual terms, complimentary to, but irreconcilable with, each other.⁶⁵ On his reading, incompleteness (i.e., non-All) must be total, must be pervasive in matter. This judgment problematises the connection between something's incompleteness and the ability for that something to be spoken, to be *said* to be incomplete. Take a familiar thought experiment in mereology: fictional characters are incomplete objects, whose full identity cannot be determined in principle. (For example, we don't know if Sherlock Holmes has a mole on his lower back.) In normal circumstances, speaking about these characters allows us to smooth over these indeterminacies to characterise the same Sherlock across iterations. In such ordinary cases Sherlock's incompleteness as an object is localised and bracketed. But if we take this incompleteness as the paradigm for ontology as such, the question is how we can exhaustively speak about incomplete objects if the (nonfictional) speaker is incomplete in the same way; for then the speaking itself is 'unfinished', carrying within it what is not said, incorporating its own absence. This would imply that, in the incomplete speech itself, the truth of the matter is likewise obscured, barred. Incompleteness is the case, but it cannot be said to be the case, for this saying is incomplete, too.

Chiesa's radicalised expression of incompleteness is or is not the case. He claims that if it is the case, it cannot be the complete truth: 'we can only *half-say* it as truth, for as soon as we say it we evoke completeness'. And if it is not the case, then 'incompleteness is the complete truth of a deceivingly inconsistent God, an absolute being whom, by definition, we will never comprehend, for he is illogical'.⁶⁶

Slavoj Žižek takes the second of these two options.⁶⁷ Consequently, Chiesa complains that Žižek is too one-sided in his understanding of incompleteness⁶⁸ since, for Chiesa, the either/or between these options is 'non-negotiable', necessitating that both options remain open.⁶⁹ For him these two options correspond to the two 'faces' of God, by which he means to identify both masculine and feminine: put in familiar terms, God-as-masculine is the *object* of the pure difference, and God-as-feminine is the *hole* or

⁶⁵ Chiesa 2016 *passim*.

⁶⁶ Chiesa 2016: xiv-xv.

⁶⁷ In Žižek's characteristic language (2019: 273-308), this God is 'the retarded God of quantum ontology'.

⁶⁸ Chiesa 2016: 66-67.

⁶⁹ Chiesa 2016: xv. For Chiesa (2016: 65-66), Žižek's one-sidedness leads to a sort of vitalist or animist ontology. This jives with both Greene's and Bruno's positions, both in conflict with Žižek's, variously cited above. I wish to endorse it only up to a point, see below.

recess of the pure difference.⁷⁰ In this light Žižek's position is a kind of imbalanced, 'one-faced' affirmation of the masculinity of God which excludes the feminine.⁷¹ Žižek therefore cannot even half-say the truth about God, but must instead dwell in total silence;⁷² but, to emphasise Chiesa's first option, it would be important to say, even halfway, what can be said about God.

But an appeal to an incomplete saying of God does not need to result in the opposite imbalanced, 'one-faced' affirmation of femininity over masculinity. The relevance of Chiesa's comments is that they touch on the proper place of femininity in any reading of the non-All. It is necessary to investigate the femininity which plays such an important role in orthodox christological territory, namely the place occupied by the mother of God, Mary. We need to recall that Žižek's Christology – in which Christ is a 'vanishing mediator' between God and creation, such that God dies in the death of this mediator, leaving only (incomplete) creation – is the result of an intentional misreading of orthodox Christology. Here I will not challenge Žižek on this 'hermeneutic of suspicion', but challenge the uniqueness of this misreading, that it must take place only at a single site, viz. in Christ. The task is to see whether we can multiply the sites of impossibility, so to speak, to describe a Christology based on the posterior positing of the divine-human Christ. For it is the impossibility of Christ which *a posteriori* opens the ability to locate repetitions of this impossibility in different ontological registers. More plainly, this results from the position which holds that the incarnation is *prior to* ontology, which takes place outside of and apart from the study and cataloguing of being. From this standpoint we can affirm the feminine as incompleteness without either projecting this incompleteness on God or problematising incompleteness in our speaking of God: in Mary our half-saying the truth about God does not invoke an illicit, divine completeness, but simply *is* the whole truth about a God whose own pre-ontological 'completeness' need not be disjunctively denied.

5.2 Misreading, delusion and Mary

Tertullian writes that 'the Son of God died' and that 'it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.'⁷³ This notorious line can be applied as a formula for a multiplication of

⁷⁰ Chiesa 2016: 21.

⁷¹ Chiesa 2016: 67.

⁷² See Žižek (1994: 89-90) for a characterisation which *may* exemplify the one-sidedness Chiesa is complaining about. There is a blankness, a silence to the woman here: 'the Lady is the Other which is not our "fellow creature"; that is to say, she is someone with whom no relationship of empathy is possible.'

⁷³ Tertullian 1885: 525 (§5.4). Apparently this quotation is not what it seems, that Tertullian is really addressing not God but some (mistaken) hypothesis about God, and saying that his rising again is absurd only on the presuppositions of this hypothesis, which takes his rising again to be impossible. I want to push this further: *any* hypothesis which seeks to smooth over inconsistency/incompleteness (even an orthodox one) should be included; God's rising again is impossible *even on the (correct) reading* claiming that it in fact took place – it happened, and it is

impossibilities ('misreadings'). It can be taken as a lesson in Christology relevant to the material nexus: church dogma (i.e., the Chalcedonian Creed) is never so true as when it is professed by someone in the grip of a spiritual delusion.⁷⁴ This is to say that it is the mistake which forces the formalisation of a dogma, which operates purely in practice prior to the problem and which must be spoken, codified, settled, after it. The idea here is analogous to setting boundaries in personal and professional relationships: in most cases, unspoken rules of socialising may be followed until one party for some reason oversteps or fails to observe them; it is then that the explicit speaking of the implicit boundary is called for. But the resulting state is a paradoxical one since it combines two logical contraries: the ongoing need to keep a boundary implicit and so unspoken and the present urgency of speaking the boundary so as to preserve/return its implicitness.

The liturgical place of the Russian прелесть or Serbian прелест (*prelest*), like the case of communicating boundaries, opens up the paradox of true delusion.⁷⁵ Precisely when I am deluded – for example, I have the impression that I am not a sinner or that I am doing decently enough spiritually – the Chalcedonian dogma shows its true sturdiness. It is, in other words, exactly when I cannot 'see' the truth of dogma, when its truth is otherwise impenetrable to me, that I require its symbolic formulation: Christ in two natures 'inseparable and unconfused'. Delusion – or misreading, to take the cognate at interest here – can open a pathway to producing a *true misreading*, exactly of the kind Žižek is after.⁷⁶ To be clear about what is being claimed here: *prelest* is a true delusion in the sense that, absent the delusion, the truth would not be said; yet when the truth is said, it can only be half-said, but half-said in the sense that it fully asserts what is strictly impossible.

Prelest or spiritual delusion finds its proper place as finding (impossible) truth through recurring misdirection. Chiesa's parallax reappears here with clarity: dyophysitism is both true and can only be said to be half-true, since our human nature is mixed up in Christ's humanity; *and* it can be fully said to be true only at the price of making that truth 'impossible' or, in the term used earlier, monstrous. Thus dyophysitism splits Chiesa's difference, since we assert the full-half truth. This is because the impossibility in question is not primarily the impossibility of Christ as One-and-many,

impossible. We can thus understand Tertullian's line for what it appears to be saying in the English citation here.

⁷⁴ This brings to mind a fascinating moment in C.S. Lewis' writings (1942: 40): 'Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.'

⁷⁵ Alexander Schmemmann (1987: 67) moves towards this. Obviously I am pressing this position into the material dialectic with which Schmemmann would strongly disagree. Nevertheless, it is merely an extension of his own position in an alternative, and I think superior, ontological register. This is meant as a theologization of the notion of 'objective fiction' explored in notes 14 and 15 above. In fact, Bruno (2020: 152) does exactly this in a different theological key.

⁷⁶ Because 'truth has the structure of a fiction'. My comments here can be seen along the lines of what Žižek calls the 'Symbolic Real', a reduction of the impossible 'Thing' to its superficially consistent formulae. This is mentioned in the Preface to Žižek 2002: xii.

though this reading still stands. The primary impossibility, from the standpoint of humanity in its 'pure' dimension, is that of virgin-mother, the parallax status of Mary, the virgin-and-mother of God (virgin-One; mother-many). The aim here simply repeats the method of misreading that Žižek is intent on applying. And in so doing, in contrast to Žižek, it produces a dyophysite reading.

It may be surprising to say that the 'impossible' reading of virgin-mother (i.e., the misreading), in Tertullian fashion, ends up simply interpreting Mary's theological role in the orthodox way. The upshot is that Christ, read against the impossible virgin-mother, is no longer the self-annihilating God, as Žižek contends, but the God of orthodox Christology. Put another way, the 'misreading' of Mary simply *is* the correct reading of Christ, and it is the very failure to make sense of virgin-mother, the very 'delusion' which obstructs the consistency of her status as virgin-and-mother, that necessitates the orthodoxy of the 'impossible' reading.⁷⁷ The contradiction between transcendence and immanence is (impossibly) internalised in Mary without the need to read her own ontological status christologically: Mary mediates between divinity and humanity but is not thereby the God-human. Judged against this picture, Christ can (rightly) be seen as God-human precisely because we no longer need to postulate his position as that of a mediator. It is Mary who bridges the gulf, not Christ; it is Christ, given Mary, who is by nature *immediately* God-and-human.

Mary can be considered an 'impossible' object: in her the non-All is at its most transparent. This is because she occupies a special limit-case of humanity as such. In other humans their non-identity with themselves is supplemented by a positive 'nothing', a virtual component mediating the difference between their form and their body (participant). In Mary, by contrast, her non-identity with herself – for in a sense her body, her human nature, is God's; there is no other human parent, her flesh is impossibly hers *and his*, because flesh cannot be shared but in this case it is – can count as a 'vanishing mediator' without vanishing either herself or the God whose flesh is hers. A properly dyophysite Mariology also sidesteps Milbank's insistence that Christ must be seen as a positive remainder 'blending' the mediated natures while still preserving the correct orthodox perception that Christ, contrary to Žižek's view, does not necessarily stay dead. And it also doubles against Milbank's monophysite Christ: the feminine is and always was simply in humanity, not in God; and it is the human nature of God which is 'impossibly' granted by Mary, who in turn is God's impossible flesh-giver.⁷⁸ Mary is therefore an impossibility strictly within the ontological territory of 'creation'.

The adequacy of this result obviously depends on how ready we are to apply the Hegelian mediation to Christ himself in a way that Žižek does not. The point for now (the argument itself will be given in the next section) is to see exactly what happens in Žižek's intentional misreading in his Christology. Recall that Christ, for Žižek, is the God who is

⁷⁷ The language of 'obstruction' is an intentional allusion to Žižek 2009: xiii-xv. The theoretical background of these comments is grown from the Mariology of Maximovich 2013 (esp. 47-61).

⁷⁸ John of Damascus (2019: 3.3) supplies the symbolic formula for this: '... if Christ had one compound nature after the union ... then He is neither consubstantial with His Father, who has a simple nature, nor with His Mother, because she was not composed of divinity and humanity.'

‘his own blasphemy’,⁷⁹ who ‘dies on the Cross ... not [as] God’s earthly representative-incarnation, but [as] the God of the beyond (the transcendent) itself’.⁸⁰ The suggestion here is simple: this Christology is patripassian, implying as it does that it is God-the-Father, the transcendent God as such, who dies on the cross.

It is difficult to see what exactly would count as an objection to this claim, since, in the first place, Žižek himself does not seem to be concerned about whether his christological interpretations are orthodox. In the second place, the label of patripassianism approaches best what Žižek has in mind. The fourth-century Church Father, Epiphanius of Salamis, says that a patripassian is someone who attributes suffering to God the Father by accepting the claim ‘that the Father, the Son, and the One who suffered are the same’.⁸¹ The only step taken in this classification of Žižek is to deductively derive ‘suffering’ from ‘death’ such that a God who dies is also a God who suffers. This will be taken as sufficient evidence.

6. A Catholic Žižek?

My last task is to explain exactly what can be so ‘Catholic’ about Žižek – or, better put, what a Catholic might get out of a Žižekian ontology.⁸² Milbank believes that Žižek can keep enough of his ontological edifice intact while embracing his theurgic brand of materialism – what Milbank in his *Monstrosity* contribution calls ‘paradox’. It is Milbank who asks us to consider the ‘Catholic Žižek’, another Žižek than the actual person, one who is

a different, latent Žižek: a Žižek who does not see Chesterton as sub-Hegel, but Hegel as sub-Chesterton. A Žižek therefore who has remained with paradox, or rather moved back into paradox from dialectic. And this remaining would be sufficient to engender a Catholic Žižek, a Žižek able fully to endorse a transcendent God, in whom creatures analogically participate.⁸³

⁷⁹ Žižek 2012: 112.

⁸⁰ See note 33.

⁸¹ Epiphanius of Salamis 2013: 93. Dionysios Skliris and Sotiris Mitralaxis (2019: 22) argue (unsurprisingly) that patripassianism is one of the many charges of heterodoxy which can be laid against Žižek.

⁸² My intention is to use ‘Catholic’ with the full range of ambiguity it carries today: both as a proper name for the confessionally (dyophysite) Catholic Church and as a cross-confessional abstract noun for the demographic of right-believers as such according to ‘mainstream’ sociological groupings. Of course I do not intend to miss out on the Orthodox Churches, which also see themselves as Catholic in the former sense, though not as Roman Catholic, but Milbank’s terminology (latter sense) constrains my language too much to include this nuance.

⁸³ Milbank in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 113. Pound (2008: 20) is a very similar attempt at locating a Catholic Žižek, which could be dealt with in the same manner as what follows. Žižek (in Pound 2008: 155, an afterword) also retorts in a way the following reply repeats.

The problem here is that Milbank's Catholic Žižek is, like Milbank himself, a theurgic materialist; it is therefore implausible to consider this figure as Žižekian at all. This is because it is Žižek's refusal to opt for theurgy which is the true significance of his position in his debate with Milbank: for Žižek, as for Greene, it is not that his position 'wins out' over against Milbank's, full stop, as by consuming it in its narrative scope or theoretical simplicity. The truth of the matter is the *difference between* their two views themselves. Since this is Žižek's own position, he asserts his dominance precisely in that *his* position is the position that asserts this difference. It is the incompleteness as such which Žižek is after – and the mere existence of any irreconcilable gap between his theory and Milbank's will be, on Žižekian grounds, evidence of the dialectical materialist ontology. Milbank's Catholic Žižek, contrary to Žižek himself, is one who seeks to (ontologically) synthesise and reconcile, missing the whole point.

In my opinion the 'real' Catholic Žižek must be one who doubles down on this difference, this gap, this irreconciliation. Much of the legwork for outlining such a figure has been done in the previous section. The argument against the real Žižek here is that the application of the 'vanishing mediator' as the middle term toggling between God-the-Father and the universe does not need to apply, in an *a priori* fashion, to Christ as one person in two natures (the orthodox formula). The point here is that we can reason within the material nexus *after* Christ rather than apply Žižek's own dialectical materialist reasoning *to* Christ, to generate an appropriately materialist (mis)reading. There are two reasons why this line of thinking is open.

The first is anecdotal: for those who, for whatever reason, already accept the orthodox Christology, it is legitimate to ask *a posteriori* what can be done in terms of ontology to make some headway in explaining things, including God. The reasons for why anyone should hold this position cannot be given here, but the simple observation describing how someone could hold it, has been. If there really is a Christ, a God-human of the orthodox kind, who dies and then rises, who forgives sins, indwells hearts, etc., then it would be expected that this figure would fail to show up in *any* ontology which does not have him explicitly in mind.⁸⁴ The contention here is that it is valid to allow an ontology to be 'eucharistic' *post factum* (if indeed it is a 'fact'), rather than by design. And such an ontology can in principle include the ontology of Žižek – but not Milbank – presents in his works.

The second reason is more technical. It is that in holding that Christ is the vanishing mediator, Žižek assumes that Christ's person is what mediates the gulf between the divine and human natures, between the transcendent and the immanent. On this conception, God-the-Father dies because the difference between him and the universe vanishes in the 'vanishing', the dying, of Christ-the-mediator. But this cannot be the correct *post-factum* reading of an orthodox Christology. In the orthodox figure of Christ, Christ's person is identical to the second in the Holy Trinity and so, in a sense, 'comes with' the divine nature rather than strictly straddling the gap between the divine and the

⁸⁴ Of course, the so-called 'eucharistic ontologies', of which there are several, will have it in mind. For a very wide variety, see Smith 2002, Pickstock 1997 or Loudovikos 2011.

human nature.⁸⁵ To say it once again, contra Žižek, Christ's person is not to be found in the position of a mediator to begin with, and so does not 'bring' God-the-Father to death with him.

The right way to make the Catholic Žižek real might be to say that, given Christ (i.e., *post factum*), the vanishing mediation is between Christ's divine nature and Christ's human nature *in Christ's person* – not, as Žižek claims, between the divine nature and human nature independently of their union in Christ. This is exactly what Loudovikos has in mind with his theology of *consubstantiality*,⁸⁶ the notion that the difference between humanity and divinity indeed dwindles, disappears, vanishes, but vanishes without causing God-the-Son to vanish, the fullness of both. Mary is instrumental here as originating Christ's flesh (human nature) but merely birthing Christ's person which was pre-existing in the divine. The material dialectic, as a result, could itself be a space nonidentical to itself, incomplete, inconsistent. It therefore includes the thesis which asserts this fragmentation in itself, and this thesis re-evaluates Žižek's foreclosure of the transcendent without re-evaluating the materialist status of matter as such.⁸⁷

7. Conclusion

This discussion must end with Terry Eagleton's claim that, since 'Historical materialism is not an ontological affair,' this means that 'In theory, you could look forward to the inevitable triumph of the proletariat while spending several hours a day prostrate before a statue of the Virgin Mary.'⁸⁸ But, Eagleton continues, since dialectical materialism is a brand of ontology which holds that reality is 'volatile, mercurial and constantly mutating, and the mind, which tends to carve up the world according to certain rather arthritic categories, finds it hard to keep abreast of this constant flux',⁸⁹ it therefore cannot be compatible with holding orthodox theological positions, whether in Christology or in Mariology. The conclusion here, contrary to Eagleton's claims, is that the dialectical materialist ontology is no threat to orthodox Christology; the Catholic Žižek can conceivably honour Mary, virgin and mother of God, along with the historical materialist.

⁸⁵ Žižek 2003: 23: '... the lesson of the Trinity is that God fully coincides with the gap between God and man, that God is this gap – this is Christ, not the God of beyond separated from man by a gap, but the gap as such, the gap which simultaneously separates God from God and man from man.' The use of the word 'person' here instead of 'nature' follows Loudovikos in the works referenced here, where 'person' is defined as an ontological category on a par with that of 'nature'.

⁸⁶ Good places to see how this works in more detail are Loudovikos 2020: 170-171 and 185.

⁸⁷ This spirit is what Loudovikos 2020 expresses so well. Parsed into the language used here, his case can be summarised as follows: the single, particular, dialectic (of Hegel) can be overcome (87-88) with the addition of the *double* nature present in Christ (75-77), implying a double dialectic. This happens in such a way that the 'vanishing' takes place, in Christ, between human being and divine being (186) rather than, *apropos* Hegel, between human personhood and divine being (231). A parallel critique of Žižek on this same topic, that he sticks too closely to what is called '*toutology*' (Hegel's 'tautology of the whole'), is given in Bruno 2020: 94. See note 12 for more on Bruno.

⁸⁸ Eagleton 2016: 8.

⁸⁹ Eagleton 2016: 9.

To put it more precisely, should someone insist on following the material dialectic, for which I have tried to show there is abundant reason, this ought not to be an impediment to such devotion.

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