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**ŽIŽEK, BONHOEFFER AND THE REVOLUTIONARY BODY:
The Sociological Potential of Critical Theology**

by

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Canterbury Christ Church University

**Thesis submitted
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

2016

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Graduate School for their award of the University Research Scholarship, which has enabled me to carry out this research.

I also wish to thank my supervisory panel, Dr Ralph Norman, Professor Bee Scherer and Professor Robert Beckford, for allowing me the space and freedom I needed and for their continued support and guidance from day one.

Abstract

This thesis explores the potential that lies in the engagement of critical theory and theology. Rather than a mere demonstration of how theology can be used in the service of critical theory, its original contribution is in the demonstration of theological self-reflective criticality that this engagement brings about. It therefore represents an attempt to further develop the potential of this engagement, by showing how critical theory can function as a resource for theological self-reflection. This is achieved through exploration of the method, function and effect of Slavoj Žižek's materialist appropriation of theology for political thought. The resulting struggling universality of abandonment and its ethic of indifference challenging any notion of identity is then applied in examination of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own social theology of a transcendental personalist community of saints and its ethic of universal love in *Sanctorum Communio*. Žižek's community, grounded in the absence of God, draws attention to the theological character as never submitting to an identity but rather blurring the hypostasized boundaries between them irrevocably. It challenges Bonhoeffer's community, grounded in and by God, as abstracting and suspending identities only through the creation of a new one. The thesis thus draws attention to and clarifies the full dimensionality of the necessary critical character of theology.

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Introduction

Aim

This thesis is a functional examination of theology's engagement with critical theory. It represents an attempt to further the engagement beyond any mere demonstration of theology's socio-political potential, and instead appropriates critical theory in theology's understanding of self. Grounded in the conception of theology as a critical intellectual reflection on the act, content and implication of the Christian faith, the thesis presents theology's engagement with critical theory as intrinsic to fulfilling its own distinctly critical character. The thesis demonstrates this with reference to the critical theorist Slavoj Žižek's utilisation of theology for political thought. His materialist appropriation is explored and applied in a critical reading of the modern theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own theological social philosophy of *Sanctorum Communio*. This is in order to demonstrate how theological engagement with critical theory, besides displaying theology's distinctly critical sociological potential, is of utmost import for the propaedeutic role of theological reflection.

The Object of Analysis: The Social Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is varied despite the brevity of his life (1906-1945). As a modern theologian his contemplation of theological concepts was directed at their social and ethical dimension or application. His interconnected ideas of Christ the vicarious representative, Christ existing as church community, discipleship, cheap-grace

and a call for a religionless interpretation of Christianity, continue to permeate theological academia and there have been numerous attempts to summarise his thought.¹ Yet all of those concepts, as Clifford J. Green (1999) convincingly argues, reflect Bonhoeffer as a theologian of sociality. The foundations of his theology with a distinct sociological orientation were laid during his theological education in Berlin and found their original expression in his first thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*. In this work, where Bonhoeffer employed social philosophy and sociology in the service of theology, he clearly expressed his conviction about ‘the social intention of all fundamental Christian concepts’ which appear ‘fully understandable only in relation to sociality’ (DBWE 1: p. 23[5]).² This thesis undertakes to examine Bonhoeffer’s sociological claims made in *Sanctorum Communio*.

The examination or analysis will be carried out from the perspective of another discipline, for the conviction that theology carries sociological potential is not restricted to the sphere of public or political theology but is shared by its numerous dialogue partners across academic disciplines. Some of these are more surprising than others, such as many non-religious, Marxist-inspired political thinkers who explore theological resources as a conceptual resource facilitating and grounding critique. Examples of this type are Alain Badiou (2003), Giorgio Agamben (1998), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). One of these is the Slovenian post-Marxist critical theorist Slavoj Žižek, a dialectical materialist who describes himself as a fighting atheist. Nonetheless, Žižek is

¹ Some examples: Bethge (1967); Dramm (2001); de Gruchy (1999); Feil (1991); Plant (2004); Dumas (1971); Busch Nielsen, Nissen and Tietz (eds.) (2007).

² This is the reference for footnote 5 on page 23 of the first volume in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works collection (DBWE). According to Richard Roberts, this also qualifies *Sanctorum Communio* as a classic illuminating the relation between theology and the social sciences. See Roberts (2005), pp. 375-377.

convinced of the absolute necessity of Christian theology for the development of his political thought and the outcome thereof – a radical universalism grounded in materialism which is distinctly theological in experience and form and continues to address core theological issues.³ Indeed, for Žižek, theology forms one of the most complex ways of speaking about radical political change. It is thus through Bonhoeffer's and Žižek's mutual conviction about the sociological potential of theology that the point of contact for this interdisciplinary research is established.⁴

Religionless Christianity and the Death of God?

Proposing an inter-reading of the thought of Žižek and Bonhoeffer perhaps raises expectation that this will be undertaken within the paradigms of the Death of God theology. Indeed, Žižek's critical insistence on the meaninglessness in the Judeo-Christian tradition and his characterisation of God as suffering, placed alongside with Bonhoeffer's thoughts from *The Letters*, might well lead to such an expectation. An explanation is therefore in order as to why this thesis will not be conducted within the paradigms of the Death of God theology.

In *The Parallax View* (2006b), Žižek's insistence on the meaninglessness of Christianity leads him to question the range of Badiou's definition of religion as the equation of truth and meaning. In the section entitled 'When God Comes Around' (pp. 182-187), he comments on Badiou's suggestion in an interview from 2004 that the

³ This is seen in 'Building Blocks for a Materialist Theology' in *The Parallax View*, where Žižek not only carries forward the major conclusions concerning Christianity reached in his earlier works, but expresses new developments of ideological critique in theological terms (Žižek, 2006b, pp. 68-113).

⁴ As will become clear in the thesis, another contact point between them is the impact of and engagement with the social philosophy of the German idealist Georg Hegel.

simplest definition of religion is the idea that truth and meaning are identical, asking whether this is true of all religion:

The key question about religion today is: can all religious experiences and practices in fact be contained within this dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? Does not Judaism, with its imposition of a traumatic Law, adumbrate a dimension of truth outside meaning (which is why Judaism is the mortal enemy of any Gnostic obscurantism)? And, at a different level, does not the same go for Saint Paul himself? (ibid., p. 182)

In Žižek's view, the best way to clarify this question would be through examination of a situation in which religion itself faces 'a shock which dissolves the link between truth and meaning, a truth so traumatic that it resists integration into the universe of Meaning' (ibid.). The paradigmatic example of such a situation is of course when theology faces the problem of evil, the question of how to reconcile the existence of God with the fact of the phenomena of excessive evil such as the Holocaust. According to Žižek, the traditional theological responses based upon an insistence on the omnipotence of God are basically the following: evil as God's punishment, evil as a trial of faith or evil as the inscrutability of God's ways. However, there is another theological answer to this problem, Žižek argues, which refers to a God who himself suffers. He then extrapolates this notion of a suffering God in the following manner:

God's suffering implies that he is involved in history, affected by it, not just a transcendent Master pulling the strings from above: God's suffering means that human history is not just a theatre of shadows but the place of real struggle, the struggle in which the Absolute itself is involved, and its fate is decided (ibid., p. 184).

With this characterization of God as 'suffering', Žižek joins the company of some of the most important theologians of the 20th century for whom the issue

of God's passibility has been absolutely fundamental.⁵ It seems Žižek himself is not entirely, or mostly, aware of this context, yet he nevertheless immediately after the passage quoted above explicitly refers to Bonhoeffer's 'profound insight' that 'after the Shoah only a suffering God can help us' (ibid.).⁶ Yet there were many others across the theological traditions.

The theological discussion of God's passibility came to the foreground in the 20th century and occupied some of its most important theologians.⁷ However, the movement that came to be known as 'Death of God' began to emerge in the 1950's predominantly in the United States of America and Germany.⁸ These thinkers tried to account for the rise of secularism and abandonment of traditional beliefs in God in light

⁵ Indeed, the above quote sets him fully on par with Moltmann who argues that 'a theology after Auschwitz would be impossible [...] were not God himself in Auschwitz, suffering with the martyred and the murdered. Every other answer would be blasphemy. An absolute God would make us indifferent' (Moltmann, 1984, p. 10).

⁶ However, the reference reveals he is merely producing a quote from a Holocaust Reader.

⁷ Such as: John Kenneth Mozley's *The Impassibility of God* (1926), Miguel de Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life* (1954), Nicolas Berdyaev's *The Meaning of History* (1939) and Kazoh Kitamori's *Theology of the Pain of God* (1965) published in 1946. For James Cone's black theology, God's suffering is a necessary part of his solidarity with the oppressed (see McWilliams, 1980, pp. 39-43), while process theology, following A. N. Whitehead's oft quoted characterization of God as 'the fellow sufferer who understands', has readily incorporated God's suffering into its reformulation of theism which makes much of God's receptivity to the world (see Williams in Meland, 1969, pp. 175-194). In Germany, Emil Brunner was prepared to abandon the philosophical dogma of the divine impassibility for the sake of a more biblical concept of God (Brunner, 1953, pp. 268, 294), while Jürgen Moltmann expounded a theology of divine suffering in *The Crucified God* (1974) and *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1981). For Moltmann, the divine suffering was closely related not only to the theodicy problem and the Cross, but also to the trinitarian nature of God. For a brief but helpful survey, see Williams, 1952, pp. 113-117 and Bauckham, 1984, pp. 6-12.

⁸ The term death of God theologians, however, does not represent a unified movement with a consensus on what their restrictive theologies meant. This is the case with the following major proponents and their work: Gabriel Vahanian and his *The Death of God* (1961); Paul Matthews van Buren with *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (1963); William Hamilton with *The New Essence of Christianity* (1966); Thomas Altizer with *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966) and later as editor of the reader *Towards a New Christianity* (1967); Altizer and Hamilton's joint effort *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1966); Dorothee Sölle with *Stellvertretung* (1965) and *Atheistisch an Gott glauben* (1968); and, of course Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1967). For further resources on the discussion, see Bishop (1968), Murchland (1967), and Christian and Wittig (1967).

of Nietzsche's thoughts⁹ on the death of God, seeking a path for belief beyond it. While they differed considerably in their approach, they agreed on a perception of reality within which God no longer held a creating and ordering function.

It was this perception that brought their attention to Bonhoeffer's tantalizingly brief but suggestive remarks in *The Letters* (DBWE 8), wherein he reflects on the conception of a 'religionless Christianity'. The series of letters exchanged with his family and friends during his imprisonment in Berlin-Tegel yields insight into his familial care and the bleakness of the prison, as well as further reflection upon various theological issues, calling attention to his earlier works, showing or demonstrating their implications. The concept of religionless Christianity is discussed in a very small portion of the letters, written to his friend and theological confidant Eberhard Bethge between April and August 1944, and reveal a singular existential reflection on faith. Bonhoeffer invokes the concept in imagining the form of faith that would take in the ruins of the post-war Christian West. The unfinished manuscript that explored it has been lost; what remains are the letters and an 'Outline for a Book'. However, it was this relatively brief series of letters which gave the work its notoriety and attracted the attention of the Death of God theologians, who have appropriated the thought expressed therein.¹⁰ Indeed, Hamilton even considered Bonhoeffer as the 'father of the God-is-

⁹ Some also did so in light of and with reference to Hegel. See Sölle, 1965, p. 54; Moltmann 1967, pp. 165-172.

¹⁰ Robinson's interpretation of the concept 'religionless Christianity' as a secular man's call for a secular theology (1963, pp. 29-44); van Buren wrote of the concept 'world come-of-age' as portraying a world without the first cause (1968); Altizer saw Bonhoeffer as advocating a kenotic Christology (Altizer and Hamilton, 1966, p. 135; Altizer, 1966, pp. 62-69.); Vahanian referenced Bonhoeffer when writing about the need to participate in the reality of the world, instead of fleeing from it (Vahanian, 1966). Sölle, who saw Bonhoeffer as a kindred spirit, analyses and further develops Bonhoeffer's concept of *Stellvertretung* [vicarious representative action] in her *Christ the Representative* (1967). It should be noted though, that just as the approaches of various thinkers under the label Death of God are varied, so is their reading of Bonhoeffer. See Eleanor McLaughlin's 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Death

dead theology' (Hamilton, 1962, p. 440). Yet, is the consideration of Bonhoeffer as a Death of God theologian justified?

In the letter from 30 April 1944, Bonhoeffer mentioned for the first time 'theological thoughts' that might 'surprise, or perhaps even worry' Bethge – thoughts on religionless Christianity (DBWE 8: p. 362).¹¹ The concept plays a fundamental role in his attempt to conceive of a contemporary Christianity as distinct from its perception as a religion. For Bonhoeffer the concept of religion is 'only a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression' (ibid.), which is marked by an inwardness and consideration of God as omnipotent coming to aid of human weakness (DBWE 8: p. 479). However, he contends, this religious understanding belongs to an epoch that has come to an end through the historical, scientific and socio-political development (DBWE 8: pp. 425-426) that has led to the 'autonomy' and 'coming-of-age' of the world itself (DBWE 8: p. 362).¹² Bonhoeffer thus attempts to consider the form Christianity ought to take in such a radically religionless world.

A specific concern comes to the fore in Bonhoeffer's conception of Christianity as religionless – how to 'talk about God without religion?' (DBWE 8: p. 364). In other words, how is Christianity to speak of God, if his understanding as a stopgap or working

of God Theologians' (2016, pp. 45-64); Craig L. Nesson's 'The American Reception: Introduction to Bonhoeffer's Christ the Center' (Bonhoeffer and Nesson, 2002, pp. 20-30); Stephen R. Haynes' Ch. 2: 'The Radical Bonhoeffer' (Haynes, 2004, pp. 13-36).

¹¹ For reflections on Bonhoeffer's concept of religionless Christianity, see first and foremost Wüstenberg's *Theology of Life* (1998). Other works that should be taken into consideration are Benktson's *Christus und die Religion* (1967); Kraus' *Theologische Religionskritik* (Benktson's *Christus und die Religion* (1967); Schönherr's 'Die Religionskritik Dietrich Bonhoeffer's' (1978-1988, pp. 239-260). Finally, there are also the relevant sections in Dumas, 1971, pp. 163-196; Feil, 1991, pp. 72-76; Green, 1963, pp. 11: 21.

¹² Bonhoeffer's consideration of historical development toward autonomy is in no small part due to his reading of Wilhelm Dilthey, as demonstrated by Ralph Wüstenberg's *Theology of Life* (1998, pp. 136-145).

hypothesis is ‘increasingly pushed out’ (DBWE 8: p. 450), ‘ever on retreat’ (DBWE 8: p. 406) or ‘losing ground’ (DBWE 8: p. 426)? Rather than a theological sanctioning of historical development, Bonhoeffer understands his analysis as the precondition for a theology that meets the world in its current condition. His solution is to demonstrate that the very absence of the religious concept of God demonstrates the presence of the Christian God. Drawing attention to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and his ultimate act of love by his death on the Cross, Bonhoeffer demonstrates that the Christian God establishes his presence precisely by abandoning us, consenting ‘to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross’ (DBWE 8: p. 479). This leads Bonhoeffer to reformulate the transcendence of God, which is no longer considered as ‘infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation. God in human form!’ (DBWE 8: p. 490). ‘Participation in the being of Jesus’ (DBWE 8: p. 501) thus replaces participation in a religiously conceived omnipotent God as solving the problems of this world. In a world without God as the stopgap, God’s transcendence is experienced in the incarnation of Jesus. Bonhoeffer wishes to assert that God is still very much present in a world that has come to function and cope without Him.

Therefore, consideration of Bonhoeffer as a Death of God theologian does injustice to his insistence on God’s presence. The oft quoted part of Bonhoeffer’s letter on 16 July 1944, stating that ‘Before God, and with God, we live without God’ (DBWE 8: pp. 478-479), is actually Bonhoeffer’s affirmation of God’s presence in this world. Even though Bonhoeffer’s notion of incarnational transcendence could be explored with reference to the Death of God theology (e.g. Carson, 1975), his consideration far from affirms a Hegelian kenoticism (explored with reference to Žižek later in this thesis). In

other words, for Bonhoeffer, God does not die and empty himself completely in Jesus the man but rather, in Jesus, opens a way to participate in transcendence. This is in stark contrast to Altizer's consideration of Jesus as the 'epiphany of a universal divine Humanity' (Altizer, 1969, p. 73), or even that our only image of him should be 'as an individual human being' (Altizer, 1970, p. 141).

Bonhoeffer is not a Death of God theologian; his God remains a living reality. What the foremost Bonhoeffer scholars, such as Bethge,¹³ Gremmels,¹⁴ Green¹⁵ and Wüstenberg,¹⁶ have pointed out in response to any consideration of Bonhoeffer as a Death of God theologian is that he is not in pursuit of a world without God, but rather in pursuit of re-presenting God in a world that has come to cope without Him (DBWE 8: p. 290). As Thomas Torrance noted:

[T]he tragedy of the situation is that [...] instead of really listening to Bonhoeffer many [...] have come to use Bonhoeffer for their own ends, as a means of objectifying their own image of themselves [...]. In this way Bonhoeffer's thought has been severely twisted and misunderstanding of him has become rife, especially when certain catch-phrases like 'religionless Christianity' [...] are worked up into systems of thought so sharply opposed to Bonhoeffer's basic Christian theology, not least his Christology (Torrance, 1971, p. 74).¹⁷

¹³ Bethge pointed out that consideration of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity can and ought not be carried out apart from his Christology (1967, pp. 61-77).

¹⁴ Christian Gremmels noted that 'Bonhoeffer's theme is not the 'coming of age', 'this-worldliness', and 'religionlessness' of the modern world. As plausible and impressive as these expressions are, theologically they function only as auxiliary concepts. They serve the task of witnessing to the presence of Jesus Christ in the present' (Gremmels in DBWE 8 p. 588).

¹⁵ Green rejects the notion that Bonhoeffer had an idea of human progress (Green, 1999, p. 252).

¹⁶ Wüstenberg, similar to the others, argues that Christology is the key to understanding Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity (1998, pp. 159-160) and observes that any failures to do so reflect the perspectives of the interpreters rather than Bonhoeffer's own assumptions (2009, pp. 137-138). He also points out Bonhoeffer's inconsistency in evaluation of the religion (1998, pp. 31-99).

¹⁷ This brief account of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity and its appropriation has also highlighted that even though this selection of Bonhoeffer's letters from prison was highly influential in the perception of his theological legacy, it is precarious to construct his theology exclusively upon them. It also has to be remembered that the theological content of the letters is fragmentary, a sort of beginning of something to be developed. That is clearly visible in Bonhoeffer's letter to Bethge, in which he wrote that 'it would be

Rather than dealing with the absence of God per se, Bonhoeffer attempts to locate God in the areligious contemporary reality. The theme is rather ‘the claim of Jesus Christ on the world that has come of age’ (DBWE 8: p. 451). This is emphasised in his words: ‘what keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?’ (DBWE 8: p. 362).

As this brief account has shown that the picture of Bonhoeffer as a Death of God theologian is incorrect, this thesis will not be conducted within the paradigm of the Death of God theology. As such, it will not consider Bonhoeffer’s religionless Christianity as a possible response to Žižek’s overcoming of God as the big Other, for any attempt to do so would be an abstraction and would distort Bonhoeffer’s marked insistence on God’s presence. Instead, as will be shown below, this thesis falls within the remit of critical theology. Even though it includes a theological challenging of meaning, that is not conducted in light of the event of the death of God on the Cross and any ensuing meaninglessness. Instead, critical theology’s challenging of meaning comes from its propaedeutic criticality. The inter-reading of Žižek and Bonhoeffer in this thesis is not established upon their ideas of the death of God or religionless Christianity; rather, the contact point between them is their mutual conviction about the sociological character of theology and its critical potential, observed in Žižek’s conception of the Holy Spirit community and Bonhoeffer’s community of saints.

very nice if you didn’t throw away my theological letters [...] I might perhaps like to read them again later for my work’ (8 July, 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 513).

The Analyst: The Theological Materialism of Slavoj Žižek

Slavoj Žižek (1949 -) is an internationally recognised Slovenian philosopher, psychoanalyst and critical theorist, and has been deemed ‘one of the world’s best known public intellectuals’ (Gray, 2012). His over eighty works and multitude of articles have been translated into numerous languages, and he regularly speaks on various topics around the globe. Aided by examples from popular culture, Žižek uses Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian philosophy and Marxist economic criticism to interpret social phenomena, including religion, and in particular Christianity. It is with regards to the latter that he considers himself a Christian atheist or Christian materialist (Žižek, 2012a, pp. 115-116).

Žižek agrees with the ‘universalist’ legacy of Christianity, which is best expressed in Galatians 3:28, where the Apostle Paul asserts that ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’.¹⁸ He identifies with the implication of this thought (at least as he perceives it) a complete egalitarianism of all people, and calls on Christianity to abandon its outer shell of religious form, manifested in institutional organisation and religious experience. Theology as post-metaphysical political thought, girded by universality for revolutionary thought and action, is the true legacy of Christianity. That is the reason why Žižek believes theology is indispensable and essential for any kind of socio-political engagement in the world.

¹⁸ All Scripture quotations in the thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Considerations of Žižek's exploration of theology from a non-religious perspective have tended to find little value or distinctive contribution in the act. Thus the literary theorist Geoff Boucher asks whether or not the religious content of Žižek's work risks a form of 'irrational fundamentalism' (Boucher, 2005, p. 44) while the political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis is critical of Žižek's language of faith, claiming it risks 'political absolutisation' (Stavrakakis, 2005, p.44). Boucher's colleague at Deakin University, Matthew Sharpe, gives a more measured response. Nevertheless, he likewise says that Žižek's theological turn can 'easily collapse into a perverse identification [. . .] with the mechanisms of prohibition themselves, rather than a passage beyond law' (Sharpe, 2004, p. 250). Such, he argues, is attested in the history of the Christian churches. While these thinkers are correct, insofar as religious absolutism can lead to political absolutism, they are wrong in their representation of theology only through these negative associations with fundamentalism or totalitarianism. Instead of a consideration of theology as a creative resource, they argue for what could be described as implicit positivism: any sociopolitical theory should be built only upon solid and empirical facts ascertained from the ground up.¹⁹ Perhaps this criticism functions as a stopgap, something Žižek himself notes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, where he warns that 'instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, [it] relieve[s] us of the duty to think, or even actively prevent[s] us from thinking' (Žižek, 2001d, p. 3). It implies theology need not be taken seriously and the failure of Žižek's critics to engage theology appears to confirm this

¹⁹ Žižek's reluctance to respond to casual inquiries about his use of theology can be understood in light of this criticism.

very point. This thesis will aim to show both the value and distinctive contribution that is brought to Žižek's materialist thought through his engagement with theology.

From the theological perspective, it is Žižek's oxymoronic understanding of Christianity, which differentiates between its symbolic form and the materialistic core, rather than his proposition of Christianity's socio-political potential, that has in recent years attracted attention from various theological perspectives.²⁰ Not unlike Freud's own reconstruction in *Moses and Monotheism* of the story of Moses and his death in an attempt to uncover this violent and guilt-ridden core in Judaism, Žižek proposes an unacknowledged and phantasmal core which emerges through the gaps and cracks of the actually-existing Christianity. Exploring this theological engagement with his appropriation of theology in the service of critical theory has given rise to this thesis, for responses have hitherto not moved beyond the necessary critique of his theological method and/or a differentiation of their own views.²¹ Whenever they do, it is with the aim of demonstrating the sociological potential of theology or as a theoretical resource giving contemporary expression to theological themes. A brief consideration of theological engagement with Žižek is thus in order.

Theological Engagement with Žižek (Literature Survey)

Among the very first theologians who have responded to Žižek's work were members of the radical orthodoxy movement. This school of theology originated in the United

²⁰ Few examples of varied responses from different perspectives: Maldonado-Torres (2005) and Mejido (2005) from Liberation Theology, Biesecker-Mast (2003) from the Anabaptist and Griffiths (2004) from the Catholic perspective. More are mentioned below and throughout the rest of the thesis.

²¹ Among these are Frederik Depoortere (2008); Marcus Pound (2008); Roland Boer (2009, pp. 275-390) and indeed, as it will be observed later, John Milbank's work on/with Žižek. In turn, Adam Kotsko (2008) provides a valuable account of Žižek's theological endeavour only.

Kingdom and is named after its first edited volume, *Radical Orthodoxy* (Milbank et al., 1999), which brought together its leading lights. Perhaps foremost among the movement is John Milbank, who combines a strong commitment to Augustine and Aquinas with a harsh criticism of modern and secular thought from a postmodern perspective. Their utmost concern is the issue of ontology, or the underlying metaphysical framework of reality. They find an alternative to the modern ontology, which they regard as nihilistic, in *analogia entis* – the analogy of being, a synthesis of Neo-Platonism and Christianity which was achieved by Augustine and further developed by Thomas Aquinas. Only this analogy of being can allow for a genuinely meaningful worldview, in which God is the fullness of being and all created beings participate in it analogically. The radical orthodox thus maintain that unless every discipline is framed by a theological perspective, it defines a zone apart from God and thus without grounding. Radical theology's response to Žižek is thus not primarily due to his turn to theology, but due to his ontological philosophy, which they consider as unjustified.²² That said, however, their engagement seeks to address and respond to a philosophy of a materialism which, even if not grounded in the divine transcendence, is theological.

To represent the radical orthodox response, I will look at the case of John Milbank's engagement with Žižek. As their foremost figure, Milbank is a good representative of their general stance and, out of all the radical orthodox, has engaged

²² Žižek's groundless ontology will be further explored and contrasted with Bonhoeffer's ontology in Chapter 4.

Žižek most often and most directly.²³ I will do this by focusing on two works: first, *Theology and the Political* (Davis et al., 2005), which includes Milbank's contribution under the title 'Materialism and Transcendence' (Milbank, 2005) and second, *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank, 2009), a work that can be considered as the outcome of a developing dialogue between them.

In *Theology and the Political*, Milbank begins by demonstrating that due to Marx's reductive materialism, post-war Marxist thinkers sought a non-reductive form of materialism, and in doing so borrowed from Platonic, Aristotelian, Idealist and even theological thought (Milbank, 2005, pp. 393-398). This initial demonstration enables an understanding of the context, form and essence of, among others, Žižek's appropriation of theology and his thought in general as Hegelian. Accordingly, Milbank is correct in recognising that Žižek is practicing a Hegelian death of God theology resulting in universality (ibid., p. 422). In his astute navigation through the contours of Žižek's thought, Milbank also upholds Christianity's universality through the particular (ibid., p. 404), but argues that Žižek's atheistic universality of struggle or tension functions only as an ontology of revolution, rather than sociality: 'if universalism springs from an event, then to lose mythos and history is to lose the event, and so to lose the universal' (ibid., p. 411). This nihilism, Milbank argues, is due to his inability to consider analogy, which mediates between the universal and particular, grounding engagement with others in a shared analogy of being, as pointing beyond themselves to God. Thus, while Milbank agrees with Žižek that Christianity is aligned with materialism and that the true

²³ It was Graham Ward, however, who first engaged with Žižek in *Cities of God* (2000a) and then later added a section on him to the conclusion of the second edition (2000b) of *Theology and the Contemporary Critical Theory* (1996).

form of universalism or sociality is Christian, he rejects his theological materialism as nihilist and ontologically incorrect. Milbank's engagement with Žižek in *Theology and the Political* presents the parameters for their further engagement: while they both pursue a radical content of Christian theology and its sociological potential, they do so on a different grounding – one upon an orthodox ontology of *analogia entis* and the other upon an atheist ontology of *verlassenheit* [abandonment].

The Monstrosity of Christ (2009) is based on a premise that Žižek and Milbank both agree on – that Enlightenment reason has run its course. The question then, which they both answer differently, is what becomes of theology after secular Enlightenment reason has run its course? Žižek argues that secular reason is sublated by the dialectic of theological materialism, whereas, building on his criticism in *Theology and the Political*, Milbank argues that it is replaced by paradox or analogy.

One of Milbank's main criticisms in the book is that, in following Hegel, Žižek is adopting a Protestant meta-narrative and neglecting the Catholic tradition (Žižek and Milbank, 2009, p. 112). Milbank argues that Žižek's treatment of Catholics such as Chesterton, Kierkegaard²⁴ or Eckhart is done through a Protestant lens and is therefore inaccurate.²⁵ Indeed, Žižek's claim that atheist Christianity is the true Christianity is

²⁴ Milbank here insists on his consideration of the Lutheran theologian Søren Kierkegaard as a Catholic. He argues that Kierkegaard's linking of faith with reason restored a basically Catholic perspective and further mentions Kierkegaard's Catholic critique of Luther for exalting faith at the expense of works.

²⁵ An example of this is Žižek's re-appropriation of the words of Chesterton's detective Father Brown: 'he was made man' (Chesterton, 2006, pp. 394-395). Chesterton used these words to portray how Western culture's retreat into spiritualism and its willingness to believe in anything must be read as an inability to sustain the traumatic reality of the incarnated God. For Žižek, however, these words mean, along the lines of Hegel, that the external or transcendent God is now a contingent fact of human freedom itself. See Delpech-Ramey (2010), pp. 122-123. However, this criticism of Žižek, as right as it may be, can also be made of Milbank, who compares Kierkegaard to Eckhart and Chesterton. See Harris (2011), pp. 35-41 at p. 38.

only possible because he accepts a dialectical (that is, a truly Protestant) version of Christian doctrine as the most coherent (ibid., p. 117). As an alternative to Žižek's nihilistic interpretation, Milbank's proposed analogy is variously found in the same sources that Žižek uses but has interpreted differently, such as Eckhart, Kierkegaard, Chesterton and Henri De Lubac. Such Catholic perspective affirms a kind of materialism that is quite positive in that it affirms a mediating link between matter and spirit – the Holy Spirit (ibid., p. 125). Milbank points out Žižek's problematic theological method and the ensuing 'strange' interpretation of Christianity.²⁶ Žižek, on the other hand, refuses to engage with Milbank's paradox as it is not truly materialist, since it still maintains an ideological structure of the big Other. The meta-narrative that Žižek uses – Protestant (Hegelian) dialectic – is the only one that he will use, for it alone has, according to him, a truly materialistic essence and potential. This results in an impasse, which is perhaps best summed up by Žižek's final contribution to the work (ibid., pp. 235-306), in which he observes that the exchange with Milbank has been reduced to each man reiterating his respective notions and has therefore exhausted its potentials (ibid., p. 235).

Further Engagement?

Having arrived at the point of exhaustion, the question thus presents itself whether it is meaningful to keep engaging Žižek? Milbank certainly seems to think it is not, as demonstrated in an interview for *The Immanent Frame* (Schneider and Milbank, 2010) shortly after the co-authored volume. To a question about the prospects for a

²⁶ That is, 'strange' in the sense that Žižek's resulting interpretation of Christianity is something completely alien to the traditional conception.

philosophical encounter with theology that does not assent to a transcendent deity, Milbank responds: 'I think that, in the end, the prospects are non-existent' (ibid.). Žižek purely insists upon his reading of theology without considering the points of his dialogical partners. These partners, who are theologians and enter this discussion about theology's sociological potential, are right to expect a theological discussion. Yet, Žižek is not a theologian and any expectation of him to reflect on his materialist theology strictly *ab intra theologiae* falls upon deaf ears.²⁷

Indeed, Žižek's materialistic interpretation of theology appears odd to the classical theological reader, insofar as it lacks a serious consideration of the traditional or current biblical scholarship, or engagement with the Church Fathers or Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (1936-1969), or even Latin American Liberation Theology. For example, in Žižek's presentation of the weakness of the legalistic reading of the atonement (2003, pp. 102-103), he simply ignores the response to that in the form of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* (1898) in the eleventh century.²⁸ He also rarely refers to any contemporary New Testament scholars or contemporary theologians in general. There are few exceptions, such as when in his description of God as perverted he refers to the

²⁷ This is also observable in *Žižek: A Very Critical Introduction* (2008), where Marcus Pound, similar to Millbank, argues for a return to the Thomistic theology and challenges Žižek's system as a whole. He proposes that the only way to do so is from the standpoint of theology and proceeds to read his thought as theology, rather than merely pitting theology against critical theory. Thus Žižek is critiqued for remaining locked in the very system he is critical of – sacrifice – and that his entire theoretical apparatus is predicated upon such a sacrificial system, leaving the violence of sacrifice as the horizon of the political. Pound furthermore questions whether abandonment on the Cross was really the final word, and claims Žižek's resulting nihilism is incapable of sustaining an ideological critique and promulgates an ontology of revolution but not the progressive path toward Socialism. Pound claims to have recognised the importance of not adopting a defensive stand against Žižek but instead fully endorsing his claim – that Christianity really is worth saving. Unfortunately, Pound's reading of Žižek as a theologian turns out as a critique of the latter's materialistic theology and argumentation for adoption of a Thomistic outlook.

²⁸ It may be that his treatment of atonement models, which appears only in the early *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001d), is an example of Žižek's development process of theological materialism (similar to his abandonment of Freud's account of religion). In that case he later realises that a discussion of the atonement models is unnecessary.

English edition of Rudolf Bultmann's New Testament Theology (Žižek, 2003, p. 118), or when using John Howard Yoder's rejection of the 'Constantinian shift' as an illustration of a non-reconciled political standpoint (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 129-130).²⁹ In fact, his ignorance of the contemporary theological thought is revealed in his classification of the Norwegian metaphysician Peter Wessel Zapffe as a theologian (Žižek, 2014, p. 271).³⁰ Instead, Žižek crafts his understanding of the New Testament by reading it in the context of Hegel, Lacan, Marx and contemporary radical philosophy. Certainly, Žižek at times engages theological thinkers, such as Chesterton or Kierkegaard, but at other times he chooses simply not to. The deciding criterion is their materialistic potential. This is also observed in Žižek's liberal consideration of the biblical text itself, such as his selectivity in the Book of Job, or paraphrasing the original text in the Gospels.

However, Žižek's reason for this serious lack of consideration of the traditional theological scholarship lies in the conviction that such an activity would be not only unproductive but also obsolete, since that scholarship represents the restrictive and perpetual lost-ness in the Symbolic, failing to see its materialistic ground. His response would perhaps be along the lines of his conclusion to *The Parallax View* (Žižek, 2006b, pp. 382-282), in which he argues that sometimes the best way to fight against ideology is to do nothing. He illustrates his politics of refusal by using the enigmatic title character of Herman Melville's story *Bartleby the Scrivener* (2009), who answers every

²⁹ In 'Trial Balance' of *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder condemned Constantine's integration of the imperial government with the Church and argued that it leads to a double bind, where one either 'accepts, without serious qualification, the responsibility of politics [...], or one chooses a withdrawn position of either personal-monastic-vocational or sectarian character, which is apolitical' (Yoder, 1972, pp. 105-106).

³⁰ Perhaps Žižek might respond that he is merely extrapolating the theological import of Zapffe's antinatalist philosophical position.

request with the phrase: 'I would prefer not to.' Žižek explains that in order to radically refuse the ideological system, he must sometimes also radically refuse the devices by which he distances himself from it, and in this way convince himself that he is not part of the problem. This, he argues, like God's self-abandonment on the Cross, is another example of a dialectical negation of negation, a change in perspective that transforms an apparent defeat into victory. Perhaps, then, Žižek would respond to the request to engage with theological scholarship similarly, by responding: 'I would prefer not to!'

To enlighten this politics of refusal from another perspective, one could consider Walter Benjamin's essay 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' (Benjamin, 1920-1921, pp. 179-204). In it Benjamin argues that challenges to, or violations of, the law always threaten to turn full circle and become a law-making violence of their own. This is a cycle bound to endless repetition, like that of the mythical punishment of Prometheus (ibid., pp. 196-197). In the light of this problem Benjamin proposes that the only revolutionary forms of violence that does not re-instate the violence of the law are proletarian strikes. Rather than extorting concessions from the bosses, the general strike makes no demands other than the complete transformation of social relations and of work itself. This type of strike is a pure means and therefore not violent because its ends are radically senseless, unreasonable and extravagant according to capitalist logic. The strike's only intention is non-participation in the logic of ends and means and a refusal of mythical imperatives in which transgression of the law meets with punishment.

Thus, Žižek's selectivity and liberal interpretation of the theological sources are along the lines of the 'political criticism' of the French Marxist literary critic Pierre Macherey, who, in *A Theory of Literary Production*, observes that:

The speech of a book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure. Thus, the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it would not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence (Macherey, 1978, p. 85).

This, he argues, establishes the usefulness and legitimacy of asking of every production what it tacitly implies, but does not say. The challenge of critical reading is therefore to get beneath the surface of a text's ideological assumptions by asking of it what it does not say, to expose its silences and evasions. According to Macherey, literary texts have a particular ability to reveal ideological contradictions, which turns literary study into a politically subversive act. No doubt Žižek would argue the same: it is absolutely legitimate to ask of theological texts, including the Scripture, what they tacitly imply, what they do not say. When read in this way, they reveal the ideological narratives inscribing or creating meaning and thereby the veiled presence of the Real – the materialistic core of theology. As it will become clear time and again in this thesis, Žižek as a critical theorist carries in his heart the conviction that what is truly important, philosophically and politically, is that humanity resists the tendency to ascribe meaning or, indeed, any valuation and identity to life. Accordingly, the true Judeo-Christian legacy is not the fullness of meaning, but rather an acceptance of the meaninglessness of the universe. This temptation to meaning is for Žižek our struggle, to paraphrase Ephesians 6:12, the authority and cosmic power of the present darkness, to be resisted at all cost. In this struggle Žižek urges: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds' (Romans 12:2).

What, then, is the potential of theological engagement with Žižek? Should any further activity take the form of merely accentuating the unreconcilable differences

between traditional theological perspectives and Žižek's atheist materialist meta-narrative? In other words, is the limit of this engagement to assess and differentiate?

Potential for Further Engagement

I suggest that the potential of engagement with Žižek lies in the challenge that his materialistic interpretation poses to theology's self-understanding, by highlighting the importance of recognizing, reflecting upon, engaging and speaking into its cultural context. In his seminal *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (Ward, 2000b), the radical orthodox Graham Ward examines critical theory's employment of theological resources in the critique of modernity but also considers the implication of that for theology as a discipline. Theology, he argues, has been presented with an opportunity to engage in 'Cross-cultural conversation; not where we are the key players, but where we have a contribution to make' (ibid., viii), and calls for a two-fold response. Alongside a theological assessment of the critical theoretical thought, which characterises the radical orthodox engagement with Žižek, he advocates a discerning of its resources in the service of theology. The potential of engaging Žižek, I propose, is located in the second part of Ward's consideration – discerning critical theory's resources in the service of theology. It takes two forms: in extrapolation of theology's sociological import and in service of its critical self-understanding.

Demonstrating the Sociological Import of Theology

First, engagement with critical theorists like Žižek is a recognition of the opportunity his intervention into the theory of theology's sociological potential presents to speak with them about the socio-political issues of the twenty-first century adroitly, effectively, responsibly and in a self-reflexive manner in pursuit of a distinct sociological

conviction. After all, this is what Žižek calls for in *The Monstrosity of Christ* – for theological partners in this endeavour.³¹ This is what Ward (2005, p. 266) describes as theology’s ‘confrontational, not simply analytical’ method and is observed whenever the theological sources venture beyond the differentiation of their own views in order to demonstrate the socio-political potential of theology.

One instance where this can be observed is in the engagement of the Croatian Lutheran theologian Boris Gunjević. In *God in Pain* (Žižek and Gunjević, 2012), Gunjević welcomes Žižek’s challenge and goes about demonstrating that there are many hidden treasures in the history of Christianity (including its revolutionary potential), which lie buried and undiscovered for perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years (pp. 1-26). Indeed, it is theology’s responsibility to uncover these treasures that at times might have been considered rejects or obsoletes. He goes on to claim that:

Inasmuch as theology is a deliberation on ecclesial practice in the light of God's word, then this practice must be shaped by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, ever ready to communicate liberty, equality, and fraternity (ibid., p. 26).

This quote clearly shows that Gunjević has not simply taken Žižek’s side, for he still considers theology to be the only fitting thought which can offer incarnational resources and incarnational tools for changing the world. Gunjević, however, recognises that to challenge Žižek over his meta-narrative and his theological method is unproductive.

³¹ However, Milbank does not proceed any further from critiquing Žižek’s nihilism and the Hegelian meta-narrative. This has already been observed about the debate in *Theology and the Political* (Kotsko, 2009, p. 117).

Instead, throughout the chapters of the book Gunjević discusses the incarnational tools and ecclesial practices that Christianity offers.

In the second chapter (*ibid.*, pp. 73-102) Gunjević gives the example of Augustine's *City of God* (1950-1954),³² which can serve both as a contrast to or rebuke of the current global capitalist politics, and as constructive instruction for the alternative way ahead.³³ He mentions Augustine's observation that the Empire did not become vast and powerful because of its political allies or its military might but because, after subjugating other nations, the Romans brought them into the common Roman state (Žižek and Gunjević, 2012, pp. 88-90). In other words, they were all granted equal rights and privileges in the community of Rome. It was exactly the guidance of the one true God with its ideal of the heavenly city which helped the Romans in this. Furthermore, the Romans attained their glory and supremacy because of the orderly guidance for desire, as it is only that which builds proper community (*ibid.*, pp. 95-96). Augustine critiqued the virtues of the Empire which always sought to increase capital and legitimize various forms of terror. He suggested that the only way to strip away the supports for this is to engage in ecclesiastical practices, and in this way counter these Empire virtues by not participating in them. This no doubt resonates with Žižek's politics of refusal ('I would prefer not to!'). This instruction that Gunjević observes in Augustine functions as a subversive counter-parable to the imperial meta-narrative (*ibid.*, p. 100). What Gunjević, in the tradition of Augustine, calls 'nomadism' or ascetic exercise, and Žižek calls

³² Augustine's work was a response to the accusation that the fall of Rome was Christianity's fault.

³³ Interestingly, this is also what Gustavo Gutierrez says in his *Theology of Liberation* (which, it can be said, is a manifesto of Liberation Theology in some ways), in which he praises Augustine's *City of God* as the classic correct method of theological approach, because the Word of God is being brought to bear on the present historical situation (Gutierrez, 1974, p. 5).

‘politics of refusal’, becomes ‘the fundamental coordinates that help ground the political subject’ (ibid., p. 102). In this they both agree. Gunjević does not attempt to convince Žižek of the need either to abstain from Empire virtues or to engage in ecclesial practices, for indeed that would be to bring the engagement to its end yet again.

Gunjević engages Žižek as a critical theorist analysing the daily socio-political realities and their ruptures, rather than as a theologian. As such he acts exactly in the way Žižek does and no doubt expects the same of his potential theological sparring-partners – in other words, by radically refusing the devices by which he might distance himself from such atheistic interpretations. In this Gunjević resists the temptation of convincing himself that he is not part of the problem that is Žižek’s heterodox interpretation of Christianity. Through this ‘negation of negation’, an apparent defeat (the failure to engage with Žižek’s atheistic elements) is transformed into victory. It is as if Gunjević himself is simply saying, ‘I would prefer not to!’

Critical Theory in the Service of Theology

The second potential of this engagement is that theology’s contextual partners, like critical theory, bring about a greater awareness of the historically embedded particularity of its own truth claims. The failure to engage these partners is both a misunderstanding of the position, function and method of Christian theology in its cultural context and its misplacement. Instead, when theologians reflect on philosophical interpretations of Christianity such as Žižek’s, they discover the potentiality of removing every-day theological texts from the automatism of perception and making them appear in a new light.

The appropriation of Žižek's insight in the service of theology can be observed with the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson who, in *Slavoj Žižek, The Death of God, and Zombies* (2013), stages a mutually critical dialogue between Žižek's psychoanalytically inspired notion of the undead and Augustine's understanding of human subjectivity in *Confessions* (1961). Despite his atheistic declaration and dismissal of all pre-modern philosophy and theology, Sigurdson argues, Žižek's theology is structurally similar to Augustine's anthropology, thus suggesting that the relationship is more complex than Žižek allows. While Žižek would no doubt complain that talk of Augustine is a plain return to the traditional transcendent theology, Sigurdson would respond that the relationship between immanence and transcendence in Augustine is more complex than a mere positing of a transcendent object somehow influencing Augustine's innermost self. It is rather that the innermost being of the self is not the self itself but something other than the self. This is aligned with Žižek's Lacanian assertion that the core of the subject is outside himself (Sigurdson, 2013, p. 377).

Sigurdson concludes that both Žižek and Augustine are united in rejecting any superficial and transparent understanding of self, and become, consequently, an example of the engagement of a theological and psychoanalytical narrative. For Sigurdson, what Žižek offers theology is an account of human subjectivity that does not shy away from its profound alienation. 'It is only through passing through the acceptance of death drive within ourselves that we can lose all narcissistic pretensions of being in charge of our actions and their consequences or having a given place in the symbolic edifice, paradoxically gaining our true subjectivity and our ultimate freedom'

(ibid., p. 379). Žižek's psychoanalytic discussion of concepts makes theological sense, Sigurdson argues.

Gunjević and Sigurdson have discerned the use of Žižek's resources for theology, the first by deciding to further elaborate Žižek's consideration of theology as the ultimate political act through a discussion of the incarnational tools and ecclesial practices that Christianity offers, and the second by reflecting on how concepts from Žižek's thought can function as a theoretical resource through which theological themes can find a contemporary expression. While appreciative of Gunjević and Sigurdson's appropriation of Žižek in the service of theology, this thesis will attempt to explore the potential of theological engagement with critical theory even further, through utilisation of Žižek's insights in critical theological self-reflection. In contrast to their appropriation, aimed at the extrapolation and outward-looking demonstration of theology's sociological potential, this thesis will appropriate Žižek as a critical theorist in reflection on the act, content and implications of the Christian faith. Its primary character and focus will thus be deliberately critical and inward oriented.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory and Critical Theology

Critical Theory

This interdisciplinary thesis is undertaken from the perspective of theory, which has become one of the greatest growth areas in cultural analysis and academic life over the last few decades. It is now taken for granted that theoretical tools can be applied to the study of virtually anything, for example, texts, societies, gender relations as well as

religion and theology, in order to reveal greater insight of those cultural artefacts.³⁴ As such, theoretical analysis is an innately pluralist exercise, for it presents a range of possible methods and perspectives by which to analyse them and their contexts – social, political, historical, gender, ethnic. It is in line with this theoretical ethos that Žižek’s materialist philosophy will be applied to the study of Bonhoeffer’s theology in order to reveal greater insight into the latter’s thought. At the same time, it will, by placing them alongside, yield new insights into understanding Žižek. Foremost, it will highlight the fundamental role of their engagement with each other’s discipline. Thus, it will provide an account of and reflection upon Žižek’s engagement with theology and highlight and clarify the consequent theological character and persuasion of his materialism, while also drawing attention to Bonhoeffer’s engagement with philosophy and its fundamental role in the development of his thought.

More specifically, the thesis is undertaken from the perspective of critical theory. The field of critical theory is distinguished by going further than merely applying theoretical tools to the study of phenomena in order to increase our understanding of them. This Western post-Marxist theory, when applied to the society as a whole, critiques it and seeks to bring about change (Horkheimer, 2002, pp. 188-243). In its application of Marx’s famous dictum that ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it’ (Marx, 1975, p. 64), critical theory digs beneath the surface of social life and attempts to uncover the assumptions that keep us from understanding how ‘the world’ works, or rather, that tell

³⁴ The phenomenon of ‘cultural studies’ in general, one of the major success stories of interdisciplinary enquiry, is based on just that assumption – that any area of our culture is amenable to the application of the latest theories.

us how the world ‘works’, why and how these assumptions have been constructed, why it is impossible to imagine an alternative and how that is to be done nonetheless. In pursuit of this goal it fosters debate between all the major social sciences, the arts and the humanities, hoping to arrive at alternative accounts, interpretations and readings of phenomena which will produce tension within existing narratives. Thus, it is within the remit of critical theory that Žižek’s concept of anti-identitarian ‘struggling universality’ will be applied in consideration of the ‘community of saints’ Bonhoeffer explored in his first thesis in order to reveal greater insight into the thought expressed therein.

Bonhoeffer’s theological arguments for true community and its form will be examined from Žižek’s materialist perspective, evaluating whether his arguments are unassailable and his conclusions are valid, particularly with regards to matters of ontology and identity. At the same time, however, it will be demonstrated how Bonhoeffer’s thoughts from *Sanctorum Communio* can be employed in critical social theory, thus applying Wayne Whitson Floyd’s observation that ‘theology for Dietrich Bonhoeffer was above all a form of critical theory, a style of thinking in the service of action’ (Floyd, 1991, p. 175).³⁵

Critical Theology

It is in this respect that the thesis is undertaken within the interdisciplinarity of critical theory and theology or, rather, of an emergent ‘critical theology’. I call it emergent because its conception is continually developing and changing in its cultural context, just as critical theory itself is an ever-evolving concept. Indeed, the current embodiment

³⁵ This quote is taken from Whitson Floyd’s article discussing the sustained critical reflection of Bonhoeffer’s thought.

of critical theorists whose theoretical analysis and critique of society at large is driven by theological convictions, such as Žižek and Alain Badiou, is distinct from its origins in the Frankfurt School with Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1969), while still continuing its trajectory of wedding theory and praxis. In a similar way, critical theology is not a uniform and stable concept but is constantly evolving. Its touchstone can perhaps be located in Rudolf Bultmann's theology of subjective existence taking into account the post-war reality and its implications (Bultmann, 1933). Indeed, the post-war modern theology was in general occupied with reflection upon its contextual 'existence' and this is certainly also observed with Bonhoeffer. Thus it was in Gareth Jones' seminal *Bultmann: Towards Critical Theology* (1990) and *Critical Theology* (1995), which also discussed Bonhoeffer, that the term 'critical theology' made its appearance. Jones was in pursuit of a theology reflective of its late twentieth-century context of modernity and addressing its concerns. This thesis seeks to further the critically reflective character of theology Jones discussed, although in a distinctly postmodern context. As such it finds itself in the company of numerous and invaluable theological endeavours to engage with postmodern philosophy, such as Mark C. Taylor, Graham Ward and Jean-Luc Marion.³⁶

Yet the focus of this thesis is even more specific – postmodern critical theory. In his formative *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (Ward, 2000b), the radical orthodox Graham Ward examined critical theory's employment of theological resources

³⁶ Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (1984) was one of the earliest attempts to study theology from the poststructuralist perspective, Ward's *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (1995) offered Barth's doctrine of analogy as a theological reading of Derrida's economy of difference, and Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being* (1991) engaged in a postmodern, Heideggerian discussion of the nature of God.

in the critique of modernity but also considered the implication of that for theology as a discipline. This thesis seeks to contribute particularly to theology's understanding of its role, position and potential in this engagement. It considers critical theology, a theology within the matrix of critical theory itself. Such an understanding of theology is more perspectival, rather than positional, challenging the socio-political constructs perceived as absolute and objective, while concomitantly reflecting critically upon the framework of theological analysis and theory production. The thesis thus welcomes the recently published Carl Raschke's ground-breaking *Critical Theology: Introducing an Agenda for an Age of Global Crisis* (2016), wherein he recognises the immense consequences of critical theory's appropriation of theology for theology itself and calls for naming the emerging genre 'critical theology'. Raschke's is the first work that directly attempts to trace the contours of this form of theological thinking by differentiating it from political theology. Concomitantly, Jeffrey Robbins published his own thoughts in *Radical Theology: A Vision for Change* (2016), although avoiding the term critical theology and instead reinventing the content and focus of radical theology. Even though this thesis deeply appreciates the critical character and sociological potential of their elaborating theology, it does not easily identify with either of these works. That is certainly the case with Robbins' identification of the character of this theological thinking as postsecular but also with their shared conviction of its primary aim as demonstrating theology's social potential. This thesis rather aims to stretch the concept of critical theology further by highlighting its self-reflectivity through appropriation of critical theoretical resources. It thus finds itself most comparable to Floyd's *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (1988) which, by engaging Bonhoeffer

and Adorno, not only contributes to the engagement between theology and critical theory but also examines the future of dialectical theology as a form of non-identity thinking that is receptive to the epistemological, social and ethical priority of Otherness.³⁷ A critical theoretical challenging of the understanding of critical theology.

It is in this multifarious and constantly developing sense of critical theology as ‘emerging’ that this thesis is developed, located specifically at its convergence with critical theory. In order to further clarify the interdisciplinary, critical theological conviction and nature of this thesis, I will refer to Bonhoeffer’s own positioning in the foreword to the chosen text:

In this study social philosophy and sociology are employed in the service of theology. Only through such an approach, it appears, can we gain a systematic understanding of the community-structure of the Christian church. This work belongs not to the discipline of sociology of religion, but to theology. The issue of a Christian social philosophy and sociology is a genuinely theological one, because it can be answered only on the basis of an understanding of the church. The more this investigation has considered the significance of the social category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts. ‘Person’, ‘primal state’, ‘sin’, and ‘revelation’ can be fully comprehended only in reference to sociality [Sozialität]. If genuinely theological concepts can only be recognised as established and fulfilled in a special social context, then it becomes evident that a sociological study of the church has a specifically theological character (DBWE 1: p. 21).

³⁷ Floyd’s work is thus also in contrast to other Bonhoeffer works whose aim is primarily to demonstrate the sociological relevance of Bonhoeffer, such as Jeffrey Pugh’s *Religionless Christianity* (2008), or *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today* (de Gruchy et al, 2009). Pugh applies the concept of religionless Christianity, which he understands as Bonhoeffer’s struggle with the deconstruction of his age, to our contemporary struggles. The collection of essays in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today* seeks to appropriate Bonhoeffer’s insights to the apparent contemporary dualism of fundamentalism and secularism.

In parallel to Bonhoeffer's employment of social philosophy in the service of theology, here it is critical theory that is employed in the service of theology. Only through such an approach, it appears, can we examine Bonhoeffer's conception of the church as a community structure and its sociological implications. This thesis then belongs not to a clear-cut discipline of theology or indeed sociology, but is perhaps to be understood rather as critical theological theory which brings together concepts from various theoretical legacies. The issue of the sociological potential of theology is a genuinely critical one, because its full dimensionality can only be grasped from this interdisciplinary and critical perspective. The more this investigation has considered the significance of the social category for Bonhoeffer's theology on the one hand, and the significance of the theological category for Žižek's critical theory on the other, the more the specific sociological character of theology and its critical potential have emerged.

Within its critical theological theoretical framework, this thesis will thus demonstrate three things: First, that this kind of critical theoretical engagement of Žižek and Bonhoeffer is model insofar as it understands both the nature and critical power of their intervention into theology or philosophy, respectively, and enters into a deliberation of theology as the ultimate socio-political act; second, that theology as a theoretical reflection can function as a powerful instrument for both sociological analysis and critique, as it has always suggested that another world is, in fact, possible;³⁸ yet third and foremost, it will demonstrate that critical theory can function as a resource in the necessary critical reflection on the act, content and implications of the Christian

³⁸ In that sense, what is witnessed in Bonhoeffer is the embodiment of this conviction and its application to Hegelian and Schelerian sociological concepts; what is observed in Žižek is its return in the guise of psychoanalysis or Post-Marxism or Hegelianism.

faith. In that sense, Žižek's insights can aid the task of critical theology in evaluating the position, function and method of theology.

The purpose of this thesis is thus not simply theological but rather the development of a critical theological perspective. Accordingly, the theory of the given reality of theological concepts is understood or examined from the perspective of critical theory. In some sense then, the thesis continues the observed trajectory of recent writing on critical theory and theology, while also taking the engagement further. While it does include reflection on how theology can be used in the service of critical theory, its primary focus is on how critical theory can help bring out the necessary self-criticality of theology. Only in this way is theology able to face up to its own 'problems', such as that of identity, explored in this thesis with reference to Bonhoeffer. As a (nascent) theologian and critical theorist, I can only hope that this study will be seen as a modest contribution to critical theology.

Outline

The thesis explores five main points:

1. It seeks to provide a clear presentation of Žižek's necessarily theological political thought resulting in a 'struggling universality'.
2. It examines the nature of theological engagement with Žižek thus far and identifies the potential thereof.
3. It applies that potential to Bonhoeffer's social theology of *Sanctorum Communio*, examining his engagement with social philosophy, his attempt to

demonstrate the sociality of theological concepts and his upholding of the church as a model form of community.

4. It thus demonstrates how Žižek's critical theory can be utilised as a resource in the service of critical reflection upon Bonhoeffer's theology, while also showing how Bonhoeffer's social theology can be used in the service of Žižek's critical theory.
5. It thereby contributes not only to the theological engagement with critical theory but, most importantly, to the development of a distinct perspective of critical theology.

The thesis has two parts, each consisting of two chapters. While Part One focuses on the formation, contextualisation and presentation of Žižek's political theology, Part Two engages it in a critical reading of Bonhoeffer's social theology.

I will begin in Chapter 1 with Žižek's intellectual background, presented in three parts. A very brief but meaningful intellectual biography will illuminate some of the matters discussed in the second part of this chapter on the conceptual framework of his thought. Georg Hegel, Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan will be identified as the main philosophical forces of his thought and an outline of their more pertinent ideas will be given – Hegelian dialectics, Marx's critique of capitalism and his conception of ideology, Lacan's emancipation of psychoanalytic theory and his Orders – together with an overview of how they are employed by Žižek in his work. The last part of this chapter will focus on Žižek's context of post-Marxism by way of contrast with the debates on postsecularity in which his voice at time appears, thus rounding off an introduction to his intellectual background.

Chapter 2 will provide an account of Žižek's engagement with Christian theology, its importance for his political thought and the outcome thereof – a radical universalism grounded in the theology of dialectical materialism. After an introduction to the account, I will examine Žižek's critique of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999a) and the significance thereof. I will then present how he develops his own understanding of Christianity and the political potential of its subversive element, but only after a brief description of his rejection of actually existing Christianity. Next, I will look at the product of the theologisation of his political thought in the form of dialectical materialism, its overcoming of the constitutive exception and the new communality.

Before insights from Žižek's theological materialism can be appropriated in a critical reading of Bonhoeffer's social theology, Chapter 3 will offer a necessary presentation of the latter's intellectual background. After a short intellectual bibliography which, like its counterpart with Žižek, does not seek to provide an account of Bonhoeffer's life³⁹ but merely to demonstrate how certain biographical elements can further enlighten his intellectual development and contribution,⁴⁰ I will situate Bonhoeffer's endeavour to exegete and apply the ethical and sociological potential of traditional theological concepts in the context of modern theology. Finally, I will discuss Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation with a specific interest. Rather than functioning as a general presentation of the various thinkers who have shaped or driven his thought, the thesis will focus on a selection of particular thinkers who, during his

³⁹ There are good works which pursue that particular goal, exemplified best by Eberhard Bethge. See Bethge (1994); Bethge (1999); and Bethge, Bethge and Gemmels (eds.) (1986). Alongside these, there are numerous other biographies that constitute a valuable reading, including Feldmann (1998); Robertson (1989); and Wind (1990).

⁴⁰ I also do not engage in examination of or argumentation for the unity of Bonhoeffer's life and work, for this would be outside the scope of this thesis.

studies at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, influenced Bonhoeffer's sustained engagement with philosophy: Ernst Toeltsch, Reinhold Seeberg, and Adolf von Harnack. It will show both how these liberal theological thinkers introduced and in a way projected Bonhoeffer into a dialectical engagement with social philosophical thinkers such as Hegel and how this distinguished his perspective from that of the reformed modern theologian Karl Barth.

In Chapter 4 Žižek's thought will be utilised in a critical reading of Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*. Bonhoeffer's engagement with social philosophy therein, specifically Hegel, will be read alongside and considered from Žižek's perspective in order to examine: (1) Bonhoeffer's understanding, criticism and development of Hegel, particularly his conception of universality based upon the subject-object relationship and the concept of objective spirit; (2) his attempt to demonstrate the sociality of theological concepts of God, sin and the church; and (3) his upholding of the latter as a model form of community. Finally, the Žižekian reading will also enable a brief application of Bonhoeffer's social forms – society, the mass and community – in analysis of the contemporary struggle for social change located in the revolutionary body.

Works Consulted, Referencing and Translation

This completely literature-based research interprets primary texts by making use of a number of sources, including books that provide an introduction to Slavoj Žižek's philosophy and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, works that elucidate the main influences on Žižek's philosophy as well as Bonhoeffer's engagement with philosophy, their respective works and also works that serve as an introduction to them. With

regards to Žižek's own works the focus will be on those within which his theological materialism is developed, works by academics in response to Žižek and works co-edited with Žižek that represent a dialogue with him. With regards to Bonhoeffer's own works, the focus will be on his first doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, while calling upon other works in the presentation of his thought. All Bonhoeffer references in this thesis are to the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works collection (DBWE) and will first list the volume number of the critical edition, followed by the page number and the eventual footnote in square brackets – e.g. DBWE 1: p. 111 [11].

Although the literature I have consulted includes works in Slovene (which is my mother-tongue), they are far fewer in number than I had expected. I discovered during the literature review that since the beginning of Žižek's international career most of his work has been published in English first and only subsequently translated into Slovene. The Slovene articles by Žižek mentioned in the bibliography thus only repeat thoughts he originally developed in the English language. Furthermore, because of the sheer number of his publications, only a portion of his work is translated into Slovene. That is certainly the case with his recent works of engagement with theology, such as *The Monstrosity of Christ and God in Pain*, of which there are no translations. Consequently, Žižek's engagement with theologians such as Milbank or Gunjević is unexplored, and limited to a few descriptive articles such as Kocijančič's 'Žižek in debata o resnici Krščanske Filozofije' (Kocijančič, 2010). The thesis will also address the lack of consideration of Žižek's academic output prior to his international career. This explains the absence of Slovene sources in this thesis.

As part of this research I have also consulted German theological and philosophical works in their original language. My initial plan was to reference and quote the German editions, providing a translation in footnotes. However, since this is not primarily a philological thesis and because space is limited, I have resorted to using the English edition of the works in quotations. This decision was supported by the careful cross-referencing in the English editions of key texts, such as the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE) and the various editions of Hegel's translations. This allows for an immediate location of the corresponding passage in the German edition. In the absence of cross-referencing, I have provided references to the latter also. Where an English translation is not available, I have provided a translation and have, occasionally, given preference to the German edition of those works, in order to emphasise a particular feature of the original text.

Chapter 1: *Žižek*'s Intellectual Background

1.1 *Žižek*'s Intellectual Biography

In this section I seek to provide an intellectual biography of *Žižek*. As much as I wished to avoid delving into biographical matters, this very brief and concise summary can serve to shed light on some of the matters discussed in the section on the intellectual background of his thought, and is therefore in my opinion meaningful. It is divided in two parts: the beginning and the international acclaim.

1.1.1 The beginning

Slavoj *Žižek* was born in 1949 as the only child to Jože and Vesna, who were both bureaucrats in Ljubljana, Slovenia, which was then part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Even though Yugoslavia was a socialist country ruled by Marshal Tito (1892-1980), it was not aligned with the Eastern Bloc. Thus the political position of Yugoslavia that *Žižek* was born into was particular, with self-managing socialism and a non-aligned status; it had an element of 'relative' cultural freedom (compared to the communist countries in the Eastern Bloc).

What was of particular influence on *Žižek* was access to the films, popular culture and theory of the non-communist West, which he consumed avidly in preference to the domestic television, books and films approved by the Community Party. Much of his encyclopaedic knowledge of Hollywood cinema was acquired during his teenage years, when he spent long hours at a theatre that specialized in showing foreign films. This was also the time when he devoted himself to reading foreign literature and

developed an early taste for philosophy. He enrolled to read philosophy and sociology at the University of Ljubljana, where he read widely, no doubt aided by his linguistic abilities – he spoke six languages. He was principally influenced by the Marxist Slovenian philosopher Božidar Debenjak (1935-).⁴¹ Because of Yugoslavia's break with the Soviet Union in 1948, its Marxism was decidedly Western, rather than the philosophy of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Debenjak was one of the first to introduce the thought of the Frankfurt School in the curricula of Yugoslavian universities and was as such integral in Žižek's turn to critical theory and also German idealism. In Debenjak's course Žižek read Marx's *Das Kapital* through the lens of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, a perspective which has heavily influenced his contemporary works. He graduated in 1971 and continued with postgraduate study reading philosophy, which he completed in 1975. His four-hundred-page thesis was entitled, *The Theoretical and Practical Relevance of French Structuralism*, a work which analysed the growing influence of the French thinkers Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gilles Deleuze. The superior quality of his thesis stirred up interest among the university's philosophy faculty, but also highlighted his stretching of Marxist theory.

In 1979 he was given a post as researcher at the Institute of Sociology and Philosophy, University of Ljubljana, and earned his first Doctorate in Philosophy on German idealism. Concurrently, Žižek became part of a significant group of Slovenian

⁴¹ His *Vstop v Marksistično Filozofijo* [Introduction to Marxist Philosophy] (1977) was published in four editions, and was one of the most influential syntheses of Marxist thought in Slovenia. He also translated several works, mostly from German, including several works by Karl Marx (especially young Marx), Friedrich Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Karl Korsch, Lenin, Jürgen Habermas and Martin Luther. He also translated Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* and co-authored one of the most comprehensive Slovene-German dictionaries.

scholars working on the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) and with whom he went on to found the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis in Ljubljana. This group, among whose best-known members are Mladen Dolar and Žižek's second wife Renata Salecl (b. 1962), established editorial control over a journal called *Problemi* and began to publish a book series called *Analecta*. In 1981 he also travelled to Paris, together with Dolar, at the invitation of Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's son-in-law, who held an exclusive, thirty-student seminar at the *École de la Cause Freudienne* in which he examined the works of Lacan on a page-by-page basis. It was at this seminar, where Žižek and Dolar were the only representatives from Eastern Europe, that Žižek developed his understanding of the later works of Lacan. Miller procured a teaching fellowship for him at the *Université Paris-VIII* and it was here that Žižek finished his second Doctorate on a Lacanian reading of Hegel, Marx and Kripke.

In the same decade, after Tito's death in 1980, there was a growing political opposition and a push for greater independence by the federation's constituent republics of Yugoslavia – among them Slovenia. Žižek returned to Slovenia and became a regular columnist for a paper called *Mladina*, which served as a platform for the growing democratic opposition to the gradually diminishing communist regime, in particular its policies of increasing militarization towards Slovenian society. He withdrew his membership of the Communist Party together with thirty-two other public intellectuals in 1988, during the JBTZ protest – a protest against the political trial in a military court of those involved in *Mladina's* publishing of articles critical of the Yugoslavian army, and became involved with a civil rights initiative, called the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights. Indeed, the political opposition in Slovenia was theoretically driven

by the previously mentioned group of scholars influenced by Althusser, Foucault and Lacan, of which Žižek was a key member.⁴² The group's orientation was philosophical and political, discussing theories of ideology and power, aided by German idealist thinkers and popular culture. Out of the civil rights initiative, they cofounded and actively supported the Slovenian Liberal Democratic Party (LDS) and developed particular interests in feminist and environmental issues, as well as preventing the right-wing nationalists from seizing power. Žižek himself stood as a presidential candidate for LDS in Slovenia's first multi-party elections in 1990, but narrowly missed out. However, this result was insignificant for Žižek's academic career, since he was already attracting international attention and his productivity only increased.

Unfortunately, the period of Žižek's intellectual formation during his studies at the University of Ljubljana (1967-1981) and his academic activity prior to his emergence on the international stage with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) has to date not been given appropriate consideration. Thus there is no investigation of what I believe to be the principal influence of the Marxist Slovenian philosopher Božidar Debenjak (1935-), the existential phenomenologist Tine Hribar (1941-), who was Žižek's collaborator in the late 1970s, or the nihilist phenomenologist Ivan Urbančič (1930-), who in 1979 employed Žižek at the University's Institute for Sociology and Philosophy. Thus his post-doctoral period, marked by a continuing pursuit of a Hegelian reading of Marx and engagement thereof with the thought of Lacan remains unexplored. There is no consideration of his major works that

⁴² See Mackendrick in Winqvist and Taylor (2001, pp. 371-372). Ernesto Laclau also describes the 'Slovenian Lacanian School' in his preface to Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). However, the definitive work discussing the emergence of the Slovenian Lacan is Irwin and Moloh's *Žižek and his Contemporaries* (2014).

demonstrate and arguably define the development of his philosophy, such as *Bolečina Razlike* [The Pain of Différance] (1971), *Znak, označitelj, pismo* [Sign, Signifier, Writing] (1976), *Hegel in označevalec* [Hegel and the Signifier] (1980), *Zgodovina in nezavedno* [History and the Unconscious] (1982), *Birokratija i Uživanje* [Bureaucracy and Enjoyment] and *Filozofija skozi psihoanalizo I* [Philosophy through Psychoanalysis] (1984), *Problemi teorije fetišizma* [Problems of Fetishism Theory] (1985), *Hegel in objekt* [Hegel and the Object] (1986), *Jezik, ideologija, Slovenci* [Language, Ideology, Slovenes] (1987) and *Druga smrt Josipa Broza Tita* [The Second Death of Josip Broz Tito] (1989).⁴³ Little or no consideration is given either to Žižek's numerous articles in journals from the 'Slovene' period, particularly his editorial contributions to *Problemi*⁴⁴ and Slovene newspapers such as *Delo*, *Dnevnik*, and *Mladina*, through which he communicated his political critique. Research with this focus would enable exploration not only of the political implications but also of applications of his philosophy, as these articles provide a theoretical framework of his political engagement, particularly in the eighties and nineties, such as his involvement with the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights or his presidential candidacy.

⁴³ In order to fill the lacuna, these key texts would first need to be translated. A good place to start would be with his first work on Heidegger and language, *Bolečina razlike* (1971), which he later cast aside. The next milestone is probably his doctoral thesis, *Hegel in označevalec* (1980), which brought together all the topics still present in his work, and *Zgodovina in nezavedno* (1982), where he engaged in an analysis of the historical shifts of the last two centuries. The works would then need to be examined against the background of or with reference to thinkers such as Debenjak, who influenced or even 'determined' (positively or negatively) the development of his thought and especially his focus on Marx, Hegel and Lacan.

⁴⁴ The Journal of the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, established in Ljubljana in 1982, is devoted to the conceptual development of psychoanalytic theory in its philosophical applications.

1.1.2 International acclaim

Žižek's first published book in English was *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), which, as the culmination of his research, sought to provide a reading of the German idealist philosopher Hegel through the prism of Lacan's psychoanalytic thought, revolving around the idea of the Other. Since then, Žižek has published over two dozen books, edited several collections, published numerous philosophical and political articles and contributed to various collections. He has also written in German, French and Slovene, and has had his work translated into some twenty languages. At all times his works revolve around Hegelian philosophy and Lacan's theoretical psychoanalysis, with increasing post-Marxist political intent and delivered through an analysis of popular culture. In 1997 the influential British literary critic Terry Eagleton published a review of several of Žižek's works in the *London Review of Books* and described his books as having 'an enviable knack of making Kant or Kierkegaard sound riotously exciting; his writing bristles with difficulties but never serves up a turgid sentence' (Eagleton, 1997, p. 49). He concluded that Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject* 'is a magisterial work from one of the major philosophers of our age — though most English philosophers have probably never heard of him' (ibid., p. 51). Working at a remarkable speed of two, three and sometimes more books per year in addition to his articles and other contributions, his international reputation grew speedily and he was invited around the world to deliver public lectures and seminars. At the same time offers of teaching positions were also frequent, especially in the United States, where Žižek gained a strong following in cultural studies departments. However, he turned them all down and instead chose appointments as a visiting scholar and often spent much of the year

traveling from one academic centre to another.⁴⁵ Žižek's lectures began to attract large crowds of young intellectuals; police had to be called to one of his appearances at a Lower Manhattan art gallery after the shutout portion of an overflow crowd that had been shut out began banging on the building's windows, demanding admission. He produced two documentaries with Sophie Fiennes, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) and its sequel, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2013), as well as being the subject of Astra Taylor's *Žižek!* (2005).

In the last 20 years Žižek has participated in over 350 international philosophical, psychoanalytical and cultural-criticism symposia in the USA, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Iceland, Austria, Australia, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Israel, Romania, Hungary and Japan. Today he is perhaps one of the most well-known contemporary philosophers and cultural critics and speaks to socio-political issues around the globe, often in the company of other prominent contemporary philosophers. Be it at the “Occupy” movement protesting in Wall Street against the moral bankruptcy of Western Capitalism (Žižek, 2011), or speaking to the Greek “new left” party Siriza to seek a way out of the ever-deepening Greek economic crisis (Žižek, 2012c), or expressing support for the 2010 UK student protests against spending cuts to further education and an increase of the cap on tuition fees, or encouraging the critical thinking of students in South America disillusioned by the corrupt leadership of their countries,

⁴⁵ He has been a visiting professor at the Centre for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Art, SUNY Buffalo (1991-2), the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (1992), Tulane University, New Orleans (1993), Cardozo Law School, New York (1994), Columbia University, New York (1995), Princeton University (1996), the New School for Social Research, New York (1997), the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1998) and Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. (1999).

or discussing problems arising from the “Arab Spring” revolution, Žižek’s speeches on radical change are highly sought after, noted and analysed for import.

In the middle of the new millennium’s first decade Žižek joined the European Graduate School as a lecturer for the intensive summer school seminars and accepted the position of International Director of Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London.

1.2 Žižek's Conceptual Framework

As already noted in his intellectual biography, Žižek's work draws on three main areas of influence: philosophy, politics and psychoanalysis.⁴⁶ Each of these areas is largely represented by the writings of a single individual: Georg Hegel for philosophy, Karl Marx for politics and Jacques Lacan for psychoanalysis. The ideas, methodologies and general effect of each thinker overlap in Žižek's work and together they furnish the conceptual framework with which he tackles the objects of his analysis, including theology. The aim of this section, therefore, is to provide an outline of some of the more pertinent ideas proposed by Hegel, Marx and Lacan, as they are employed by Žižek in his work.

1.2.1 *Hegel according to Žižek and vice versa*

Traditionally, the work of Georg Hegel⁴⁷ (1770-1831) represented the culmination of Western idealism, a system of philosophy which sought to examine the world in terms of ideas about it. Its philosophers argued that the material world does not exist independently of the ideas the mind has about it, thus making consciousness the foundation for reality.

Žižek's understands Hegel as occupying a central position in the Western tradition of metaphysics because his work falls precisely between the speculative idealism of Johann G. Fichte (1762-1814), in which all matter issues from the idea, and

⁴⁶ The synthesis of these three sources represents the scaffolding of the Frankfurt School and thus critical theory in general. While Herbert Marcuse (1955) introduced a combination of Hegel and Marx, Erich Fromm (1941) added his expertise on psychoanalysis.

⁴⁷ For a general introduction to Hegel, see Houlgate's *Freedom, Truth and History* (1991). Hegel's own most detailed exposition of the dialectic is found in Vol. 6: *Wissenschaft der Logik II* of Hegel's *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (1983). The best work to read for Žižek's position on Hegel is perhaps *Less Than Nothing* (Žižek, 2012a).

the speculative materialism of Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775-1854), in which the absolute contingency of existence is accepted and yet the radically contingent nature of that existence itself gives rise to further speculation about its own nature. This complex relationship between the subject and the object of existence, between that which exists and the understanding that we have of that which exists, is at the centre of Hegel's investigations, who, for Žižek, is a thinker whose focus is not on fixed, static meanings or structures, but on the process of conceptual transformation itself.

1.2.1.1 The influence of Kojève

It should be noted at this point that, although Žižek's early work was in German philosophy,⁴⁸ his reading of German idealists was radically reorganised by his encounter with the intellectual debates of twentieth-century French philosophy. There Hegel was a pivotal figure, not as the founding point of German idealism and phenomenology, but as a philosopher of history and subjectivity. This transformation occurred in the 1930s in philosophical seminars by the Russian-born French philosopher and statesman Alexandre Kojève, whose integration of Hegelian concepts into continental philosophy had an immense influence on 20th-century French philosophy.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Žižek's first book was on Heidegger and Language; see Žižek (1999a), p.13. Although Žižek does not state it himself, he is referring to *Bolečina razlike* (1972). This work on philosophy of Différance was a Heidegger-Derridean exercise, which he later cast aside.

⁴⁹ For Kojève's understanding of Hegel, see Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (1969). The seminars were regularly attended by many of the French intellectuals who shaped debates around structuralism and phenomenology after WWII, such as Raymond Queneau, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Georges Bataille, André Breton, Raymond Aron and Jacques Lacan. For example, the latter's mirror stage theory was highly influenced by Kojève's interpretation of Hegelian master-slave dialectic. For Lacan, following Kojève, human subjectivity is defined first and foremost by desire. It is the experience of lack, the twin of the experience of desire, that provides the ontological condition of subject formation.

Kojève interpreted Hegel by reading his theory of consciousness through the lens of both Marx's materialism and Heidegger's temporalized⁵⁰ ontology of human being. For Hegel, human history is the history of thought as it attempts to understand itself and its relation to the world (Hegel, 1970a, pp. 28ff [1998, pp. 44ff]). He postulates that history began with unity, into which man emerges, as a questioning subject, introducing dualisms and splits. Man attempts to heal these sequences of 'alienations' dialectically, and drives history forwards, but in so doing causes new divisions which must then be overcome. Kojève takes this idea of universal historical process and reads it affirmatively, as an intersubjective dialectic heading towards reconciliation and towards unity, and synthesizes it with theories of Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). From Marx he takes a secularised, de-theologised, and productivist philosophical anthropology, one that places the transformative activity of a desiring being centre stage in the historical process. From Heidegger, he takes the existentialist interpretation of human being as free, negative, and radically temporal. Pulling the three together, Kojève presents a vision of human history in which man grasps his freedom to produce himself and his world in pursuit of his desires, and in doing so drives history toward its end (understood both as culmination or exhaustion and its goal or completion).

1.2.1.2 Žižek's understanding of Hegelian dialectics

Influenced by this Kojévian reinterpretation of Hegel, Žižek then pushes it even further and avoids simple reconciliation by emphasising the perpetual tension or negativity. Far

⁵⁰ In discussing Being as a question, Heidegger uses the expression Dasein to denote man's embeddedness and immersion in the concrete of the world. A human being then cannot be taken into account except as being existent in the middle of a world amongst other things. In that sense Da-sein is 'to be there' – in the world.

from the usual received image (see Pinkard, 2000, ix) of Hegel as a celebrant of the World Spirit unfolding and revealing itself as fully-formed in the Prussian State, he is primarily a revolutionary spirit who opens up theoretical systems and for whom the moments of fracture that make critical thought possible are enduring dialectical points of impossibility.⁵¹ Thus for Žižek he is the most profound theorist of dialectical difference.

Hegel's method of dialectical thinking, as the process of unfolding universal history, was adapted from the early Greek philosophers Zeno (490 – 430 BC) and Socrates (470 – 399 BC). For them the dialectics was a method of seeking knowledge by a system of question and answer.⁵² For Hegel, however, the dialectics became much more – the secret propulsion of history. It is at times understood in terms of an over-simplified three-step process, as expounded by Singer in his *Hegel* (1983, pp. 75- 83), but also asserted earlier by Hegel scholars, such as John McTaggart (1896) and Walter Terence Stace (1924). This process begins with a thesis, or an idea, which is then countered with an antithesis, or a qualification of that idea. Both are then combined into a synthesis, which is a larger and more encompassing idea. This dialectic process brings the two theses together into a higher unity that incorporates the element of truth from each position, while overcoming the contradictions internal to each.

However, Hegel's dialectical method has little to do with this way of presenting in the three dialectical stages of Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis. Gustav Mueller, the

⁵¹ In this sense Žižek's reading of Hegel is not dissimilar to that of Gillian Rose, who argues that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is not a dominating absolute knowledge, but a gamble. See Rose's *Hegel Contra Sociology*, (1981, p. 159). Žižek himself acknowledges Rose's interpretation of Hegel in *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991a, p.103).

⁵² In this model each question was refined by the previous answer.

author of a number of works on Hegel, who, in his essay ‘The Hegel Legend of “Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis”’ (Mueller, 1996, pp. 301-305), traced the origin of this understanding back to Marx, who inherited it from the German philosopher Heinrich M. Chalybäus (1796-1862), who, in his *Historische Entwicklung der Speculativen Philosophie von Kant bis Hegel* (1843), characterised Hegel’s dialectic as positing the triad. Hegel himself never used that specific formulation, but ascribed that terminology to Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), whose work on the synthesis model was greatly elaborated and popularised by Johann G. Fichte (1762 – 1814) in his *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre* (1956). Instead, Hegel himself used a three-valued logical model of Abstract, Negative and Concrete, which denote the stages of the organic method whereby presuppositionless thought freely and necessarily determines itself. In his own words, ‘the concrete totality which makes the beginning possesses as such, within it, the beginning of the advance and development’ (Hegel, 1983, p. 557/2010, p. 40). It is by means of the dialectical principle, Hegel argues, that apparently stable thoughts reveal their inherent instability by turning into their opposites and then into new, more complex thoughts. The thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula does not explain why the thesis requires an antithesis, whereas Hegel’s own formula clearly shows that contradiction or negations do not come from the outside, but are inherent and internal to things themselves. This is the central aspect of Hegelian dialectics.

The Hegel that we encounter in Žižek’s thought is certainly the philosopher of contradiction. His system is not only full of apparent contradictions but is itself based on the recognition that contradiction is the fundamental starting point of all philosophy, and indeed of all thought (Žižek, 1989, p. 6). Correspondingly, the idea about something

is always disrupted by a discrepancy and the result is not absolute knowledge conceived as full and transparent, but a realisation that ‘absolute knowledge itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 7). In other words, the tension is never fully resolved. In this way the Concrete does not overcome the negativity of the Negative, but rather radicalises it to such a degree that it no longer appears as a negation. Žižek calls Hegel’s negation of negation a ‘repetition at its purest: in the first move a certain gesture is accomplished and fails; then, in the second move, this same gesture is simply repeated’ (1999a, p. 74).

According to Hegel, the dialectical aspects or stages do not form distinct parts of logic, nor are they sharply contrasted with each other. They are related to each other in the sense that the second aspect is the negation of the first, and the third the negation of the second – the negation of the negation (Hegel, 1969a, p. 51 [2010, p. 121]; 1970b, pp. 65-66 [1977, p. 22]; 1970c, pp. 190f, 263f [2010, pp. 96f, 132f]). While the second element is the opposite of the first and the third element is in some sense the unity of these two opposites, it is not a simple, formal unity, but rather the unity of distinct determinations (Hegel, 1970c, p. 263f [2010, 132f]). Therefore, each element can be defined only in terms of the other – the contrast between them (Hegel, 1983, pp. 54ff [2010, pp. 361ff]). Accordingly, each element must always pass through the phase of the negative, and Hegel designates this movement with the word *Aufhebung*, translated into English as ‘sublation’, which carries connotations of both negation and elevation. For Hegel, the truth regarded as absolute must continually be discarded; but, in being discarded, it must at the same time be taken up afresh and raised up into a higher unity.

In other words, it is the affirmation of a truth that turns into a denial and then again into a transcending of both affirmation and denial.

1.2.1.3 Dialectics as the methodological key to Žižek's thought

An example to illustrate Žižek's dialectical thinking can be found in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, in which Žižek attempts to explain his understanding of the doctrine of atonement, or the transformation of the condition through Christ. He lays out what he claims are two widely held positions:

The first approach is legalistic: there is guilt to be paid for, and, by paying our debt for us, Christ redeemed us (and, of course, thereby forever indebted us); from the [second] participationist perspective, on the contrary, people are freed from sin not by Christ's death as such, but by sharing in Christ's death, by dying to sin, to the way of the flesh (2003, p. 102).

These two perspectives, according to Žižek, are perhaps more familiar as the traditional (or conservative) view and the liberal view of the meaning of the Cross. The latter 'tends to deny the direct divine nature of Christ' (ibid., p. 103), presenting him as more of a model to follow. In an attempt to decide between the two, he states:

In the abstract, of course, the participationist reading is the correct one, while the sacrificial reading 'misses the point' of Christ's gesture; the only way to the participationist reading, however, is through the sacrificial one, through its inherent overcoming. The sacrificial reading is the way Christ's gesture appears within the very horizon that Christ wanted to leave behind, within the horizon for which we die in identifying with Christ (ibid.).⁵³

⁵³ Žižek's presentation of the historic understanding of atonement as crude dualism, whatever one makes of it, is not completely arbitrary, since what he describes here is essentially a recognition of the Christian approach to salvation, which, while complex, lies in two different areas. In the first place, salvation is understood to be grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; in the second, the specific shape of salvation within the Christian tradition is itself formed by Christ – Jesus Christ provides a model or paradigm for the redeemed life.

Here Žižek is making one of his most characteristic dialectical moves, pointing out a ‘mistake’ that is nonetheless a necessary step in arriving at the correct position. In this specific case, the legalistic approach is clearly incorrect, and in fact Žižek argues that if we stay within its frame, ‘Christ’s death cannot but appear as the ultimate assertion of the law [...] which burdens us, its subjects, with guilt, and with a debt we will never be able to repay’ (ibid.). However, if we attempt to skip directly to the other position, that position loses its punch.⁵⁴ The true meaning of Christ’s death is not immediately the call for participation, but rather the break with the legalistic view, which opens up the space for participation in a new kind of social collective outside the logic of debt and repayment. In other words, the death of Christ on the Cross is considered as important as the call for participation. Indeed, the call for participation is not possible without the death of Christ on the Cross. Therefore, the participation perspective, properly conceived, is a kind of embodiment of the break with the legalistic perspective enacted by Christ’s death on the Cross. It is this very negativity that provides the Cross its power.

This example perfectly illustrates Žižek’s dialectical understanding, through which the concretization is found in the contradiction rather than the smoothing out of differences. This at-first-sight oxymoronic style of thinking is indicative of the whole approach to thinking that Žižek calls dialectical and which he employs when analysing everything, including Christian theology, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. This approach then helps to account for the surprising title with which he describes

⁵⁴ Here too Žižek recognises that the atonement is a very rich concept, and that it is impossible to adequately describe what happened or what happens in the atonement with one clear figure of speech or analogy.

himself – a Christian atheist, or materialist Christian, and provides insight into such statements as the Christian tradition should be cherished by Marxism.⁵⁵ What this means is that the identification of Žižek’s dialectical arguments is one of the most important ways to understand what he is saying, without which one is unable to follow his arguments.

1.2.2 *Marx, Marxism and Žižek*

In the preface to *The Žižek Reader*, Žižek professes himself as ‘unabashedly Marxist’ (Wight and Wright, 1999, x), someone who is convinced about the truth and value of Marx’s critique of capitalism and believes in the possibility of a better, alternative method of organising society. So, while Hegel’s dialectic functions as the method of thought that Žižek practices, Marx’s critique of capitalism presents the very grounds or motivation for why Žižek writes at all. In addition to Marx himself, Žižek also works with, or draws upon, two important groups of the broader Marxist tradition: the theoretical tradition of Western Marxism⁵⁶ and the revolutionary tradition. For the latter Žižek’s focus is on its founder, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1925), and his role as the strategist of the revolution or radical openness,⁵⁷ while for the earlier it is formatively on Louis Pierre Althusser (1918-1990), on the topic of how the capitalist society propagates its existence.⁵⁸ Essentially then, his work can be understood as a contribution

⁵⁵ Indeed, this is the main thought behind *The Fragile Absolute* (Žižek, 2000b).

⁵⁶ Due to Yugoslavia’s break with the Soviet Union in 1948 there was hardly any Soviet-style dialectical materialism taught philosophically. Instead, it was Western Marxism, focused on the Frankfurt School and critical theory, which has been dominant in Slovenia since the 1970s and which influences Žižek.

⁵⁷ An example of Žižek’s attempt to retrieve something radical in the history of Marxist thought from the debris of Eastern European Stalinism is his ‘Repeating Lenin’ (<http://www.lacan.com/replenin.htm>), which brings together a selection of Lenin’s writings from 1917, and reappears in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Žižek, 2002a, p. 89).

⁵⁸ See 1.2.2.3.

to the Marxist⁵⁹ body of criticism, which attempts to alter the way in which the world is understood in order that it might be changed for the better.

1.2.2.1 Žižek and Marx

Karl Marx (1818-1883), regarded as the father of modern communism, was trained as a philosopher and was a student of Hegel, but later became his critic and turned towards economics and politics. Indeed, Marx understood the whole of human history as depending on the material and economic conditions of human life.⁶⁰ For him human is basically not a contemplative but an active being, this activity being primarily the material one of production. As such, manual labour becomes the fundamental form of human work, and human work is the ontological essence of man. This is the ground of Marx's critique of the capitalist economic system as allowing the minority to accumulate vast wealth by oppressing the majority,⁶¹ which becomes alienated not only from its product, but from its fellow human beings and also its ontological self.⁶² What he understood as even more disturbing was the concealment, promotion and ratification

⁵⁹ This assertion is not at odds with my understanding of Žižek as a post-Marxist, as described in 1.3. I am merely understanding his motivation as essentially Marxist.

⁶⁰ Marx's first fully developed materialist conception of history appeared in his 'Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844' (Marx, 1967-1968, pp. 465-588). Later, together with Engels, he returned to the subject in 'Die deutsche Ideologie' (Marx and Engels, 1969, pp. 5-530).

⁶¹ For a clear exposition of Marx's critique of political economy, see David Harvey's *The Limits to Capital* (2006).

⁶² In 'Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844' (1967-1968), Marx famously depicts the workers under capitalism as suffering from four types of alienated labour. First, they are alienated from the product, which as soon as it is created is taken away from its producer – they are the victim of the productive system and what they produce is not theirs. Second, they are alienated in productive activity, or work, which is experienced as torment. Third, workers are alienated from species-being, for humans produce blindly and not in accordance with their truly human powers. Finally, they are alienated from other human beings, where the relation of exchange replaces the satisfaction of mutual need. Therefore, man alienates self in the objective product of labour. The specialised labour categories of capitalism further distort social relationships, so that man is only related to another through money, ownership and property, through which individuality is expressed. This, Marx argues, is the demonic nature of capitalism which imposes a structure on human relationship, resulting in labour, mankind's distinct activity, no longer being meaningful and free, merely a means of survival. See also Kolakowski's 'The Alienation of Labour. Dehumanised Man' (1981, pp. 138-141).

of these injustices by the cultural, political and legal framework of society – what he called the superstructure. This superstructure was mostly determined by the ruling minority who benefited from oppression and inequality. Marx therefore proposed an alternative system to capitalism, in which there would be no division or inequality, but a communal context through the abolition of private property, co-operative production meeting everyone's needs, and where each individual would be allowed to realise his or her creative potential. He called this system communism.

Žižek's thought is certainly of Marxist motivation, although, out of his main sources, Marx is the one with whom Žižek has perhaps the most complicated relationship. On the one hand Marx is a decisive influence on his politics, but on the other, Marx is the least authoritative. While Hegel and Lacan are always 'right' (when properly interpreted), Marx is sharply criticised on a crucial point: not being radical enough (Žižek, 2012a, pp. 257-258). The fundamental capitalist truth of unleashed productivity, Žižek argues, was misrecognised as something independent of the concrete capitalist social formation, where capitalism and communism function as its two different historical realisations. 'Instrumental reason as such is capitalist, grounded in capitalist relations, and "really existing socialism" failed because it was ultimately a subspecies of capitalism, an ideological attempt to "have one's cake and eat it"; to break out of capitalism while retaining its key ingredient' (ibid., p. 257). In other words, Marx and the twentieth-century communist project failed because it allowed the possibility that communism could arise out of capitalism, rather than realising a complete break. In that sense Žižek considers Marx's notion of the communist society as the inherent capitalist fantasy attempting to resolve the observed capitalist antagonisms. He therefore

calls for a repetition of the Marxist critique of political economy without the utopic expectation that communism is its inherent outcome, or longing for a return to a pre-modern notion of a balanced society.

1.2.2.2 Žižek and Marxist critique of ideology

As far as the post-Marxist Žižek is concerned, traditional Marxism possessed a solid grasp of the mechanics of society, but it had very little to offer in the way of understanding the workings of individuals. Marx described that which enables continuous exploitation of the majority proletariat by the ruling class as ideology – a system of ideas that an economic theory is based upon. This system, consisting of the religious, artistic, moral and philosophical beliefs contained within society, he argued, is always within the domain of the ruling class. Thus the alienated man relates to the real world in and through the prism of a construction. However, providing an explanation of how exactly ideology functions rather than merely a negative definition of ideology has proved challenging for the Marxist tradition.

A very crude understanding of ideology proposes that it is simply an incorrect way of thinking about things, or that it has to do more with the way in which facts are interpreted, rather than simply mistaking them. In this way György Lukács (1885-1971), in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1968, pp. 42-46), described ideology as a projection of the class consciousness of the ruling class, preventing the proletariat from attaining consciousness of its revolutionary position. It could therefore be understood as a kind of error in perception, which can be corrected by further thought. However, as Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) pointed out, Marxism had failed to consider how ideology works to make itself unrecognizable as such (Gramsci, 1971). It does so not

only through economic and political control, but actually persuades the whole of society that a prevailing ideology (protecting the dominant class) is really the only natural and normal way of thinking. According to this understanding, ideology is a means of describing the very horizon of thought itself, where despite contrary arguments, it is unfeasible to think of things in another way. By the same token, post-Marxists such as Žižek argue that capitalism has today become the horizon of our thought and that we are therefore unable to conceive of an alternative way of organising society.⁶³ Ideology in this sense is not something that can be escaped by further thought, as it represents the very limit of thought. This development of the theory of ideology from Marx through Lukacs to Gramsci frames its perception in Marxist thought, but does little to explain its workings.

1.2.2.3 Žižek and post-Marxist critique of ideology

It was Louis Althusser (1918-1990) who, agreeing with Gramsci that ideology works most effectively at the level of ideas, sought to provide an explanation of how ideology functions. In his influential essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (Althusser, 1971, pp. 121-173), he argued that ideology as a system of belief contains internal contradictions and requires a strategy of force to disguise them. It is therefore disseminated by the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (such as the Churches, the education system, the family unit, the legal system, the political system, the media and culture) and maintained by the 'Repressive State Apparatus' (such as the police force and prisons). Ideology interpellates or hails us, we respond in reflex-like fashion, acting

⁶³ For example, in the documentary *Žižek!* (2005), directed by Astra Taylor, Žižek claims that 'it is much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism'. The trick of the hegemony is thus to persuade the whole of society that a prevailing ideology, the very one which in fact protects the dominant class, is really the only natural and normal way of thinking.

as required and remain captive. It is then a part of the relationship between the individual and society, where people respond consciously to ideology, but the latter is itself unconscious.⁶⁴

It is exactly at this point that Žižek makes his most telling contribution to the Marxist tradition.⁶⁵ He agrees with Althusser that ideology is the way in which individuals understand their relationship to society, but provides a considerable supplement. The State Apparatuses, Žižek argues, are mechanisms that not only generate belief in a particular system, but do so before the subjects are even aware of it – they unconsciously pre-empt our belief and thereby habituate us to it. He explicates this with the help of Pascal's Wager argument (Žižek, 1989, pp. 36-40). If someone is struggling to believe, Pascal recommends simply acting like a Christian, i.e. engaging in Christian practices, for belief will follow soon enough. In the same way, the Ideological State Apparatuses work irrespective of whether individuals believe in them or not, simply by an individual's obedience.

In this way the Slovenian cultural critic challenges the assumption that ideology is a 'conspiracy' by counter-proposing that we are all as individuals complicit in its operation (ibid., p. 29). The radical nature of Žižek's claim here should not be overlooked – we are all aware of the gaps and contradictions in ideology, but we turn a blind eye to them most of the time. Ideology then succeeds – not because it interpellates us and we react reflexively (as Althusser) – but because we want it to succeed. We want

⁶⁴ Insofar as it is how people relate to society, Gramsci argues, ideology will always exist, even in a classless society. This is contra Marx, who suggests that in such a society its appearance will be equal to its essence.

⁶⁵ Žižek's analysis of subjectivity as an ideological process is the main burden of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), which was published in the Laclau-Mouffe series of post-Marxist books reworking the Left project in terms of 'radical and plural democracy'.

to believe that we live under a consistent system of belief, and therefore interpolate ourselves to make it seem so. It is therefore us who fill in the gaps and disguise the contradictions, not some political elite on our behalf.

Taking to the realm of ideas and culture, or the superstructure, Žižek seeks to re-appropriate our perception of it as that which secures the perpetuation of the existing economic organisation. His treatise of subjects such as Hollywood, religious perversion, taboo topics and day-to-day activities, has brought about much interest in his assertion that our acceptance of them as routine demonstrates our assent to the capitalist ideology.⁶⁶ Žižek found the theory of the instinctive and psychological processes that are the ground where ideology functions in none other than the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

1.2.3 Žižek and Lacan

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)⁶⁷ controversially redrafted the core concepts of the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in order to retrieve the truth about psychoanalysis as something reaching beyond the constraints of its discipline and in this way brought it into contact with the dominant philosophical schools of his time. Lacan is perhaps the most visible authority for Žižek – indeed, one

⁶⁶ This is aptly illustrated in the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), directed by Sophie Fiennes, in which Žižek appears in the scenes of various movies, pieces of music and day-to-day activities, exploring and exposing the ideological framework of our society.

⁶⁷ For a clear introduction to Lacan that is broadly in line with Žižek, see *The Lacanian Subject* (Fink, 1995). The bulk of Žižek's references to Lacan are drawn from his seminars. Foremost among them are Seminar XX on feminine sexuality (Lacan, 2000); Seminar VII (Lacan, 1997) on ethics, which includes Lacan's reading of Romans 7; and Seminar XI (Lacan, 1998), presenting the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.

of his main ambitions has been to provide a preliminary understanding of Lacan, to explain his theories.⁶⁸ He describes this ambition in an interview as follows:

My most secret dream is to write an old-fashioned, multi-volume theological tract on Lacanian theory in the style of Aquinas. I would examine each of Lacan's theories in a completely dogmatic way, considering the arguments for and against each statement and then offering a commentary. I would be happiest if I could be a monk in my cell, with nothing to do but write my *Summa Lacaniana* (Boyton, 2001).

The task of explaining Lacan is complicated due to the latter's confusing style of writing, which is full of puns, Hegelian allusions and conceptual interplays, where theoretical divergences from psychoanalytic theory and philosophical theory occur.⁶⁹ Žižek has, in his tireless effort to clarify and elaborate Lacan's thought, manifested in the numerous works from *The Sublime Object of Ideology* onwards, brought about a popularity of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is much broader and more ambitious than the traditional conception of psychoanalysis. In that narrow conception, psychoanalysis is a field of knowledge that comprises a method for treating neurotic patients and a set of theories about mental processes. As conceived by Lacan and extrapolated by Žižek, psychoanalysis has a distinctive view of symptoms, diagnosis and clinical structure, and as such has cosmic ambitions, as it engages with cognate fields of politics, philosophy, literature, science and religion to form an overarching theory that analyses every human endeavour.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ A prime example of this is certainly his explanation of Lacan's 'graph of desire' (Žižek, 1989, pp. 100-124).

⁶⁹ For example, Stavrakakis expresses concerns about the 'intricacies of Lacan's discourse, his baroque and complicated style' (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 4). Lacan himself said 'I am not surprised that my discourse can cause a certain margin of misunderstanding', but this is done 'with an express intention, absolutely deliberate, that I pursue this discourse in a way that offers you the occasion of not completely understanding it' (Lacan cited in Samuels, 1997, p. 16).

⁷⁰ These cosmic ambitions were grounded in Freud's ambition to give a psychoanalytic interpretation of human culture. It was in the 1950s that Lacan began to re-read Freud's works in relation to contemporary philosophy, linguistics, ethnology, biology and topology.

In the introduction to the *The Sublime Object*, Žižek discloses his threefold aim: introduction of the fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, re-actualisation of the Hegelian dialectical method in philosophy through a deployment of Lacan's key concepts, and development of the theory of ideology by clarifying the correlation between Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis:

It is my belief that these three aims are deeply connected: the only way to 'save Hegel' is through Lacan, and this Lacanian reading of Hegel and the Hegelian heritage opens up a new approach to ideology, allowing us to grasp contemporary ideological phenomena (cynicism, 'totalitarianism', the fragile status of democracy) without falling prey to any kind of 'postmodernist' traps (such as the illusion that we live in a 'post-ideological' condition) (Žižek, 1989, p. 7).

Undeniably, Žižek's reading of Hegel, with its overwhelming emphasis on negativity and loss (see, for example, Žižek, 1989, pp. 161-162), is Lacanian in the sense that it fits with the general ethos of Lacan's writings about a world structured around lacks, gaps and voids.⁷¹ Likewise, well-known classic Marxist concepts, such as commodity fetishism (ibid., pp. 18-23), are read through the lens of Lacan's concepts, such as sublime object (ibid., pp. 74-77) and surplus-enjoyment (ibid., pp. 50-55). However, it must be asserted that Žižek also elaborates Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in light of Hegel⁷² and Marx; thus the relationship is reciprocal, rather than one-sided. The purpose

⁷¹ However, that does not in any way mean that Žižek's reading of Hegel is Lacan's reading. The latter read Hegel in a more traditional way. Žižek is aware of this challenge and attempts to show that his own 'Lacanian' reading of Hegel is credible by demonstrating compatibility between Lacan's concepts and the basic structure of Hegel's thought. He argues that Lacan had a Hegelian style of thought even when he believed himself to be totally in opposition to Hegel (Žižek, 1991a, p. 94).

⁷² This strategy is particularly evident in *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991a), where Žižek provides an explanation of a concept from Lacan, such as the Real as the inconsistency of the symbolic register, then draws a parallel to Hegel's writings, such as the dialectical negation of negation, and then links it to Marx's understanding of ideological structure as void.

of Žižek's inventive inter-reading is to develop a new and revolutionary way of interpreting political life and culture.

1.2.3.1 Lacan and the Orders

Lacanian psychoanalysis therefore serves as an illuminating and transformative spark for Žižek as he tackles theoretical examination and interpretation of a wide range of subjects. This is particularly true of ideology, which Žižek addresses with reference to Lacan's three Orders as classifying all mental functioning: The Imaginary, The Symbolic and The Real. These permeate each mental act and bring to bear their own particular type of influence on an individual's mental well-being. Lacan's notion of the three interacting orders first appears in detail in what can be considered as the founding lengthy manifesto of Lacan's original thought, the 1953 *Écrit: The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (2006), often referred to as the 'Rome Discourse'. It is by utilising these three Orders that Žižek lays out the instinctive and psychological processes that enable the ideological to function.⁷³

1.2.3.1.1 The Imaginary

The Imaginary, as explained by Lacan in *Écrits* (2006), designates the process by which the ego is conceived, the so-called mirror stage, which begins during infancy. Lacan holds that human beings are born prematurely, as can be seen in our inability to coordinate our movements until we are several years old. Infants overcome this inability by identifying with an image of themselves in the (actual or non-actual) mirror (*ibid.*, p. 76). This image of self as a fully synchronised and united body stands in contrast to the

⁷³ It is important to stress the complexity of Lacan's thought and therefore what follows is not an attempt to summarize the meaning of his triad, but rather an attempt to provide an elementary outline of Žižek's employment of Lacan's Orders in his thought. For an illuminating article about the difficulties associated with summarising exactly the meaning of Lacan's triad, see Bowie (1979).

sense of un-coordination and dislocation. As a result, it causes in the child an anticipation of future development, granting it a pleasing sense of coherency – an ego.

However, this process, which on the one hand is a stabilising fiction, on the other hand, due to the constant discrepancy between the child's sensation of itself and the image of wholeness with which it identifies, is very unpredictable, in that it constantly undermines the very rectitude and unity it seeks to impart (ibid., p. 78). This means that the ego formed by this identification is constitutionally divided between itself and its vision of itself, and is forever trying to reconcile the two. This also means that identity is displaced from itself, insofar that the fantasy with which we identify (ego) is outside ourselves.

Even in adulthood, the character of the ego is the same, seeking wholeness and unity and attempting to overcome the division which created it in the first place. To summarise, for Lacan (and consequently for Žižek), the Imaginary represents a restless seeking after self, constantly amalgamating instances of replication and resemblance in order to boost the fable of its unity.

1.2.3.1.2 The Symbolic

Žižek writes that, while the Imaginary is about identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, the Symbolic is 'identification with the very place from where we are being observed' (Žižek, 1989, p. 116). The ambitious scope of the Symbolic, Lacan writes in *Écrits*, includes everything from language to the law, taking in all the social structures in between. This means that most of what is usually called reality is actually Symbolic, an impersonal framework of society within which human

beings take their place. All-pervading, it considers and in some sense imprisons people even before they are born – by the use of names, familial ties, gender, race and so forth.

The Symbolic Order is held together by a list of words by which something can be referred to, what Lacan calls the signifying chain, or the law of the signifier (Lacan, 2006, p. 479). The notion is drawn from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) argument that language is made up of signs, and that each sign is composed of two parts, the signifier and the signified (de Saussure, 1959, pp. 65-78). He inferred that these two parts of the sign are connected by an arbitrary bond, which means that what is being signified by a signifier can change, and also that language is a relational system and therefore no sign can be defined in isolation from others. This differential aspect of language is crucial for Lacan, who extrapolates that if words only refer to other words rather than to a thing in itself, we are cut off from that world and stranded on the shores of language (Lacan, 2006, p. 66). Language is thus an independent system, which forms its own closed world, by constituting experience rather than reflecting it. An example of this would be the kind of difference it makes if we describe a person either as a terrorist or a freedom fighter. Even though that person stays the same, our attitude towards them is completely different depending on how we refer to them.

For Lacan and consequently for Žižek, it is this list of words or the total network of available signifiers which binds the Symbolic together. As a consequence, we cannot approach anything except by way of the unstable and arbitrary law of the signifier, and are doomed never to know things as they really are in themselves but instead remain in the prison of language (ibid., pp. 194-195). Furthermore, since the relationship between

the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and unstable, the character or type of the Symbolic Order in which we live is neither permanent nor necessary (Žižek, 1989, pp. 77-78). For example, due to the fundamental change of the role of women in the society, the signifier 'woman' refers to something different than it did in the past.

As we shall come to see in the next section, Žižek in his work often speaks of God as the 'big Other'. That term at times designates the Symbolic Order as it is experienced by individual subjects, while at other times it designates the subject representing the Symbolic.⁷⁴ In both cases, the use of 'God' is Symbolic, i.e. not God as He really is, but rather the unstable and arbitrary signifier. It could be said that God is the signifier and the signified is God. This is skilfully illustrated in the first chapter of *For They Know Not What They Do* (Žižek, 1991a, pp. 7-60), in which Žižek explains that before the modern period in Europe, the ultimate big Other was none other than God. The Church guided society in the name of God, the king ruled by divine right and everyone had their proper places in the social order as ordained by God. In the modern period, however, God is no longer the privileged name for the big Other. Still, even though the public space of the Western world is for the most part secular, everyone still acts as though there is some Other out there, holding together the social order. Again, for Žižek, the belief in the big Other is found at the level of people's practice, as opposed to their knowledge.

⁷⁴ Žižek (2012a), pp. 95-97 cf. Žižek (2006a), pp. 8-12. Žižek inherits this complexity (rather than ambiguity) from Lacan, who refuses to comment explicitly on what he means by the big Other; see his translator's note in Lacan (1978), p. 282.

1.2.3.1.3 The Real

From the description of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, it follows that the Real describes those areas of life which cannot be known, the things in themselves. In a way that means everything, for all knowledge of the world is mediated by language. If nothing is ever known directly, then the Real is the world before it is carved up by language (Lacan, 2006, pp. 23-86). This means that what is Real avoids description, because by default words are used to identify each separate element of the world. Lacan therefore concludes that the Real resists Symbolisation (Lacan, 1991, p. 164).

Žižek, who is sometimes called ‘the philosopher of the Real’ (Myers, 2003, p. 29), traces a trajectory through Lacan’s work revolving around the distinction between the Real and Symbolic in *Looking Awry* (1991b). While the realisation that we are condemned to living in the Symbolic might lead to the question of why any attention needs to be paid to the Real, Žižek, following Lacan, warns that the Symbolic and the Real are intimately bound up with each other (Lacan, 1998, p. 37 cf. Žižek in Butler et al., 2000, p. 121). In *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006), Žižek explains this with the help of a scene from the film *The Matrix*, in which Morpheus, after showing Neo the actual state of the world run by machines, offers him the choice of two pills: one to remain in this reality, and the other to return to the virtual reality constructed by the machines. Žižek argues that Neo should have asked for a third pill, one which would enable Neo to see the virtual reality (Symbolic) but to be able to discern the Real elements within it. Indeed, the Symbolic works upon the Real in that it cuts it up in myriad different ways. One of the ways in which the Real is recognised, Žižek argues, is by noting when something is indifferent to Symbolisation. Taking the example of

human beings (Žižek, 2001b, p. 104), one can see that some part of them is real by counting up the different ways in which we are symbolised, i.e. mammals, animals, the only extant members of the hominin clade, etc. Thus human beings enter the Symbolic Order when we are named or otherwise classified, but prior to that we are in the Real. The Real then comes after the Symbolic, in the sense that it is that which is left when the Symbolic is done slicing it up into articulate pieces (Žižek, 1989, p. 49).⁷⁵

Another disclosure of the presence of the Real is anything that is interpreted differently. This is illustrated by Žižek using the example of AIDS (Žižek, 1993, p. 44; 2012b, p. 4), which, so he argues, is interpreted by some people as a punishment for homosexuals, or a divine retribution for carrying on a non-Christian way of life. Others see it as part of a plot by the CIA to stem population growth in Africa, while other people consider it the result of humankind's interference in Nature. All these explanations revolve around the same brute fact of the disease which carries on regardless of the reasons attributed to it. In other words, AIDS is an interruption of the Real. It is meaningless in itself and all these interpretations of it are mere attempts to Symbolise it (Lacan, 1998, pp. 165-167). Indeed, Lacan asserts that meaning and change can only be found within the reality of the Symbolic Order, whereas the Real is meaningless, senseless and does not change (Lacan, 1991, pp. 219-220).

Lacan's late increased emphasis on the concept of the Real as a point of impossible contradiction in the Symbolic Order has had the greatest influence on

⁷⁵ Lacan also defines psychoanalytic praxis as a 'concerted human effort [...] which places man in a position to treat the Real by the Symbolic' (Lacan, 1998, p. 6).

Žižek.⁷⁶ Indeed, he understands the Real as the arena of the dialectic, wherein opposing terms can coincide (Žižek, 1989, pp. 190-196; Žižek in Butler et al., 2000, pp. 120-122).

It is only in the Imaginary that two terms can be reconciled in a harmonious synthesis, with the Symbolic functioning as the state where they are defined differentially.⁷⁷

Žižek's preference for the Real as the only order in which contradictions are not smoothed away sheds further light on his aforementioned Hegelian dialectic thinking, which in turn further illuminates his preference for the Real.

1.2.3.1.4 Addendum: Žižek and the Schellingian genealogy of his Subject

There is one final point about the relationship between the Real and the Symbolic. It is exactly at their interface, or on their borders, that Žižek locates the subject.⁷⁸ If the Symbolic was not an incomplete or insufficient account of the Real, which could be apprehended directly, then we, as subjects, would disappear. For Lacan and Žižek, the thing that makes us subjects is the signifying chain and the decisions we take in regard to it. If we all agreed on a single signifier we would no longer be subjects at all, but merely automatons or robots, blindly obeying the dictates of the Symbolic Order.

Because the Lacanian subject lacks any theory of its own ontogenesis, Žižek turns to German idealism to develop a dialectical materialism that would ground it, specifically to the German philosopher Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775-1854). In *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996), Schelling is understood by Žižek as a connection or transition between idealism and materialism that is later taken up by Marx, Nietzsche

⁷⁶ Following the triadic structure of the Lacanian registers, Žižek himself has stressed that there are in fact three basic orders of the Real: the real Real, the symbolic Real and the imaginary Real. See Žižek and Daly (2004); Žižek (2001b), pp. 79-88; and Žižek (2002b), xii.

⁷⁷ That is, where one is something because it is not something else.

⁷⁸ In this he follows Lacan (1998, p. 141).

and Freud, and functions as a sort of philosophical vanishing mediator (ibid., p. 8).⁷⁹ While his philosophy maintains the form of idealism, its content is materialistic and therefore, Žižek argues,⁸⁰ one should not discard the philosophy's more mythological content (ibid., p. 7). His theory about the genealogy of the subject is grounded in Schelling's *Die Weltalter* (1946), in which the latter considers the genesis of God as part of his larger goal to explain the emergence of an intelligible world at the same time as coming to terms with mind's inextricable relation to matter.

Žižek reads Schelling's account of the origin of God as an allegory for the origin of the subject. He begins with the assertion that at first God was a pure Nothingness, part of the 'chaotic, psychotic universe of blind drives' (Žižek, 1996, p. 13) which he calls the Grund of reality, enjoying the state of non-being – in other words, not yet an individual Being, but an impersonal Wollen that wills nothing (Žižek and Schelling, 1997, p. 15). However, this non-assertive Will that wills nothing is actualised in the Will that actively wants this nothing, thereby annihilating every positive, determinate content (ibid., p. 23). The two sides of this same coin (wanting something as positive and wanting nothing as negative) result in a recursive deadlock. In other words, God is caught in a circle in which He fails to differentiate between himself and his Predicate. The only way to clear up the confusion, to achieve independence from the Ground and become an entity in His own right, a person, is 'by acquiring a distance towards what in it is not God himself, but merely the Ground of His existence' (Žižek, ibid., p. 36). Thus

⁷⁹ Following Kojève, it is Žižek's understanding that psychoanalysis is the direct descendant of German idealism (1999a, pp. 65-66).

⁸⁰ Although Schelling is traditionally categorised as a mere idealist, Žižek's argument is not without foundation, for the aim of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* is to provide a more objective conception of nature – i.e. as having a reality for itself. Moreover, Schelling's philosophy, due to its apparently ever-changing nature, has proven a significant challenge. Žižek is therefore not simply imagining Schelling's materialism.

God becomes constituted as a subject by a loss, by expulsion of the very Ground or essence from which He is made. Žižek agrees with Schelling, that it is this very state of ejection which constitutes the vanishing mediator between Nothingness and God himself.

Žižek's reading of Schelling is not simply Lacanian, but is better described as Hegelian (ibid., pp. 5-56).⁸¹ He insists that Schelling's main insight is that the identity of anything is split, alienated or always outside itself, and therefore any identity involves an indivisible remainder that undermines it. Indeed, Schelling and Hegel form a complex intertwining of Schellingian ontology and Hegelian logic of negativity, which is at the heart of Žižek's own understanding of the radical nature of subjectivity in German idealism (Carew, 2011, p. 15). This is further evidenced by the fact that Žižek's analysis of Schelling primarily focuses on the second draft of *Die Weltalter*, which alone displays a Hegelian structure of self-relating negativity in the exposition of freedom, whereas the third draft already marks a return to a form of dogmatic metaphysics (Žižek, 1996, pp. 37-39).

Based on Schelling's genesis of God, Žižek argues that a subject is constituted by the removal of itself from itself, an externalisation (Žižek, 1999a, pp. 158-159). In other words, the core of the subject's being is outside itself and the signifier representing the subject is just that, merely a representation. Before the beginning the subject is the psychotic antagonism between the will to contraction and the will to expansion. Although this subject is already a 'one', its proper beginning is the shift to willing or desire. By positioning myself in an external signifier which represents me, the

⁸¹ For an apt description of the Hegel-Schelling relationship in Žižek, see Carew (2011).

move occurs from the Real to the Symbolic (Žižek, 1996, p.43). As in the observation of the relationship between the two respective Orders above, the representation of myself is then not opposed to myself, but the two are implicated in each other. To summarize, Žižek locates the subject on the borders of the Real and the Symbolic, with the signifiers externalising it into the Symbolic.

1.2.4 Concluding thought

The three main influences on Žižek's work are Hegel, Marx and Lacan. The first provides him with the type of thought or methodology that he uses – dialectic. In Žižek's reading of Hegel the dialectic is never finally resolved. The second is the inspiration behind Žižek's work, for what he is trying to do is to contribute to the post-Marxist tradition of thought, specifically that of a critique of ideology. Finally, Lacan provides him with a framework and terminology for his analyses. Of particular importance are the concepts of the Symbolic and the Real. Žižek locates the subject with the help of Schelling at the interface of these two Orders. This fusion of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Hegelian philosophy and Marxist political theory is the originality of Žižek's contribution to Western intellectual history (Wieczorek in Žižek, 2000a, viii).

What has hopefully also become clear in this section is that Žižek does not treat his sources as separate entities, but, in a critical theoretical way, instead brings them together creatively, expecting to reveal new insights and appropriations. Indeed, his intellectual trajectory can be seen as a series of attempts to bring them together in a coherent and compelling way and making them his own, by demonstrating a disavowed

but essential element of their thought. As we shall see in the next section, that is also the case with his approach to theology.

1.3 The Context of Žižek's Theological Engagement: post-Marxist critical theory

In this section I aim to contextualize Žižek's theological engagement. I argue that, even though his voice at times appears in discussion about the postsecular and he shares with it the conviction that religion is socio-politically relevant, his philosophical context is rather post-Marxist critical theory.

1.3.1 Setting the scene

Before we examine the content of Žižek's engagement with theology, it is necessary to establish its context and motivation. Given his materialist persuasion and atheist identification, why does Žižek draw on theology in his analysis of the contemporary society?

There has been much conversation in recent decades between sociologists of religion, theologians and political philosophers about the role of religion in our societies. A considerable proportion of the discussion has been focused on the idea of a secularization of society – the notion that religion would diminish as an inevitable aspect of modernisation, from conceptions of the secular as a category contrasting the religious and vice versa, to deliberations of the possible trajectories of the categories themselves, their relationship and their future. With time, however, as the secularization thesis became more and more problematic, there has been a call to rethink its claims. There has been a rise in numbers in terms of non-institutional affiliation and belief, and also in terms of the institutional strength of religious organisations. What is more, religion seems to be an increasingly important factor in the global political situation, for good or ill. In the reformulation of his original secularisation thesis, Peter L. Berger has claimed that it is

now more accurate to talk about a process of ‘de-secularisation’ and acknowledged that ‘the world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled ‘secularisation theory’ is essentially mistaken’ (Berger, 1999, p. 2). Thus the world of academia has witnessed a renewed interest in or re-evaluation of religion in light of its ever-changing presence in the public sphere, and has explored the interface between the religious and the secular. A cluster of social and political theorists is now speaking of the “postsecular” public square, and acknowledging that religion has a role to play in socio-political reflection.

The term postsecular has been gaining influence as a description of the discussion and the society which we inhabit today, where religion is not merely something to be overcome. It is in the midst of this community of voices discussing the postsecular that Žižek’s thoughts have often appeared. Therefore, in seeking to contextualize the Slovenian philosopher, it is tempting to identify him as a postsecular thinker re-evaluating the role of religion in the contemporary world and concomitantly questioning the secularisation thesis. Yet, is that really the term which identifies or describes Žižek’s thought? Or is the debate about the postsecular merely one of the vehicles or platforms for his thoughts, which in fact are not really postsecular? In this section I argue that the latter is correct, while the former is a hasty and erroneous misinterpretation and misrepresentation of his thought and engagement with theology. Instead, I argue that Žižek’s context is that of post-Marxist critical theory. This theory refuses any notion of a postsecular, insofar as it denies secular and religious as dualist categories of a metanarrative, and is enabled by the theological for a critical investigation of the political.

To that end I will begin with a brief presentation of the postsecular and then contrast it to Žižek's own post-Marxist context in order to show the difference in the socio-political function of theology. Furthermore, this contextualisation lays the ground for an understanding of the radical nature of Žižek's engagement with theology and the criticality of the latter in his political philosophy, which will be explored in the next section.

1.3.1.1 Secular and postsecular

The very composition of the term "postsecular" places it in a relationship with the secular. A very short and simplified explanation of the secularisation thesis argues that as Western society becomes more modern, more complex, it inevitably becomes more "secular". This shift is occasioned by the dynamics of modernity itself: modernisation, the rise of technology, rational and bureaucratic procedures, liberal democracy, urbanisation and industrial capitalism (Bruce, 2002, pp. 2-5). Brian Wilson characterises secularisation as a process by which 'religious institutions, actions and consciousness, lose their social significance' (Wilson, 1982, p. 49). As societies modernise, so they become less "religious" according to a number of criteria: in terms of personal affiliation and belief; in terms of the institutional strength of religious organisations; and in terms of the political and cultural prominence of religion in society.

This conviction that the modern democratic state must effect a separation between religion and government, between "faith" and "reason", originates from the religious wars of early modernity, the Enlightenment and revolutions of Europe and North America in the 18th century. This mode of thinking has been prominent since the 1960s and is associated with liberal thinkers such as the political philosopher John Rawls, whose A

Theory of Justice (1971) argued that equality of participation among citizens in the public domain was dependent on the ‘bracketing out’ of matters of personal or subjective conviction (such as religious faith), on the grounds that these represented forms of reasoning not universally accessible and therefore inadmissible as acceptable forms of political or moral reasoning. Hence, the strive for separation of religion and politics, and the assumption that the modern democratic state should be functionally secular or at least neutral towards the manifestations of religion in public.

While the secularisation thesis presupposed a zero-sum game between the “religious” and the “secular”, as if they were incapable of co-existing, the postsecular re-examines and finds the relevance of religion in the political and cultural sphere of the society, thus placing the categories of “secular” and “religious” into co-existence, a complex inter-relationship. Talk of this complex coexistence of the religious and the secular, a ‘postsecular society’,⁸² has been acknowledged in the work of some leading social theorists, most notably Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and José Casanova. The latter speaks of public religions in a postsecular world (Casanova, 1994), while Butler explores the potential of religious perspectives for renewing cultural and political criticism in the context of her work concerning state violence in Israel-Palestine (Butler, 2011, pp. 70-91), and Taylor argues for a radical redefinition of secularism (Taylor, 2011, p. 34-59). Habermas’ recent work has spearheaded this new turn in social theory and political philosophy, with his talk of the ‘postsecular’ as an expression of the newly prominent role of religion in the public square, which re-examines the classic

⁸² See Habermas (2008), Keenan (2002) and Bretherton (2010), pp. 10-16.

assumptions of modern liberal thought towards the role of religion in the body of politics (Habermas, 2011, pp. 15-33).

Increasingly, political theorists of many kinds are intimating that ostensibly secular democracies rely on worldviews not reducible to secular reason and as such religious or theological principles may continue to nurture and inform public debate. Various political theorists and social critics as well as philosophers agree with the suggestion that religion might be potentially emancipatory and progressive, rather than inherently antipathetic to human rights and the pluralist public discourse. It is within these growing discussions, focused on the critical and constructive reflection upon religion – theology – as a resource for political reflection, that Žižek’s contributions have been making a recurrent appearance.

An example of this is *Theology and the Political* (Davis et al., 2005), a theoretical theological-political engagement with what its many contributors consider to be the crisis of liberalism and its manifestations of liberal democracy, philosophical liberalism and liberal theology. It includes some of the most influential contemporary philosophers (Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, Regina Mara Schwartz, Philip Goodchild, Simon Critchley, Antonio Negri, Kenneth Surin, Eleanor Kaufman and Hent de Vries) and theologians (Rowan Williams, Creston Davis, Conor Cunningham, William Desmond, Daniel M. Bell, Jr., Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, John Milbank and Phillip Blond – many of whom are closely associated with Radical Orthodoxy). These thinkers argue for Christianity and Marxism as offering ‘the only two real metaphysical alternatives to liberalism’ (ibid., p. 259-260).

Another collection, edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (2006), challenges the very premises of secularisation and explores the relationship of the political and religious domains, in light of the latter's persistence. Distinguished scholars from philosophy, political theory, anthropology, classics and religious studies discuss the relationship from Ancient Greece, through Augustine's two cities and early modern religious debates, to classic statements about political theology by such thinkers as Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, and conclude with a deliberation of new open ways of conceptualising society. The volume notably includes a historic discussion between Jürgen Habermas and Pope Benedict XVI, concerning the pre-political moral foundations of a republic.

The volume *Religion and Political Thought*, edited from the theological perspectives of Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (2006), aims to provide a brief overview and exposition of the history of religious political thought. The book is divided into five chronological sections, each covering certain themes, but of particular relevance is Part V: 'The Contemporary Debates' (ibid., pp. 219-281), in which contemporary thinkers present their understanding of the relationship between religion and politics for today: the political philosopher Charles Taylor finds value in religion for social politics, the German Catholic Theologian Jürgen Manneman writes about religion as the motor for contemporary human and political processes of transformation, the theologian Marcella Althus-Reid presents the relationship from the perspective of Liberation and Queer Theology, John Milbank offers a Thomistic alternative to secular politics and Žižek seeks to raise awareness of the religious as a constitutive element of society and its cultural

foundations. The section is thus philosophically engaging, as each thinker seeks to present the primary religious sources in relation to a grand historical narrative.

The above-mentioned are all examples of the current discussions involving Žižek about the role and potential of the religious, in particular theology, in the global socio-political environment. Should Žižek then be considered as a postsecular? To answer this question, we must first take a closer look at the meaning that the term is supposed to carry.

1.3.1.2 Problems with the postsecular

If the very name of the term places it in a relationship with the secular, the question that immediately follows concerns the exact nature of the relationship between them. Already in the examples mentioned above we observe a variance in understanding of this relationship, from Habermas' acknowledgment of religion's prominent role to Taylor's call for a radical redefinition of secularism. The term itself evokes relational resonances with other concepts, such as postmodern, post-colonial, post-structuralist or post-human. Aside from each of these terms having its own specialist discourse and complex genealogy, the underlying question appears to be the way in which the prefix 'post' is deployed in each. Does it denote a successor phase, temporarily or chronologically speaking, in which one epoch or paradigm follows another? Or is the term being deployed to question the very stability and coherence of its associated concept? For example, postmodern may indicate merely the era after a modernity or an architectural or aesthetic style after modernism. Alternatively, it may signal the very reappraisal of the assumptions underlying the modern. How exactly, then, does the prefix 'post' function with regards to secularity – is it questioning the very stability of secularity, or is it the latter's development?

James Beckford (2012, pp. 1-19) offers a helpful, thorough and extensively referenced typology of the major interpretations of the concept, which broadly speaking can be summarised by the following: (1) the persistence of religious belief and practice belies the existence of secularization; (2) a more modest revisionist stance vis-a-vis secularisation which notes both the reality of secularism and its limitations as any kind of meta-narrative; (3) a re-enchantment of the secular, especially evident in the return of the sacred in popular culture; (4) the de-privatisation of religion and its resurgence as a public and political force; and (5) a reassertion of neo-orthodox worldviews.

Thus the term post-secular can carry different interpretations in relation to the secular and is not exhaustively defined, but has an undetermined meaning. Beckford (2012, pp. 12-13) concludes that due to such a proliferation of usage of the term its very currency has become irredeemably devalued.⁸³ That is why some thinkers avoid the term or concept and have sought to critique it. Martin (2011, p.14), for example, perceives the term as a fanciful invention without any proof, while Dalferth (2010) claims that it seeks to characterise societies which are neither religious nor secular but indifferent. The term post-secular and its conception have proven very problematic.

Among the thinkers critiquing the notion of the postsecular is Žižek (1999b), who refers to the concept as ‘postsecular crap’. He caricatures the postsecular argument as follows: ‘Of course, we no longer have the ontological god, but it is an Otherness which is a mystery; a gap is opened, something is present in the mode of absence. It’s always to come, it is never here, it’s the mystery of otherness to be respected’ (ibid.). No doubt he is here referring to the postmodern interpretation of the religious observed in the thought

⁸³ This concern is also shared by the intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra (2009, p. 68), who considers the easiness with which the term is being gravitated towards as problematic.

of Jacques Derrida (1995), with which he disagrees and which he criticizes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001d). In the section titled ‘Postsecularism? No thanks!’ (pp. 152-160), he disapproves of Derrida’s desire to keep what the latter deems as the authentic kernel of religion (religious experience) but to throw away the institutional and mystifying husk (theology), and argues that this takes away the transforming potential of religion and instead turns it into a fetish. He also disagrees with Jürgen Habermas’ view of the public sphere and of the state. Whereas Habermas (2008b) advocates the traditional liberal separation of religion and politics, Žižek is convinced of the need to include religion as our modern democracies are more post-political than political, and religion might thus be a radical critique of the de-politicisation of the public sphere and of the state (Žižek, 2001d, p. 152). What Žižek observes within both Derrida and Habermas is religion re-imagined as a politically compatible or servile philosophy which avoids challenging the current political or sociological makeup. Devoid of critical socio-political potential, its function is that of a fetish – to escape the uncomfortable dimensions of religion in favour of a mere thought experiment without any social consequences. In contrast to this, Žižek’s estimation and appropriation of Christian theology is purely concrete and incarnate, revealing rather than obscuring or mystifying the social reality.

Žižek’s resistance to the term postsecular, as described above, is not merely because he does not agree with the meaning ascribed to it by Derrida or Habermas, but because he profoundly disagrees with the very dualistic categories of religious and secular in their obfuscating function. While he does share with them the conviction that religion, or to be precise theology, is socio-politically relevant, the very ground for this conviction

differs. Žižek's endeavour transcends the division between secular and religious, but also any understanding of postsecular, in the sense that it represents the very dismantling of understanding the religious and secular on their own, as abstracts, and proposes that the two are rather intrinsically bound into a dialectical concrete. This is illustrated perfectly in the following well-known quote:

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 (Žižek, 2003, p. 6).⁸⁴

On this point Ward Blanton remarks that Žižek's more recent writing on Christianity does not differ from his earlier work with regard to style, motifs and theoretical descriptions (2007, p. 178 footnote 19). I agree, and rather than saying that this either means that Žižek has always been writing about Christianity or that he is still just writing about materialism, I would argue that he has always written about both together.

Žižek is not alone, as other thinkers have, like him, refused the very categories of secular and religious, and subsequently the postsecular. Such is Kong's (2010, p. 764) rejection of the concept as superfluous since secularization never existed, or McLennan, Smith and Whistler's (2010, p. 14) dismissal of it as an imperialist response to the imperialist understanding of secularity. This perception of the academic and social distinction between religion and the secular as a primary motor of the self-expansion of

⁸⁴ This is very close to a formulation of Bloch's that Žižek does not acknowledge: 'Nur ein Atheist kann ein guter Christ sein, nur ein Christ kann ein guter Atheist sein' [only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist.] (Bloch, 1968, p. 363). This statement actually appeared on the cover of the German original, but does not appear in the English translation by J.T. Swann (1972). It does appear on the edition published by Verso in 2009.

the modern, rational West, resonates with Žižek's caricature of the postsecular described above as a liberal tradition of creating a split that was not there. That is also why Ward Blanton, in his essay 'Neither Religious Nor Secular' (in Boer, 2010, pp. 141-161),⁸⁵ deconstructs the very categories of secular and sacred as inextricably caught up within Western hegemony, and calls upon biblical criticism to cease defining itself by using these terms and open itself up to new ways of thinking and being as a discipline.⁸⁶

Therefore it must be concluded that while Žižek's voice is often perceived by theological circles in the rise of the postsecular (e.g. Sigurdson, 2010), it is incorrect to describe or contextualise him as a postsecular due to his rejection not only of the problematic interpretation of the concept, but more importantly, of the dualistic categories of religious and secular. Instead, as we shall see below, his critical attitude to the Enlightenment project, or its offspring the secularisation thesis, is to be considered as that of post-Marxist critical theory.

1.3.2 Marxism and theology as sociopolitical sojourners

In *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*, Göran Therborn regards the Marxist turn to theology as 'the most surprising development in left-wing social philosophy in the past decade' (Therborn, 2008, p. 130). Certainly, the turn is surprising within the specific context of Marx's criticism and suspicion of religion, which was understood as the opium of masses, the extreme of ideology and false consciousness.⁸⁷ However, that very criticism reveals

⁸⁵ In *Displacing Christian Origins* (2007), Blanton contends that the notion of the secular was constructed in modernity by defining religiosity as something which it was not and calls secularisation 'a thesis of ephemeral banality' (p. 170).

⁸⁶ Blanton's thought is then developed further in his *Materialism for the Masses* (2014), where he gives a fresh consideration of the Apostle Paul as a challenge to that Western hegemonic framework.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Marx (2008), pp. 39 and 74.

the cultural power and function of religion, which has been appreciated by a number of Marxist thinkers from the very beginning.

In 1940 the German Marxist social critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1968, p. 253), in his *Theses on the Concept of History*, tells the story of the Turk, a famous chess-playing device of the eighteenth century, as an analogy for historical materialism. Presented as an automaton that could defeat skilled chess players, the Turk puppet actually concealed a dwarf master chess-player who controlled the machine and could counter, thus assuring its victory in the match. Benjamin compares the puppet to historical materialism in philosophy, which is always victorious as long as it employs the services of theology, which in turn is small and ugly and ought to be kept out of sight, the inference being the distinctly teleological historical materialist understanding of history as culminating in a secularised embodiment of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic idea. Dialectical materialism, Benjamin argues, is an incarnation of theology and as such the latter is unavoidable – political theology. Yet it is important to note that Benjamin’s consideration of the theological was not isolated, for an element of Marxist recognition or identification, if not appreciation, of a revolutionary dimension to Christianity has been present ever since Engels.⁸⁸

This is nicely illustrated in the consideration of Thomas Müntzer as a part of Marxist heritage. Frederick Engels (1820-1895) first elaborated his position in an influential study of Müntzer and the peasant revolution, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1978b), where he understands Müntzer’s fiery theological language as rhetoric for larger groups of peasants, a cover for a secular, revolutionary core that he communicated plainly

⁸⁸ See Collier’s *Christianity and Marxism* (2001). For a historical survey of attempts to connect the two traditions in European thought see Bentley’s *Between Marx and Christ* (1982).

to his inner circle.⁸⁹ This work by Engels initiated a series of further studies, such as that of the Marxist theoretician's Karl Johann Kautsky (1854-1938). His *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus* (Kautsky, 1897) is an extensive study of revolutionary and communist movements before the modern era, which pays careful attention to the treatments of Thomas Müntzer, the Münster revolution and the Anabaptists. Compared to Engels, Kautsky gives far greater credit to Müntzer's revolutionary, and indeed communist, credentials when he posits that the revolutionary currents breaking over Europe were due, in no small degree 'to his extravagant communistic enthusiasm, combined with an iron determination, passionate impetuosity, and statesmanlike sagacity' (ibid.). Yet this is inseparable from Müntzer's theological engagements, with a view to overthrowing oppressors and freeing those burdened in the name of a thoroughly democratic and communist project.

The insight that theology itself was crucial was shared also by Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), the Commissar of the Enlightenment after the Russian Revolution and author of *Religiia i Sotsializm* [Religion and Socialism] (1908).⁹⁰ In that work he admires the revolutionary role of prophets such as Müntzer, but also the biblical figures of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus. The Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) further influenced the raising of Müntzer to the status of pre-revolutionary hero. His *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1960) represents a wholehearted embrace of Müntzer and the peasant revolt, arguing for the centrality of

⁸⁹ Engels later conducted a study of Christianity, which was published posthumously, in which he evaluates the latter as 'originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freedmen, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome' (Engels, 1978a, p. 447).

⁹⁰ This work has lain in obscurity ever since Lenin attacked it 1908. For further details as well as a translation into English, see Boer (2013, pp. 74-83).

theology in his radical politics, as also the pre-Marxist forms of communism that are found in the radical tradition of Christianity. He focuses on the apocalyptic dimension of Müntzer's message in order to show how revolutionary such religiously-inspired apocalyptic movements can be. The Scripture thus effectively acts as the bad conscience of the believers, with its vivid apocalyptic texts fanning the flames of revolution. This understanding is repeated by Bloch in *Atheismus in Christentum* (1968), in which he argues that one of the main sources for revolutionary affect and commitment is found in the Bible. Indeed, the latter work is Bloch's attempt to demonstrate Christianity's potential for liberation through a sociological study of the Bible. He locates its appeal for the oppressed in its antagonism to authority and subversive potential against authoritarian metaphysical theism. Not unlike Žižek then, as we shall see in the next chapter, he finds a subversive element at the core of Christianity, which leads to a necessary atheism.

1.3.3 Western Marxism, theology and political critique

In Western Marxism, a particular strand of cultural criticism arose out of the Frankfurt School⁹¹ – critical theory. This method of analysis was an amalgam of philosophical and social-scientific techniques that had wide-ranging applications. Long before postmodernism became fashionable, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), two of the leading figures of the Frankfurt School, wrote one of the most searching critiques of modernity to have emerged among progressive European intellectuals. In *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [Dialectic of Enlightenment] (Adorno and

⁹¹ The Frankfurt School is a school of neo-Marxist interdisciplinary social theory established as a Research Institute at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. It fled to New York during the Nazi takeover in 1933, but returned to Frankfurt after the Second World War. The school initially consisted of dissident Marxists who were disillusioned with the Soviet Marxism and sought a path outside of traditional Marxist theories, which were unable to explain the complexities of capitalism in the twentieth century.

Horkheimer, 1969/2005) they examined how the Enlightenment project, of which Marxism was a part, was able to end up in the horrors of the Second World War. The progress of reason, they argue, had become irrational and the reason for this irrationality was domination driven by an irrational fear of the unknown: ‘Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization [...] Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized’ (ibid., p. 11/22). Their historical analysis of the formation of the modern age of Enlightenment leads them to two theses: ‘Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology’ (ibid., p. 6/xviii). The first thesis allows them to suggest that, despite being declared mythical and outmoded by the forces of secularization, older rituals, religions and philosophies may have contributed to the process of enlightenment and may still have something worthwhile to contribute. The second thesis allows them to expose ideological and destructive tendencies within modern forces of secularization, but without denying either that these forces are progressive and enlightening or that the older conceptions they displace were themselves ideological and destructive. Thus we see that Adorno and Horkheimer challenged the dualism of myth and enlightenment, or religion and reason, by showing that myth is already enlightenment and the latter is a regression to the mythical, understanding the relationship between them as truly dialectical.

More recently, critical theory has seen a proliferation of Marxist-inspired thinkers under the label post-Marxists, who explore theological resources, free of the preconceptions of orthodox Marxist thought, which refuses to countenance any tinkering with its basic philosophical categories. The list includes the work of Alain Badiou,

Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Terry Eagleton and of course Slavoj Žižek.

In *Saint Paul* (2003), the French philosopher Alain Badiou claims that Paul laid the foundation for a particular kind of universalism that Badiou also endorses.⁹² Badiou is not interested in Paul as a religious thinker, but as ‘an anti-philosophical theoretician of universality’ (ibid., p. 108), whose way of thinking ‘the event’ (ibid., p. 2) is hardly surpassed and therefore the form of this thinking, not the content, should be searched to enlighten the struggle against global capitalism. In that sense, Paul’s theology was a revolutionary event of thinking and ought to be repeated formally in our current socio-political context, but without the content.

While the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben disagrees with Badiou’s interpretation of Paul, and so has written his own commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Agamben, 2005), he nevertheless agrees with him on the importance of reading Paul. He seeks to separate the Pauline texts from the history of the Church that canonized them, thus revealing them to be the fundamental messianic texts of the West. Far from Paul’s letters being concerned with the foundation of a new religion, they seek to abolish the Jewish law. Through a close reading and comparison of Walter Benjamin’s enduring and influential contribution to Western Marxism mentioned above and the Pauline Epistles, Agamben discerns a number of parallels between the two works, concluding that Benjamin’s philosophy of history constitutes a repetition and appropriation of Paul.

In *Multitude* (2005), a follow-up to the well-known *Empire* (2000), the American literary theorist and political philosopher Michael Hardt and the Italian sociologist and

⁹² This subject will be discussed in further detail in the context of Žižek’s theology in Chapter 2.

political philosopher Antonio Negri often make use of biblical and theological themes, such as a Christian view of the body and the battle over icons in Byzantium some 1200 years ago. These discussions are readily connected to their own agenda, such as issues of embodiment and vision. For example, the chapter in *Multitude* entitled 'Traces of the Multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2005, pp. 189-227) consists of a discussion of the 'social body' that reminds them of the theological discussion on the same theme initiated by the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac in *Corpus Mysticum* (2007).⁹³ Meanwhile, in *Empire*, they use as an illumination of 'the future life of Communist militancy' the milder religious example of Saint Francis of Assisi (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 413).

The British literary scholar and cultural theorist Terry Eagleton, has, in *After Theory* (2004), severely criticised recent cultural studies and postmodernism with the help of Saint Paul and by an appeal to an Aristotelian-Augustinian version of Catholic theology inspired by the late Dominican Herbert McCabe. In that work theology is used not only as an illustration but as an argument in its own right. Eagleton continues this exploration in *Holy Terror* (2005), which deals with the metaphysics of terrorism, and also in his criticism of the New Atheists in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009). In the latter he divulges his reason for dealing extensively with theology: 'however implausible many of its truth claims' seem to be, it still 'is one of the most ambitious theoretical arenas left in an increasingly specialised world' (*ibid.*, p. 167). Even if, according to Eagleton, theology in many places of the world increasingly continues to be part of the problem, it nonetheless exhibits the capacity to foster 'the kind of critical reflection which might contribute to some of the answers' (*ibid.*, p. 168).

⁹³ Interestingly, de Lubac has drawn on many of the same thinkers as do Hardt and Negri, especially the Russian philologist Mikhail Bakhtin.

It is within the context of post-Marxist critical theory that Žižek posits that the attempt to think politically, without religious categories, is faulty. He argues that today's political thought has been turned into ethics and a legal philosophy, and is as such post-political. It has been reduced to a promotion of moral values and ethical policies.

In an attempt to demonstrate and critique the failures of the current political system of liberal democracy, the post-Marxist thinkers, among whom is also Žižek, refer to classical theological sources, such as the letters of Saint Paul.⁹⁴ Thus theology is recognised for its critical potential and as an important element of the political, be it for organisation, maintenance or enhancement of social living. It acts as a conceptual pool facilitating and grounding critique. The Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson argues that Marxism and theology have always shared an interest in what he calls hope – ‘a mutual expectation, beyond mere wishful thinking that something new is possible, a better society than the current alienated and social existence of humankind’ (Sigurdson, 2012, p. 5). In this philosophical sense, common to Sigurdson as a theologian and Žižek as a post-Marxist, theology and Marxism could be understood as revealing the socio-political reality with its faults and necessarily emerging as an alternative. Positioned in this context, Žižek's interest in theology is hardly original or without precedent.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Blanton and de Vries ask the question specifically with regards to contemporary political philosophy's attention to Paul. See Blanton's 'Paul and the Philosophers: Return to a New Archive' (in Blanton and de Vries, 2013, pp. 1-38). For a critical response to this engagement see Chieza's 'Pasolini, Badiou, Žižek und das Erbe der christlichen Liebe' (in de Kessel and Hoens, 2006, pp. 107-26); Onfray's *Atheist Manifesto* (2007); Rasch's *Sovereignty and Its Discontents* (2004); and Esposito's *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008).

⁹⁵ This remarkable theological genre among a section of the European intellectual left has also recently been bolstered by Roland Boer's *Criticism of Heaven* (2009), which offers a wide-ranging treatment of 'biblical Marxists' and Marxist grappling with religion. He picks up their often extended reflections and deliberations over theology and the Bible, of which there is an abundance but which has not been acknowledged and analysed appropriately, even though the authors never attempted to hide these deliberations, but were straightforwardly open about them. Boer provides a very detailed reading of certain oft-neglected works, such as Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity*, Althusser's early theological essays and the collection of lectures *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, Lefebvre's

1.3.4 Concluding thought

I conclude that contextualising Žižek as a postsecular thinker is an incorrect framing of the content and motivation of his engagement with theology. He considers the demarcation between the categories of religion and the secular as an obfuscating myth and the postsecular momentum, insofar as it re-interprets religion as servile and impotent, as its continuation. His theological engagement, on the other hand, subverts clear categorical demarcations and is properly placed in a post-Marxist context, where the theological is explored for the process of radical change, of illuminating and dismantling the perpetual mystifications of the capitalist political order.

What will be revealed in the next section on Žižek's theological materialism is the form that his engagement with theology takes and how it impacts his materialist thought. The criticality of theology for his political philosophy will become evident, not only in enabling a critical investigation of the political, but also as its embodiment. It is in its contestation of the current socio-political setup that theology not only enables but is the revolutionary and ultimate political act – a materialist philosophy that is distinctly theological.

'Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside', Gramsci's Prison Notebooks and Adorno's habilitation thesis Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic.

Chapter 2: Žižek's *Political Theology*

In this section I seek to provide an account of Žižek's engagement with Christian theology, the importance for his political thought and the outcome thereof – a radical universalism grounded in the theology of dialectical materialism. The previous chapter therefore served as a necessary background for this one, providing an introduction to the main influences on Žižek's thought and their concepts, the understanding of which he re-appropriated and interrelated, as well as contextualising his engagement with theology as post-Marxist. I will begin this account with an introduction to the manner in which this engagement materialises. I will then, through an examination of Žižek's critique of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* and its significance, present how he develops his own understanding of Christianity and the political potential of its subversive element, but only after a brief description of his rejection of actually existing Christianity. Next, I will look at the product of the theologisation of his political thought in the form of dialectical materialism, its overcoming of the constitutive exception, and the new communality. Finally, I will provide a very brief afterthought regarding Žižek's theological method.

2.1 Introduction

When seeking to provide an account of Žižek's engagement with theology, the temptation is to speak of a 'theological turn' – that at a certain point in his philosophy he decided to engage theology. This is the case that Sharpe and Boucher make in *Žižek*

and Politics, when they position it in the timeline of his engagement with Badiou from *The Fragile Absolute* (2000b) onwards (Sharpe and Boucher, 2010, pp. 194-195).⁹⁶ However, Žižek has always engaged Christian theology and materialism together. Sharpe and Boucher seem to miss that Žižek's willingness to engage Badiou in theological terms and his later persistence with the theological is grounded upon his already observed reading of Walter Benjamin in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and his defence of theological language in *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996) and *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Žižek and Schelling 1997).

Walter Benjamin is at the centre of the chapter 'You Only Die Twice' (Žižek, 1989, pp. 145-167), in which Benjamin's already mentioned *Theses on the Concept of History* (Benjamin, 1968, p. 253), via Lacan's notion of the death drive, is read as a critique of the surviving big Other in Stalinist historical materialism, which does not take responsibility for the past as the subject abdicates responsibility to the big Other who drives the historical 'progress'. Benjamin's historical materialism, by contrast, takes that responsibility, when he asserts that meaning is determined only by the outcome of the present struggle. Žižek argues that this acceptance of responsibility for the past is the essence of Benjamin's reference to 'theology' in his first thesis. Indeed, Žižek has upheld this criticism of Stalinist historical materialism together with its theological moves, as was observed in the previous section.

With regards to Schelling, also already observed in 1.2.3.1.4, in *The Indivisible Remainder* Žižek extrapolates that Schelling's *Die Weltalter* is for him the founding text

⁹⁶ This is incorrect, since Žižek's initial engagement with Badiou was in the earlier *The Ticklish Subject*, as is clear from my demonstration below. See Žižek's 'The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St Paul' (1999a, pp. 127-170).

of dialectical materialism, not despite its theological content, but precisely because of it (Žižek, 1996, p. 36). Indeed, his account of the intra-divine struggle becomes instrumental for Žižek's understanding of subjectivity. It is therefore correct to resist speaking of a decisive theological turn in Žižek's thought, for even if his interest in theology is more obvious in some of his works than others, its 'more-than-a-simple presence' is evident in almost all of his works since *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

It can be said, however, that it is only in his encounter with Badiou that Žižek begins to develop his own distinctive understanding of the origin of Christianity and its relationship to Judaism and paganism. Prepared in *The Ticklish Subject*, it is developed in three books, which he published in quick succession: *The Fragile Absolute* (2000b), *On Belief* (2001b) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). These books should be read together in order to gain a sense of the constant revision and development that Žižek's thinking undergoes in order to arrive at its present form, as observed in works like *The Parallax View* (2006b), *Paul's New Moment* (Žižek, 2010b, pp. 92-99), *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank, 2009), *God in Pain* (Žižek and Gunjević, 2012) and *Less Than Nothing* (2012a), and also in other recent works, such as *Living in the End Times* (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 80-134) and *Absolute Recoil* (Žižek, 2014, pp. 245-282), which include chapters or large sections on theology.

Rather than accepting talk of a theological turn, it is more appropriate to speak, as Roland Boer does (2009, pp. 335-390),⁹⁷ of theology as playing an important part in Žižek's development as a distinct political thinker. In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), Judith Butler criticises Žižek on the grounds that while his

⁹⁷ Even though he still speaks of a theological turn in Žižek's thought or 'conversion', Roland Boer offers a valuable account of Žižek's development as a political thinker and the role of theology in that process.

psychoanalysis provides an important contribution to how ideology works at an individual level, it does not provide a solution or a way out (Butler in Butler et al., 2000, pp. 28-29). It rather insists on the notion of constitutive exception, which simultaneously enables and hobbles every effort at emancipation, thereby subverting it:

We think we have found a point of opposition to domination, and then realize that that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and that we have unwittingly enforced the powers of domination through our participation in its opposition (ibid., p. 28).

Since Žižek's psychoanalytic thought cannot enact change and is therefore impotent, it cannot provide the basis for a viable politics, Butler argues.⁹⁸ So, rather than speaking of a theological turn, it is exactly in a response to or development of his political thought that theology plays a crucial role. By engaging further with Christian theology, first Paul and then Jesus, Žižek escapes from the closed-circuit of Lacan's psychoanalysis and emerges as a distinct political thinker.

2.2 Badiou and Paul's truth-event

After the challenge of Butler, Žižek engages with Alain Badiou's similar charge in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999a) that psychoanalysis cannot give us any political position.⁹⁹ This is or could be considered as Žižek's first effort at a militantly political book (ibid., p. 4), in which he sets about engaging and critically examining Badiou's notion of the truth-event in *Saint Paul* (2003). Thus the point of contact between Žižek and Badiou is not the latter's use of Paul, but his concern with truth, an account of universality. This

⁹⁸ Likewise, Laclau argues that Žižek's political thought is not advanced and 'remains fixed in very traditional categories.' In other words, it is underdeveloped and is merely juxtaposing Marx and Lacan (Laclau in Butler et al., 2000, pp. 206, 209).

⁹⁹ Žižek engages or refers to Badiou at various points in his earlier works, but proper engagement comes only in *The Ticklish Subject*. See Žižek (1991a), pp. 188, 270; Žižek (1997), pp. 26, 59, 92; and Žižek (1993), p. 4.

interest in truth shows Žižek in stark contrast to postmodern philosophy, which refuses to deal with the notion. While he agrees with the postmodern assertion that there is no going back to some pre-modern understanding of truth, Žižek nevertheless argues for the necessity of a new concept of truth (Žižek, 1993, pp. 3-4). This is the point of contact with Badiou, who agrees and proposes that truth or its nature, rather than being a positive body, is something that happens, i.e. an event.¹⁰⁰ In other words, it does not concern the state of things (being), but is rather an event of location of the political act and subject. The place where that event comes from is the marginalised. Each truth-event corresponds to a given situation, in which all elements are present, but not all are represented. For example, a country contains people who live there without being officially recognised as citizens or legal residents. Žižek agrees with Badiou's conceptualisation of universalism that it is those very excluded, with no place in the order or system, that embody the true universality and represent the whole or entirety in contrast to others, which only represent their particular interests (Žižek, 2003, p. 112). It is therefore exactly this excluded element which is the site from which a truth-event erupts. When it does so, only those who embrace the truth-event are subjects in the proper sense of the word, and their attempt to follow the consequence of it is called a truth-process. Žižek and Badiou agree that universalism is always the result of a great process of struggle of the excluded that opens with an event.

¹⁰⁰ I am here following Žižek's presentation of Badiou's theory in Chapter 3: 'The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul' of *The Ticklish Subject* (1999a), pp. 127-170. Badiou's Pauline application of event is developed from his seminal *Being and Event* (2006), which is built in reliance upon Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962).

Badiou then uses Paul as an utmost example of a subject naming the truth-event (Badiou, 2003, p. 2).¹⁰¹ The resurrection of Christ as an unexpected event seizes Paul, causing him to dedicate his life to spreading the gospel. The Pauline category of death or living in the flesh marks the realm of being – not being aware of the event – while life or living in the Spirit marks the realm of living in light of the truth-event.¹⁰² Therefore the resurrection is to Badiou the key to Paul’s truth-event and his death is merely another indication that God became a human being. Certainly, the resurrection is for Badiou a fable, but he understands that as the very condition for universality – it is not tied to any element of the life of Jesus and enables Paul to structure a subject, which is ‘devoid of identity and suspended to an event whose only “proof” lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject’ (ibid., p. 5).¹⁰³ The differences in this world have

¹⁰¹ This reading of Paul without the presupposition of any specifically Christian belief or commitment is perhaps pioneered by Jacques Lacan, who, in his seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis in 1959, as the lecture draws to a conclusion, uses Romans 7 and paraphrases it to discuss desire (Lacan, 1992, p. 83). Lacan explains his use of Paul and the religious text in the following manner: ‘We analysts [...] do not have to believe in these religious truths in any way, given that such belief may extend as far as what is called faith, in order to be interested in what is articulated in its own terms in religious experience – in the terms of the conflict between freedom and grace, for example [...]. There is a certain paradox involved in practically excluding from debate and from analysis things, terms and doctrines that have been articulated in the field of faith, on the pretext that they belong to a domain that is reserved for believers’ (Lacan, 1992, pp. 170-171).

Similarly, Badiou writes in his preface to St Paul: ‘I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him. But he is a subjective figure of primary importance.’ Like Lacan, he emphasises that it is possible and indeed legitimate to read Paul: ‘we may draw upon [him] freely, without devotion or repulsion’ (Badiou, 2003, p. 1). For Badiou, Paul is taken to be exemplary of a kind of commitment that he believes to be necessary for contemporary politics.

¹⁰² Žižek on the other hand contrasts being and truth-event as between law and love. The order of being is the domain of law, whereas the truth-event and fidelity to it belongs to the way of love – what he calls ‘the properly Christian way of Love [agape]’ (Žižek, 1999a, p. 47). This construction seems theologically odd, since in Pauline theology the contrast is between law and grace, and this is also emphasised by Badiou. See Badiou (2003), pp. 63, 66-67, 74-85. This is picked up by Boer, who argues that Žižek realised his mistake and moved onto grace in *On Belief* (Boer, 2009, pp. 337, 349-351). However, Žižek seems to be highlighting the importance of fidelity to the truth-event here. He does say later that the life in ‘love is accessible to all of us through grace’ (Žižek, 1999a, p. 147).

¹⁰³ Interestingly, while Badiou does not require a historical Jesus, he does on the other hand desire a historical Paul. See ‘Who is Paul?’ in Badiou, 2003, pp. 16-30.

thus become indifferent in light of the new event and are materialised in the Pauline conception of church.¹⁰⁴

Žižek concurs with Badiou's subject without identity and expresses it psychoanalytically as the 'intrusion of the traumatic Real that shatters the predominant symbolic texture' (Žižek, 1999a, p. 142), a reminder that the subject is not only its Symbolic representation. However, he disagrees with Badiou in two ways: first, the religious example is not only an example but is actually an implicit paradigm for the theory of the truth-event. Second, it is not the resurrection of Christ which seizes Paul, but actually his death on the Cross (ibid., pp. 145-147).¹⁰⁵ He delivers his critique with the help of the Freudian notion of the death drive as that which persists beyond life and death. This negative gesture of detaching oneself from a given situation, Žižek argues, is absolutely necessary if something new is to emerge. In Badiou's reading, the death of Christ, as he puts it, has no inherent meaning whatsoever, for it merely prepares the site for the event. However, Žižek argues, in order that his universal message might matter more than his person, Christ had to die (Žižek, 1999a, p. 157), for it is only through the murder of particularity that universality follows (Žižek, 2003, p. 17f). Only by this negativity can the subject be established. As such, Žižek's criticism is that by ignoring Christ's death on the Cross¹⁰⁶ and merely talking about the resurrection, Badiou understands the truth-event as just a radically new beginning and as such a pseudo-event.

¹⁰⁴ In *Being and Event*, Badiou describes the church precisely as the post-evental 'operator of faithful connection to the Christ-event' (Badiou, 2006, p. 392).

¹⁰⁵ Reading the crucifixion as key is also evident in Taubes' *Die politische Theologie des Paulus*, where he insists that it is precisely the message concerning the crucified Messiah which subverts Imperial authority. Indeed, he regards Romans as a declaration of war on the Roman Empire (Taubes, 1993, p. 16).

¹⁰⁶ Badiou talks of the Cross as little else but a demonstration that Christ was really human.

The same criticism continues on to Badiou's reading of Romans 7 (Žižek, 1999a, pp. 147-149 cf. Badiou, 2003, p. 75-85),¹⁰⁷ in which Paul grapples with something akin to the notion of the inherent transgression. The very emergence of a certain 'value' serving as a point of ideological identification relies on its transgression, on some mode of taking a distance from it:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was, if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death (Romans 7:7-11).

By both Žižek and Badiou, Paul is here understood as the prime example of someone who is starting to become conscious of the contradictory character of the Symbolic Order.¹⁰⁸ They also both agree that the only way out is by identifying with some truth-event. However, whereas Badiou argues for a direct identification with the resurrection in order to escape Law as the obscene superego supplement, Žižek argues that the only solution is that one must die to the law:

What 'death' stands for is at its most radical, not merely the passing of earthly life but the 'night of the world,'¹⁰⁹ the self-withdrawal, the

¹⁰⁷ For a shorter but precise summary of Žižek's engagement with Badiou's reading of Romans 7, read Žižek's 'Paul and the Truth Event' in Davis et al. (2010), pp. 92-99.

¹⁰⁸ Their reading of Romans 7 here essentially follows Lacan's reading of the Law as Symbolic in 'On the Moral Law' (Lacan, 1997, p. 83).

¹⁰⁹ Hegel's phrase 'night of the world' is employed by Žižek frequently (1992, pp. 50-52; 1994, p. 145; 1996, p. 78; 1997, pp. 8-10; 2006b, p. 44). It is used to express the radical negativity of the subject, the overwhelming excess at the moment of doubt, which is the origin of the Cartesian subject. In 'PART 1: Spirit according to its Concept' of the Jena lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit, Hegel writes that 'the human being is this night, this empty nothing, which contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self [...]. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful' (Hegel, 1970d / 1983) available online at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/jl/ch01a.htm>.

absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of links with ‘reality’ – this is the ‘wiping of the slate clean’ that opens up the domain of the symbolic New Beginning (1999a, pp. 154).¹¹⁰

The only way to escape the contradictory Symbolic Order, in this case the Law, is by symbolically dying to it, rather than merely enacting a new beginning within it.

According to Žižek, that is what marks a real, subjective truth-event.

Therefore, in the process of engaging Badiou’s philosophical account of universality, the latter’s reading of Paul as the founder of Christianity leads Žižek directly to his own reading of Paul and Christianity.¹¹¹ His critique is not developed in purely theoretical terms, but finds Žižek arguing that there is an inner necessity to this turn to theology as ‘only Christianity opens up the space for thinking the inexistence of the big Other, insofar as it is the religion of a God who dies’ (Žižek, 2013b, p. 176). The question of what exactly this means is the subject matter to which I turn my attention next. For now, however, the following observation is in order: Through this engagement with Badiou, Žižek begins to develop his own reading of Christian theology and its import for his own political thought. As we shall see, the latter is thought out through the former (and vice versa).

2.3 Christianity’s Perverse Core

The engagement with Badiou’s reading of Paul and the truth-event leads Žižek to conclude that ‘what we need today is the gesture that would undermine capitalist

¹¹⁰ See also p. 159.

¹¹¹ However, while Žižek clearly connects Paul’s universalist legacy to Christianity, as previously observed (in section 1.3), Badiou places it in the trans-historical revolutionary/communist context. Thus, in *Del’ideology*, Badiou and his co-author François Balmès regard Paul as a ‘communist invariant’, together with Thomas Müntzer and the German peasant revolt (Badiou and Balmès, 1976, pp. 60-75). I have relied here on the English translation (rough draft) by Z.L. Fraser, available online at: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/47747975/Of-Ideology> (Accessed: 20 September 2016).

globalisation [with particularisation] from the standpoint of universal Truth, just as Pauline Christianity did to the Roman global Empire' (Žižek, 1999a, p. 211). Just as the global Empire, which was held together by a non-substantial link to the Roman legal order, was undermined by Pauline Christianity from the standpoint of universal Truth, the same standpoint is needed in the struggle against capitalist globalisation. In a sense, all of Žižek's books on Christianity represent an attempt to grapple with the full implications of this statement. In all of them, after calling for a Pauline-style intervention, he turns to an analysis of what it is about the contemporary situation that makes a Pauline gesture possible and necessary.

Žižek's own understanding of contemporary society is that it is increasingly characterised by perversion. This comes from the fact, already observed in 1.2.3.1.2, that modernity has permanently undercut the big Other of society.¹¹² Whereas before God was the privileged name for the big Other, ordering everything and everyone's place in society, once that was no longer the case, the subjects were left in a double bind. Building on Lacan's premise, Žižek argues that the role of the big Other was to prohibit and thereby shield the subjects from harmful pleasures, while at the same time providing a small amount of pleasure through the law's inherent transgression. This means that in modernity, without the law, pleasure threatens to overwhelm the subject, while on the other hand, the breakdown of law also threatens to deprive the subject of the small amount of pleasure derived from transgressing the law.

¹¹² See also Chapter 1: 'On the One' of Žižek (1991a), pp. 7-60.

Perversion,¹¹³ Žižek argues, is a twofold strategy to counteract the nonexistence of the big Other and the resulting double bind. There is first ‘an (ultimately deeply conservative, nostalgic) attempt to install the law artificially, in the desperate hope that we will then take this self-positing limitation seriously’ (2003, p. 53). Secondly, there is ‘in a complementary way, a no less desperate attempt to codify the very transgression of the Law’ (ibid.). As an example, Žižek goes on to mention the imposition of ‘traditional values’ by the Christian fundamentalists in the United States. While on the surface this imposition represents an attempt to suppress destructive pleasures, the Christian fundamentalist position is at the same time sustained by an ‘ambiguous attitude of horror/envy with regard to the unspeakable pleasures in which sinners engage’ (Žižek, 2003, p. 68).¹¹⁴

What, then, is the way to avoid perversion, and what does Christianity have to do with that? This is developed and clarified in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, in which, by again focusing on the problem of perversion in Romans 7 as presented by Lacan,¹¹⁵ Žižek clarifies the connection between the contemporary situation and Pauline intervention. Given that Žižek presents Paul’s argument as geared toward escaping perversion, does he propose that the only option is a straightforward turn to the

¹¹³ The term is here by Žižek perceived in a broader sense, applied beyond its usual sexual context primarily to political situations – thus for instance describing Stalinism and Nazism as utterly perverse political ideologies (e.g. 1993, p. 195; 2001b, p. 139; 2007, p. 227; 1997, p. 69). It marks a conservative ‘solution’ to the problem of the decline of the big Other, which reveals a belief in its existence. In that sense, ‘perversion is not subversion’ (1999a, p. 247).

¹¹⁴ This, Žižek argues, is exemplified by the numerous sex scandals involving major figures on the religious Right, such as the American televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, whose zealous condemnations of sexual immorality were countered by his sexual scandals in the eighties and nineties, or his preaching against self-centredness, which is carried out as a ‘show’ event, bearing the appearance of an ego-trip. Another example is that of the former Republican senator Rick Santorum’s infamous remarks claiming that the acceptance of homosexuality will inevitably lead to ‘man on dog’ sex. Only an obsession with transgressive sexuality would make such a connection seem plausible, Žižek contends.

¹¹⁵ See footnote 108.

Christian position? Not at all. In Chapter 2 of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, entitled ‘The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy’ (2003, pp. 34-57), Žižek uses G. K. Chesterton’s (1874-1936) *Orthodoxy* (1996) and injects his insights into contemporary debates that show a certain perverse logic,¹¹⁶ while arguing that perversion is actually the key strategy of existing Christianity (Žižek, 2003, p. 53). The Christian system of prohibition and self-denial ‘is the only frame within which we can enjoy pagan pleasures: the feeling of guilt is a fake enabling us to give ourselves over to pleasures’ (ibid., p. 57). He gives the following example:

This is what the perverse version of Christianity entices us to do: betray your desire, compromise with regard to the essential, to what really matters and you are welcome to have all the trivial pleasures you are dreaming about deep in your heart! Or as they would put it today: renounce marriage, become a priest and you can have all the little boys you want. The fundamental structure here is not so much that of conditional joy¹¹⁷ (you can have it if you...), but rather, that of fake sacrifice, of pretending not to have ‘it’, to renounce it, in order to deceive the big Other, to conceal from it the fact that we do have it (ibid., pp. 49-50).

In fact, Žižek goes so far as to wonder if the Christian God is himself a pervert, in that he seems to need the Fall to occur in order to be able to redeem humanity.¹¹⁸ He needs Judas to commit the despicable act of betraying Jesus in order to carry out his plan of redemption. It is this very moment of perversion, where God himself seems to operate according to the principle ‘let us do evil that good may result’ (Romans 8: 3), that is the perverse core of Christianity to which the subtitle of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* refers.

¹¹⁶ For example, upholding democratic values through torture (Žižek, 2003, p. 37).

¹¹⁷ While otherwise following Chesterton, Žižek here critiques him for his ‘doctrine of conditional joy’ – joy that depends on what is forbidden (Chesterton, 1996, p. 40). By insisting that there is a constitutive exception (you may have joy, if you...), Žižek argues, Chesterton remains within perversion.

¹¹⁸ This draws on Žižek’s previous discussions of the philosopher Malebranche as proposing that God incited Adam and Eve to sin in order to be able to redeem them (Žižek, 1999a, pp. 116-119 at p. 118).

Therefore, the Christianity of today cannot be the cure for perversion, since it is itself perverted. What is required is to dispose of this perverted core and recover the true, authentic Christian message with its revolutionary potential embodied in its founding gesture. To this we turn next.

2.4 The Jewish Context of Christianity

The first necessary step in removing Christianity's perverse core, Žižek argues, is to fully grasp the distinctiveness of the Jewish context within which Pauline Christianity arose. Just what Žižek means when he talks about the Jewish context is again a project that he develops throughout his books pertaining to Christianity.

In the *Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief*, Žižek attempts to ground his understanding of Judaism in Freud's *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939). In this alternative account of the emergence of Jewish Monotheism, Freud presents Moses as an Egyptian who adhered to the worship of Aton, the first recorded monotheism. When the Pharaoh who had imposed Aton-worship was deposed, Moses turned to the Jewish slaves and led them out of Egypt in the hope of perpetuating the religion of Aton. Moses proved to be a harsh leader, which eventually led to a rebellion against him. The Jews killed him and did away with Aton worship. However, just as the murdered primeval father in *Totem und Tabu* (1913) was transformed into a domineering internalised authority by his guilty sons, the murdered Moses returned in a more fearsome and powerful form as Yahweh. Freud argues that Paul's creation of Christianity based on the death of Christ was an attempt to move beyond this primal crime and the inherent guilt. Whereas the Jews and other religions are forever haunted

by guilt for their act because they do not admit to committing it, Žižek concludes, Christians achieve a kind of purification, or are at peace, because they openly admit to it (Žižek, 2000b, p. 90).

It is in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* ('Subtraction, Jewish and Christian', 2003, pp. 122-143) that Žižek for the first time develops his own account of Jewish origins, which becomes the basis for his most systematic stance on Christianity. Abandoning Freud's account, he instead focuses on the (unusual) figure of Job as the founder of the Jewish religion.¹¹⁹ The choice of this Old Testament figure is due to his representation of doubt or questioning of the symbolic Order, which, Žižek argues, is the absolutely necessary first step toward revolutionary change:

What makes the Book of Job so provocative is not simply the presence of multiple perspectives without a clear resolution (the fact that Job's suffering involves a different perspective than that of religious reliance on God); Job's perplexity stems from the fact that he experiences God as an impenetrable Thing; he is uncertain what He wants from him in inflicting the ordeals to which he is submitted, and, consequently, he – Job – is unable to ascertain how he fits in the overall divine order, unable to recognise his place in it (Žižek, 2003, p. 124).

Žižek's understanding of Job is adopted from G. K. Chesterton's philosophical essay *The Book of Job: An Introduction* (1916), with particular interest in the commentary's emphasis that the Book of Job does not provide a satisfactory answer to why Job suffers, why God tests Job or why God refuses to explain His design. It is with reference to the latter that Chesterton remarks, 'The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man' (ibid.). In Žižek's words, when God is confronted with the suffering of Job, 'he

¹¹⁹ See also Žižek's 'A Meditation on Michelangelo's Christ on the Cross' in Davis et al. (2010a), pp. 176-179.

resolves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job's mind into the thing itself – he comes to share Job's astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe' (Žižek, 2009a, p. 48). What occurs is a Hegelian transposing of epistemological limitation into an ontological fault (cf, Žižek, 2003, p. 55): God himself is astonished. It is through this dialectical transition that God or the big Other as the constitutive exception, Chesterton's or actually existing Christianity's perversion of conditional joy, is overcome:

God is here no longer the miraculous exception that guarantees the normality of the universe, the unexplainable X who enables us to explain everything else; he is, on the contrary, himself overwhelmed by the overflowing miracle of his Creation. Upon a closer look, there is nothing normal in our universe — everything, every small thing that is, is a miraculous exception; viewed from a proper perspective, every normal thing is a monstrosity (Žižek and Milbank, 2009, p. 50).

Cf. with Chesterton:

To startle man, God becomes for an instant a blasphemer; one might almost say that God becomes for an instant an atheist. He unrolls before Job a long panorama of created things, the horse, the eagle, the raven, the wild ass, the peacock, the ostrich, the crocodile. He so describes each of them that it sounds like a monster walking in the sun. The whole is a sort of psalm or rhapsody of the sense of wonder. The maker of all things is astonished at the things he has Himself made (Chesterton, 1917, xxiii).

When God appears at the end of the book, Žižek argues, he doesn't provide an answer to Job's questions, but 'acts like someone caught in a moment of impotence – or at the very least, weakness – and tries to escape his predicament by empty boasting' (Žižek, 2003, p. 125). It was Job, the revolutionary ideal, who brought God to this point of confusion and seeming bewilderment by His own creation, with his relentless questioning. He is the archetypal figure of someone resisting meaning. Certainly, this is

very different to the traditional understanding of Job as a patient sufferer with a firm belief in God. Nonetheless, Žižek argues that the book is an exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history. The book dismisses any attempt of legitimising suffering, represented by Job's 'comforting' friends,¹²⁰ against whom God himself takes Job's side (Job 42:7-9). Žižek goes on to point out that what is most interesting is Job's silence after God speaks.¹²¹ He does not continue with an open declaration that God has failed him, but remains silent. According to Žižek, this is

neither because he was crushed by God's overwhelming presence, nor because he wanted thereby to indicate his continuous resistance, that is, the fact that God avoided answering Job's question, but because in a gesture of silent solidarity, he perceived the divine impotence. God is neither just nor unjust, simply impotent. What Job suddenly understood was that it was not him, but God himself, who was actually on trial in Job's calamities, and He failed the test miserably (2003, pp. 126-127).

In a way, Žižek argues, Job's silence also indicates that the Jewish community still persists with something analogous to the superego structure. Even though God's omnipotence is discredited, Jews still continue to engage in ritual practices as if nothing

¹²⁰ Žižek compares the three friends and their insistence on inscription of meaning to the three doctors in Freud's account of a dream in which he examines his patient Irma's throat: 'The structure here is exactly the same as that of Freud's dream of Irma's injection, which begins with a conversation between Freud and his patient Irma about the failure of her treatment due to an infected injection; in the course of the conversation, Freud gets closer to her, approaches her face and looks deep into her mouth, confronting the horrible sight of the livid red flesh. At this point of unbearable horror, the atmosphere of the dream changes, the horror all of a sudden lapses into comedy: three doctors, Freud's friends, appear and, in ridiculous pseudo-professional jargon, enumerate multiple (and mutually exclusive) reasons why Irma's poisoning by the infected injection was nobody's fault (there was no injection, the injection was clean...). So there is first a traumatic encounter (the sight of the raw flesh of Irma's throat), which is followed by the sudden change into comedy, into the exchange between three ridiculous doctors which enables the dreamer to avoid the encounter with the real trauma. The function of the three doctors is the same as that of the three theological friends in the story of Job: to obfuscate the impact of the trauma with a symbolic semblance' (Žižek, 2009a, p. 53).

¹²¹ Žižek simply ignores Job's response to God in 42:1-6, where Job admits that he was wrong and God was right. No doubt, he could argue that Job's reply is in a sense part of Job's subsequent decision to keep the status quo. Still, he is quick to notice verses 7-9 regarding Job's friends. Chesterton certainly doesn't understand God as silent, but as rebuking not only Job's comforters, but also Job – the accuser: 'God rebukes alike the man who accused and the men who defended Him.' See Chesterton, *The Book of Job*, <http://www.chesterton.org/introduction-to-job/>. The convenient omission of Job's response is an example of Žižek's liberal treatment of the biblical text.

happened, in order to conceal God's impotence (ibid., p. 129). More importantly, along the line of Marx, it is not only ritual practices but the observation of the Jewish Law, with its dimension of divine justice, which legitimises any temporary injustices. The Jewish Law stands as the prime example of the ideological fantasy. In fact, this is what leads Žižek to contend in *The Parallax View* that 'the proclamation of the Decalogue is not the normal case of ideological interpolation: The Decalogue is precisely a law deprived of the obscene fantasmatic support' (Žižek, 2006b, p. 427). It is therefore imperative that any attempt to escape from the perverse logic of the obscene superego supplement start here.

2.5 Christianity's Subversive Element

Only with an understanding of its Jewish context, Žižek argues, can Paul's revolutionary gesture be properly understood. Actually, in opposition to Nietzsche, who understands Paul as power-hungry and filled with hatred and desire for revenge against the Jewish Law (Nietzsche, 1942, pp. 39-42), Žižek understands Paul as a Jew, rather than a convert.¹²² From this perspective, Paul did not abandon the Jewish position, but did something with and within the Jewish position itself. What Paul did was to bring about a subversive new understanding of the Law, which was otherwise an obstacle to the Gentiles (Žižek, 2003, pp. 92-121). In explaining how Paul manages to do this, Žižek echoes Freud's basic scheme of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, namely, his contention that Paul founds Christianity by revealing what

¹²² Judaism is thus in a dialectical relationship to Christianity: Without Judaism first identifying and remaining faithful to the fantasmatic kernel, Christianity would not have been able to identify with it and show it to be empty. Without the Jewish community constituted as an ethnic remainder, Paul would not have been able to claim that the whole of humanity is a remainder.

Judaism kept hidden. Yet where Freud views Christ as a repetition of Moses, Žižek views him as a repetition of Job.

However, Christ's repetition of Job is not just a simple repetition, but a radicalisation. In other words, Christ brings the act of Job to its conclusion. Job, who out of solidarity chooses to remain silent upon discovering God's impotence, in this way maintains the logic of the subject supposed to believe, keeping up appearances for the sake of the big Other. This big Other is no longer God, but the human public in general. Christ, however, breaks this cycle of the subject supposed to believe through his cry of dereliction on the Cross (Matthew 27:45-46), which, because he is the Incarnation of God, represents more than just a cry of anguish and pain, as Žižek explains: 'Christ's words on the Cross "Father,¹²³ why have you forsaken me?" — in this moment of total abandonment, the subject experiences and fully assumes the inexistence of the big Other' (2002b, p. 180). Because Christ himself is God, this is rather a proclamation of judgement: where there is supposed to be God, there is nothing. There is no objective meaning in history and no big Other who guarantees the happy outcome of our lives and deeds. What is more, 'the impotent God who failed in creation' is the split Absolute subject: 'the traumatic experience of God is also the enigma for God himself – our failure to comprehend God is what Hegel called a "reflexive determination" of the divine self-limitation' (Žižek, 2001b, pp. 132-133). By

¹²³ This is another example of Žižek's liberal treatment of the biblical text. In his quotation of Christ's cry of dereliction in Matthew 27:45-46, Žižek replaces 'eloi – God' with 'Father,' thus bringing it into a smoother compatibility with Lacan and Freud's role of the father in psychoanalysis. Pound contends, in my opinion rightly, that in this way Žižek conflates two distinct events: Christ's forsakenness by 'God' in Matthew and his committal to the 'Father' in Luke 23:46. The result is of course that abandonment has the last word. See Pound (2008), pp. 48-49. Thus Žižek's 'error' is indeed intentional, like his selectivity.

borrowing Chesterton's words, Žižek claims that on the Cross, 'God seemed for an instant to be an atheist' (Žižek, 2003, p. 14).

Theologically speaking, Žižek's understanding of the death of God himself on the Cross is along the lines of Philippians 2:7 – Christ empties himself in a kenotic way, and in this way enables or brings about a gap (Žižek, 2003, p. 26; 2010c, p. 118). In this sense the Christian God of kenosis is the actualised difference in that he himself is the very person who provokes the question of whether he is still God.¹²⁴ This kenosis in its radicality as self-sacrifice of God is enabled by the fact that Christ is God. While the God of the Old Testament is still 'the real thing of beyond', the divine dimension of Christ is 'just a tiny grimace, an imperceptible shade, which differentiates him from other (ordinary) humans.' In that sense Christ is "the Thing itself", or, more accurately, "the Thing itself" is nothing but the rupture/gap that makes Christ not fully human' (Žižek, 2001c, p. 101).

According to Žižek, this theme of the death of God still constitutes a challenge today, and for reasons which are indeed consistent with the critique of the perverse core of the actually existing Christianity that he presents in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). As he sees it, the very concept of Trinity or the triune God leads not only to monotheism, but also ultimately to atheism. The importance of the belief that God himself dies on the Cross is displayed in the early church history, with Tertullian, who held that the true Christian belief is that God himself died and yet lives eternally, and also during the Aryan controversy and against Apollinarian circles, when Athanasius

¹²⁴ Žižek probably derives this understanding of kenosis from Chesterton. The concept appears also in Gianni Vattimo's integration of the concept of the death of God in 'the God who is Dead' (Vattimo, 2002, pp. 11-24).

insisted that it was God himself who was crucified (Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem* cited in Jüngel, 1977, p. 85).¹²⁵ However, any discussion of or reference to the crucified God loses the edge where Athanasius claims that Christ did not suffer in his divinity, but in his flesh for us (Athanasius' *Contra Arianos*, cited in Jüngel, 1977, p. 86). Afterwards the theological discussion of the death of God subsides and only re-emerges in late nineteenth and twentieth century. As a result, 'Today, two thousand years later, this death of God is still an enigma: how to read it outside the pagan-mythic topic of divine sacrifice or the legalistic topic of exchange (payment for sins)?' (Žižek 2009a, p. 39). Žižek's understanding of the Cross here is fully Hegelian in that the infinite pain of the loss or death of God is sublimated in God himself, 'as a moment of the supreme Idea':

God himself is dead [...], purely as a moment of the supreme Idea, the pure concept must give philosophical existence to what used to be either the moral precept that we must sacrifice the empirical Being, or the concept of formal abstraction, to re-establish the idea of absolute freedom and along with it the absolute passion (as in suffering), the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday, to speculatively re-establish Good Friday in the whole truth and harshness of its godlessness (Hegel, 1983, p. 134).¹²⁶

This re-establishment of the Good Friday in its 'whole truth and harshness of its godlessness', Žižek argues, is the potential (if read properly) of Chesterton's non-perverse reading of the death of God. Indeed, Žižek's claim is even that it was 'Chesterton, who thought through the notion of the "death of God" to its radical

¹²⁵ The examples of Tertullian and Athanasius are here mentioned only to illustrate the extent or importance which a theoretical understanding of the Cross in Christianity has occupied.

¹²⁶ This is my altered translation of a quote from Hegel's 'Glauben und Wissen oder die Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjektivität, in der Vollständigkeit ihrer formen, als Kantische, Jakobische und Fichtesche Philosophie' (Hegel, 1983, pp. 273-287). It differs somewhat from the Cerf and Harris translation (Hegel, 1977, pp. 190-191) in order to preserve the clarity and main point of Hegel's thought here.

conclusion: only in Christianity God himself has to go through atheism' (Žižek, 2009a, p. 39). The fact that God in Chesterton's reading is a suffering God means first of all that God is involved with his creation, indeed involved in the suffering:

The insight into the speculative identity of Good and Evil, the notion of God's two sides, peaceful harmony and destructive rage, the claim that, in fighting Evil, the good God is fighting himself (an internal struggle), is still the (highest) pagan insight. It is only the third feature, the suffering God, whose sudden emergence resolves this tension of God's two faces, that brings us to Christianity: what paganism cannot imagine is such a suffering God (Žižek, 2009a, pp. 47-48).

Since it is God himself who dies on the Cross, this reading of the event prevents any attempt at resurrection of God as the big Other, perversion. In contrast to the standard form of atheism, where 'God dies for men who stop believing in him; in Christianity, God dies for himself' (Žižek, 2003, p. 15). Since God did not die for us, but for himself, this precludes a sacrificial reading of his death.

This non-perverse God who dies for himself is a God who refuses to guarantee the meaning of our reality, a God who is no longer above or beyond, but engaged in this reality, as in his answer to Job and in Christ's cry on the Cross. In a long comment on Job in one of his conversations with Glyn Daly, Žižek gives the following elaboration: '[T]he moment you accept suffering as something that doesn't have a deeper meaning, it means that we can change it; fight against it. This is the zero level of critique of ideology – when you don't read meaning into it' (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p. 161). Žižek is quick to reply to any objection under the umbrella of the inscrutability of God's ways by recalling Job's lesson:

The legacy of Job precludes such a gesture of taking a refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us to be a meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain

contributes to global harmony. [...] Christ's death on the Cross thus means that we should immediately ditch the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology – Christ's death on the Cross is the death of this God, it repeats Job's stance, it refuses any 'deeper meaning' that obfuscates the brutal reality of historical catastrophes (Žižek and Milbank, 2009, pp. 54-55).

If God is dead not just for us but for himself, then what does Žižek do with the biblical account of the resurrection? Does he ignore it or dismiss it in order to avoid resurrecting God as absolute? As explained in *The Monstrosity of Christ* he reads it in a Hegelian way, insisting that 'Crucifixion and Resurrection [...] should be perceived not as two consecutive events, but as a purely formal parallax shift on one and the same event: Crucifixion is Resurrection – to see this, one has only to include oneself in the picture' (ibid., p. 291). He goes further by saying that this is not a Hegelian reading, but Pauline, since it was the Apostle who re-read the death of Christ as a triumph:

Let us take the case of Saint Paul, whose rereading of the death of Christ gave Christianity its definitive contours. He did not add any new content to the already-existing dogmas – all he did was to remark as the greatest triumph, as the fulfilment of Christ's supreme mission (reconciliation of God with mankind), what was before experienced as traumatic loss (the defeat of Christ's mundane mission, his infamous death on the Cross). Here we encounter again the fundamental Hegelian motif: 'reconciliation' does not convey any kind of miraculous healing of the wound of scission, it consists solely in a reversal of perspective by means of which we perceive how the scission is in itself already reconciliation – how, for example, Christ's defeat and infamous death are already in themselves reconciliation. To accomplish 'reconciliation' we do not have to 'overcome' the scission, we just have to re-mark it (1991a, p. 78).¹²⁷

¹²⁷ This explains the subtitle of Žižek's essay in *Paul Among the Philosophers*, 'From Job to Christ: A Paulinian reading of Chesterton' (Žižek in Caputo et al., pp. 39-58).

2.6 Dialectical Materialism

This proclamation of God's impotence in Christ's cry of dereliction, Žižek argues, marks the emergence of materialism and explains his insistence at the (previously mentioned) start of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that in order to become a dialectical materialist one should go through the Christian experience (Žižek, 2003, p. 6). The Christ-event reveals not only the nonexistence of the big Other, but opens up the space for thinking about its implications (Žižek and Milbank, 2009, p. 287), that is the inconsistency and contingency of reality itself (2006b, p. 79). The event not only reveals that there is nothing but material reality, but also that this material reality is itself inconsistent and incomplete. Without this experience, for example, the religious core survives in humanism, even up to Stalinism with its belief in history as the big Other that decides on the objective meaning of our deeds. In a 2008 Lecture at Vanderbilt University entitled 'Between Fear and Trembling: On Why Only Atheists Can Believe' (Žižek, 2008a), Žižek gives the example of many communist cadre who committed suicide when Stalinism was renounced in Russia. The reason for that, Žižek argues, was not that they were unaware of the atrocities that were committed (quite the opposite), but the fact that there was now no historical big Other to justify it. Without the Christian experience the big Other remains. Žižek's description of a true dialectical materialist as one who necessarily goes through the Christian experience, indicates clearly that the Christian experience itself is not dispensable. In other words, only Christianity has the ability to become genuinely materialistic.

This was again confirmed at The Actuality of the Theologico-Political Conference at the Birkbeck Institute, hosted by Žižek himself, who, to Eric Santner's

question of why the persistent turning to Christianity, replied that without the theological, critique of ideology fails. ‘The old syntagm, the ‘theologico-political,’ acquires new relevance here: it is not only that every politics is grounded in a ‘theological’ view of reality, it is also that every theology is inherently political, an ideology of a new collective space’ (Žižek, 2010c, p. 119).

Žižek claims that genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other; therefore the role of theology in his work cannot be reduced to the status of an illustration or a passing fad, and neither can it be dismissed as a purely negative concern. The latter seems to be the understanding of Žižek’s engagement with theology by John D. Caputo. In his review of *The Monstrosity of Christ*, he expresses doubts about Žižek’s sincerity and guesses that his true intent is to undermine Christian belief in God:

We all know that Žižek can very well make his main case with no mention of Christ at all, that he can use the seminars of Lacan, the films of Alfred Hitchcock or the novels of Stephen King just as well. His whole point, as he says elsewhere, is subversive: to build a Trojan-horse theology, to slip the nose of a more radical materialism under the Pauline tent of theology in order to announce the death of God [...]. He discusses Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Crucifixion, the way an analyst talks with a patient who thinks there is a snake under his bed, trying patiently to heal the patient by going along with the patient’s illusions until the patient is led to see the illusion (Caputo, 2009).

However, Caputo’s understanding of Žižek acting like an analyst showing that God is dead is incorrect by not being radical enough, since for Žižek God himself is the analyst showing that he is dead. Far from Žižek insincerely subverting belief, he rather sincerely engages the essence of Christian belief: a God who suffers and dies.

Schelling's *Die Weltalter* (1946), discussed previously in 1.2.3.1.4, is for Žižek the founding text of dialectical materialism, not despite its theological content, but precisely because of it:

The point is not to reject what is not true in Schelling, the false ('obscurantist,' 'theosophico-mythological') shell of his system, in order to attain its kernel of truth; its truth, rather, is inextricably linked to what, from our contemporary perspective, cannot but appear as blatantly 'not true,' so that every attempt to discard the part or aspect considered 'not true' inevitably entails the loss of the truth itself [...] (Žižek, 1996, p. 7)

Indeed, Christianity is the prerequisite of the critique of ideology. This critique is inherently Christian in and of its experience and is itself articulated in theological terms and continues to address core theological issues. This is seen in *The Parallax View*, in which Žižek not only carries forward the major conclusions concerning Christianity reached in his earlier works, but expresses new developments of ideological critique in theological terms (2006b, pp. 68-123). It is through explicit discussions of theological terms that notions such as the reality of human freedom are introduced. Such notions, which possess a symbolic authority, are then grounded in the material, the physical. He does this by engaging with the sciences, such as cognitive science, quantum mechanics and evolutionary theory.¹²⁸ In this way, Žižek does not end up affirming the metaphysical concept of God, but replaces an outdated and instinctive metaphysical system with a materialistic model, which can make sense of the latest science and simultaneously does justice to the experience of human freedom. Dialectical materialism is thus a non-reductive type of materialism, which does not claim that

¹²⁸ See also Žižek (1996), p. 230, where Žižek uses quantum physics to provide a scientific grounding for the idea that the realm of deterministic physical law is 'non-all'. Thus human subjectivity emerges out of the order of determinism in a dialectic manner.

‘everything is matter’, but instead confers upon ‘immaterial phenomena a specific positive nonbeing’ (2006b, p. 168).

At the same time, this type of materialism is not simply non-reductive, i.e. it does not merely posit non-material beings. Instead it is truly dialectically aufgehoben [sublated]¹²⁹ in that the autonomous symbolic level of reality is necessarily grounded in the contradictory material level (Žižek, 1996, p. 74). In his treatment of the understanding of the death of Christ described above, Žižek therefore proposes that the proper understanding is only that which grounds the symbolic in the material – the understanding that exposes the human subject as self-legislating, without a divine master. God thus functions as the ultimate ethical agency putting the burden on humanity to organise itself. In *Paul’s New Moment*, Žižek thus concludes: ‘This is why I – precisely as a radical leftist – think that Christianity is far too precious a thing to leave to conservative fundamentalists. We should fight for it. Our message should not be, “You can have it,” but “No, it’s ours. You are kidnapping it”’ (Žižek, 2010a, p. 181). Therefore, Žižek’s dialectical materialism is properly theological materialism.

2.7 A theological overcoming of the constitutive exception

In *On Belief* (2001b), Žižek fully spells out the import of Christianity’s overcoming of the constitutive exception for his political thought, which takes on the form of Leninism, and by this providing a full reply to Butler’s accusation of the political impotency of his psychoanalytic thought. On the last pages of the book, Žižek is clear:

Here enters the ‘good news’ of Christianity: the miracle of faith is that it IS possible to traverse the fantasy, to undo this founding decision, to start one’s life all over again, from the zero point – in short, to change Eternity itself (what we ‘always–already are’). Ultimately, the ‘rebirth’ of which

¹²⁹ One is only defined in relation to the other and incorporates the other into itself.

Christianity speaks (when one joins the community of believers, one is born again) is the name for such a new Beginning (ibid., p. 148).

It is important to observe the change of language that occurs away from Lacanian terminology in this passage. Instead, it leans heavily on theological terminology, which enables a political act.¹³⁰ At the end of the book Lacan subsides and we instead find references to Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, Evelyn Waugh, Berthold Brecht, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and Vladimir Lenin. It is Lenin, with his absolute commitment to the revolutionary cause and the suspension of ethics in its name, who is a repetition of the paradigmatic Christ-event, and who changed the coordinates of the liberal-capitalist world order (ibid., p. 114).¹³¹ Lenin's advocacy of actual freedom, representing the ability to step outside or transcend the particular context in question, as opposed to formal freedom, where the freedom is only apparent and its boundaries are in fact set by a certain situation, is thus the choice to change the very coordinates of that situation. Lenin's actual vs. formal freedom is thus of the same order as Christianity's possibility of a thoroughly new beginning, and Roland Boer is certainly right when he extrapolates that Žižek's deliberation of Lenin's actual vs. formal freedom is a Leninist formulation not only of Badiou's Being and the event, but first and foremost of law and grace in Paul's theology (Boer, 2009, p. 112). While there are frequent references to

¹³⁰ A little earlier Žižek actually invokes the term 'miracle', quoting Lenin's contention that 'in some respects, a revolution is a miracle' (Žižek, 2001b, p. 84).

¹³¹ Žižek actually compares Lenin as a revolutionary figure to Paul and Christ to Marx, although he is not the first to do so – Badiou does so as well. See Badiou (2003), p. 2 cf. Žižek (2000b), p. 2. Of course, Žižek's Lenin is the Lenin of the revolutionary moment from April to October 1917 (not the earlier or later one). He is presented as the purest historical example of an eventual subject who has had the courage to act without the sanction of the big Other. Boucher and Sharpe critique Žižek that this image of Lenin is not actual, complete or true. See 'Repeating Lenin, an Infantile Disorder?' in Sharpe and Boucher (2010), pp. 225-228. Like his reply to accusations of supersessionism, which I elaborate in 2.7.2.1, Žižek is well aware that there are more controversial aspects to Lenin, but he refuses to reduce the potentiality of Lenin to that contentious figure.

Lacan in *On Belief*, the main points of Christian theology are no longer interpreted by means of his categories, but by Lenin, in the company of whom theology articulates key political points.

2.7.1 Militant politics of external and contingent Grace

One such example is Žižek's theological articulation that Lenin's actual freedom, or Badiou's event, or Christianity's act of a thoroughly new beginning, is only a possibility of something new; it is not ensured. This point is very important and deserving a quote from Žižek:

By taking upon himself all the Sins and then, through his death, paying for them, Christ opens up the way for the redemption of humanity – however, by his death, people are not directly redeemed, but given the POSSIBILITY of redemption, of getting rid of the excess. This distinction is crucial: Christ does NOT do our work for us, he does not pay our debt, he 'merely' GIVES US A CHANCE – with his death, he asserts OUR freedom and responsibility, i.e. he 'merely' opens up the possibility, for us, to redeem ourselves through the 'leap into faith,' i.e. by way of choosing to 'live in Christ' – in *imitatio Christi*, we REPEAT Christ's gesture of freely assuming the excess of Life, instead of projecting/displacing it onto some figure of the Other (2001b, p. 105).

As already noted, *On Belief* is saturated with theological language, but in relation to this quote one term is deserving of special mention: 'grace' (*ibid.*, pp. 1-5). Žižek understands grace as the unexpected, unpredictable revolutionary moment, which arrives from the outside. Theologically speaking, grace concerns salvation, which cannot be earned or deserved, but is rather given by God as a pure externality and contingency, to use Žižek's terminology.

While God is an entirely different matter for Žižek, he does stress the analogous impossibility of predicting revolution, thus maintaining the externality of grace. Even if

one assesses the social and political situation, it is impossible to predict how, when, or even why the revolution will occur.¹³² In this context of Žižek, God stands for the radically unexpected. Thus we see Žižek developing a materialist theology of grace as external, unexpected and beyond human agency, which appears as fore-ordained only after it was received, all in order to explain that a suspension of political coordinates appears as leading up to it and inevitable only after it occurs. When Paul announces the Messiah and thereby brings about a revolution against the existing symbolic order of Judaism and Hellenism, this is not an externalisation of an internal event, but an event whose Truth only becomes evident or revealed afterwards. Žižek's theory of a political act seeks to promote or give courage to the promotion of political alternatives. These, however, are unimaginable or we can say no more about them, but as soon we enter the domain of this political act, it becomes cognitively accessible and allows us to experience a truly new communality.

For Žižek, it seems, theology forms one of the most complex ways of speaking about radical political change. Moreover, as Boer points out, his militant politics 'is an inescapably radical and revolutionary theological doctrine' (Boer, 2009, p. 376).

Theology is political and the political is theological; therefore, political theology is not only possible, but necessary (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 118-119). The attempt to think politically, without religious categories, was a failure, Žižek argues, and contends that today's political thought has been turned into an ethics and a legal philosophy. The business of politics is supposed to promote moral values and ethical policies which are reached either through a discursive will formation (humanitarianism, freedom etc.) or

¹³² Thus for example the Arab Spring, a surge of collective action throughout North Africa and the Middle East, was unpredictable and indeed unpredicted.

through the language of rights (original positions, striking a balance between individual rights and community goods, rights as trumps etc.). Theology can help to revive the political, to re-politicize politics, by constructing new political subjects who break out of the ethico-legal entanglement and ground a new collective space. Žižek concludes: ‘Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, one can say that what we need today is a theologico-political suspension of the ethico-legal’ (ibid., p. 119). It is to Žižek’s appropriation of Kierkegaard that we now turn.

2.7.2 Žižek’s Atonement: An act of madness that suspends the law

Žižek’s doctrine of atonement is in stark contrast to the four dominant traditional atonement models. He points out the problems of all four in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001d, pp. 45-59) as follows. The ransom theory is riddled with the problem of who the price was paid to – if it was Satan, then God and Satan are in a way partners in exchange, whereas, if it was God, then why exactly did God exact this sacrifice? Žižek dismisses the psychological reading, through which Christ’s sacrifice relieves our guilt and shows God’s care for us, as an explanation through a psychological mechanism, rather than in theological terms. The legalistic reading is flawed because of its inference that God is somehow compelled to comply with a legalistic framework. After all, God is the Creator of the world, not part of it. Why doesn’t he directly forgive humanity? Lastly, the edifying-religious moral reading, which asserts that not only forgiveness but also Christ’s death elicits our compassion and desire to transform ourselves, is marred by a perverse logic: in the Garden of Eden

God places humanity in trouble, in order to be able to prove his devotion to them by later saving them. Instead, Žižek argues:

Christ's sacrifice, with its paradoxical structure (it is the very person against whom we humans have sinned, whose trust we have betrayed, who atones and pays the prices for our sins), suspends the logic of sin and punishment, of legal or ethical retribution, of 'settling accounts,' by bringing it to the point of self-relating (ibid., pp. 49-50).

Christ is the self-willed victim who, despite Peter's protestations, freely gives himself over to the chief priests. His death thus performs a psychoanalytic cut, by introducing a moment of madness and suspending the Law or social convention. Far from mediation between God and the world in the traditional sense, Christ is the vanishing mediator, whose death is the death of God as the big Other or the constitutive exception (Žižek, 2010a). The atonement is thus best understood as a break, a cut or trauma, in the sense that Christ traumatises the Jewish Law and the systems of retributive justice by committing a senseless act not circumscribed by social convention.¹³³ It is in *The Fragile Absolute* that Žižek begins to spell out Christianity's breaking out of the logic of constitutive exception, of the vicious cycle of law and sin (2000b, pp. 133, 135, 143), culminating in the following passage:

What if the split between the symbolic Law and the obscene shadowy supplement of excessive violence that sustains it is not the ultimate horizon of our experience? What if this entanglement of Law and its spectral double is precisely what, in the famous passage from Romans 7: 7, Saint Paul denounces as that which the intervention of the Christian agape (love as charity) enables us to leave behind? What if the Pauline agape, the move beyond the mutual implication of Law and sin, is not the step towards the full symbolic integration of the particularity of Sin into the universal domain of the Law, but its exact opposite, the unheard-of gesture of leaving behind the domain of the Law itself, of 'dying to the Law', as Saint Paul put it (Romans 7:5)? In other words, what if the

¹³³ Žižek therefore sees Christ as an example of the death drive – bringing into focus the desire for death in his relentless pursuit of Calvary. It is this desire for death that upsets the socio-symbolic (Žižek, 2001b, pp. 107-110).

Christian wager is not Redemption in the sense of the possibility for the domain of the universal Law retroactively to ‘sublate’, integrate, pacify, erase – its traumatic origins, but something radically different, the cut into the Gordian knot of the vicious cycle of Law and its founding Transgression? (ibid., pp. 99-100)

This is the ‘Christian experience’ to which Žižek refers as necessary in order to become a true dialectical materialist, the recognition or realisation that Christ stands for a break with all totalities and cosmic schemes. Instead of the indiscriminate, postmodern talk about differences, Christ divides between good and bad in accordance with the Gospel, saying: ‘Do you suppose that I came to bring peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division’ (Luke 12:51).

God’s self-abandonment on the Cross is already upheld in *For They Know Not* as the ultimate example of a dialectical negation of negation, a change in perspective that transforms an apparent defeat into victory (1991a, p. 29). Using theological language, Žižek calls this triumph the resurrection, but interprets it in a non-traditional way.¹³⁴ His interpretation is in line with Hegel, for whom the death of God in Christ represents the giving over of God’s self to the world, whereas his resurrection was and is in the community.¹³⁵ It is identical with the advent of the Holy Spirit, as the bond of the new community founded on Christ’s revelation on the Cross. Thereby, in a dialectical reasoning, the Holy Spirit is the immediate consequence of the crucifixion, or the public revelation that the big Other does not exist.¹³⁶ Žižek states that ‘from the

¹³⁴ For how this non-literal resurrection functions, see ‘Paul and the Truth Event’ (Žižek in Davis et al., 2010b, pp. 87-92).

¹³⁵ The move from religion to politics by the Young Hegelians that was to follow, and that was in a way more obviously critical of religion, was thus traced out already by Hegel. Such is the case of *Das Leben Jesu* (1864), in which David Strauss examined the representation of Jesus’s life in terms of an elaborate understanding of myth, in which the incarnation of the Logos was not solely limited to Jesus, but was through him distributed among the multiplicity of individuals.

¹³⁶ In a recent interview, ‘Žižek and Dupuy: Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging’, given together with Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Žižek, after delivering an account of his understating of the resurrection,

Christian standpoint, praising Christ is the act of accusing God-the-Father' (Žižek, 2010c, p. 115). In other words, it is an embodiment of the negativity of the Cross. Žižek describes this with reference to Matthew 18:20, 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them', but departs from the original by interpreting it as 'When there will be love between two of you, I will be there' (Žižek, 2013b, p. 177). The Christian community is thus, like the Jewish community, bound together by solidarity with the impotence of God as the big Other. What distinguishes the Christian community is its dispensing with the Jewish secret:

The secret to which the Jews remain faithful is the horror of the divine impotence – and it is this secret that is revealed in Christianity. This is why Christianity could only occur after Judaism: it reveals the horror first confronted by the Jews (2003, p. 129).

2.7.2.1 Interim Thought: Žižek's account of religion and Eurocentrism

In his analysis and understanding of religion, Žižek has to some extent re-appropriated Hegel's problematic¹³⁷ model of religion. The latter aimed to develop a general theory of religion by employing an evolutionary model, present in the 18th and 19th century. This model denotes a movement from simple to complex, primitive to modern, and from African, Aboriginal Australian or Native American to European religion. It thus displays its problematic character of the then actual Eurocentrism and Imperialism, where the pagan forms of religion are superseded by the monotheism of Judaism, which in turn is superseded by Christianity – the ultimate stage of the model. Hegel lists the religions in the following order of ascending rank: magic (fetishism, animism,

explains or rather defends it by saying: 'Maybe my reading of the resurrection is too simplistic, but it is my reading!' (Žižek and Dupuy, 2014, 1t 44:20).

¹³⁷ For examples of criticism of Hegel's colonialist political philosophy displayed in his model of religion, see Serequeberhan (1989), pp. 301-308, and Larrain (1991).

primitivism), Buddhism, Lamaism, the State Religion of the Chinese Empire, Taoism, Hinduism, Persian Religion, Egyptian Religion, Greek Religion, Jewish Religion, Roman Religion and Christianity.¹³⁸

Žižek's model of religion is also evolutionary as is clear from his Judeo-Christian account above, where Jews are still faced with a God who is omnipotent and wrathful; thus Judaism is a 'religion of Anxiety', whilst Christianity is the 'religion of love' (Žižek, 2001b, p. 132).¹³⁹ In *The Fragile Absolute* (2000b, pp. 96-98) the movement is from Ancient pagan or pre-Judaic religions to Judaism and finally to Christianity, which is the ultimate form, and Žižek describes religions other than Christianity as pre-Christian (ibid., p. 95).¹⁴⁰ The model is not supposed to be all inclusive (this explains the absence of Islam, among others), for Žižek does not aim to develop or present a general theory of religion, but instead wishes to present the dialectical movement of historical thought towards 'uncoupling'. Thus, as Žižek elaborates in *On Belief* (2001b, p. 106), the first in the series of uncoupling was the Greek philosophical wondering, which was unplugged from the immersion of the subject into the mythical universe. Second, Judaism unplugged from polytheism, and finally, Christianity unplugged from one's substantial community. Žižek does not understand this movement as a simple linear succession, but rather as the sublation or supersession of what went before. 'Christianity [...] renounces this God of beyond, this

¹³⁸ This is also the plan of his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*. See the contents pages of Volume 16 (1969b) and 17 (1971).

¹³⁹ Žižek borrows the phrase from Augustine.

¹⁴⁰ A similar evolutionary movement can be observed in his understanding of the development of Christianity: from Eastern Orthodoxy, to Roman Catholicism, and finally to Protestantism. Of course, the latter example is not temporal, but rather the dialectical shift from the universal to the particular, to the singular. See Žižek and Milbank (2009), p. 28.

real behind the curtain of the phenomena so that there is nothing there except an imperceptible X that changes Christ, this ordinary man into God' (ibid., p. 89).

This evolutionary account by Žižek has attracted criticism and challenges to distance himself from Hegel's account. William D. Hart (2002, pp. 553-557), the critical theorist of religion, for example, contends that even if Žižek does not fully commit to Hegel's model of religion, his own evolutionary account is still Eurocentric, as it claims the superiority of Christianity. Hart argues that since the account is constitutive of Žižek's politics, the latter as well is Eurocentric (ibid., p. 556). To this challenge Žižek responds that he is far from uncritically endorsing Christianity (Žižek, 2002c, p. 582). Furthermore, he openly admits to Eurocentrism, if the latter means privileging the Judeo-Christian tradition or according it a special position:

Where are the concrete counterarguments? I make a series of claims about the specificity of Judaism and Christianity – where am I wrong? ... Do we find features that I attribute to Christianity in Buddhism or Hinduism? Am I wrong in attributing these feature to Christianity? Or am I wrong in asserting the emancipatory potentials of these features? (ibid., p. 579)

Žižek is more than aware of Hegelian narrative as ideological legitimization of Western colonialism, but it is wrong to stop there and overlook Hegel's philosophy as providing the 'ultimate subversive intellectual tools that allow us to discern and question the very Eurocentric colonialist bias' (ibid., p. 580). By doing so, Hart reduces Hegel to a mere racist ideologue of capitalist colonialism. Žižek thus flips the coin and turns the postcolonial critique into a Eurocentric endeavour par excellence.

2.8 The True Community

This community of the Holy Spirit is a new form of sociality, which is formed and held together through the revelation of the big Other's impotence, but also replaces him in

his abdication (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 371-375; 2014, p. 274). This new community is thus established and organized upon the remainder, that which is left and could not be killed on the Cross (Žižek, 2013a, p. 173).¹⁴¹ The experienced state of destitution thus becomes a catalyst for change:

Paradoxically, the fall of this big Other [...] is not the same as the disappearance of belief – in a way, it opens up the space of an authentic belief which sustains an act, a belief which is no longer transposed onto, sustained, or covered by some figure of the big Other. In taking the risk of an act, I fully assume the belief in myself, accepting that there is no Other to believe for me, in my place. This is the properly Christian belief, the message of God's death: the Christian community of believers is alone with its belief, freely assuming full responsibility for it, no longer relying on a transcendental authority that would guarantee it (Žižek, 2010c, p. 134).

While destitution is here understood by Žižek as having a dimension of the terrifying, in that it represents a realisation that man is utterly alone without the ideological support of the big Other, it is at the same time a realisation of freedom. Forsakenness thus enables a new form of community which is significantly characterised by two things: It is a sociality that is truly universal, in that everyone can participate in it, and the participation is direct, irrespective of their social status and position (ibid., p. 120). In the words of Paul: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). It is also the first form of sociality without any hidden agendas, Žižek claims, for it is truly revealing of the nothingness behind it (2000b, p. 139).

Because of that, it is a community which truly embraces differences. The death of Christ, or God's self-undermining, opens up the possibility of a collective of subjects who are directly confronted with each other apart from the symbolic fiction imposed by

¹⁴¹ Žižek is here using Eagleton's exposition of the sacrament of the Eucharist (Eagleton, 2008, p. 272).

the big Other. This kind of love, founded on the Real of the subject (2009b, p. 105), is the opposite of sentimental love which idealises the other subject, in that it directly identifies with its finitude and weakness. In other words, it is not simply a form of liberal tolerance, which abstracts from differences, such as race, religion or gender, and accords everyone a generic set of human rights. Christian love,¹⁴² Žižek argues, goes beyond that by loving people not in spite of their differences, or despite their weaknesses, but loving them exactly for those traits. In this way it is an event or moment of caring for people as they truly are. The maxim ‘God is love’ (1 John 4: 8) should thus be read alongside ‘No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us’ (1 John 4:12):

And here love enters: the most radical moment of love is not the belief of others which sustains the subject in its existence, but the subject’s own counter-gesture, the terrifyingly daring act of fully accepting that its very existence depends on others, that – to put it in somewhat inappropriate poetic terms – I am nothing but a figure in the dreamspace of an inconsistent other (Žižek, 2014, pp. 274-275).

In order to elaborate the radical character of this Christian love, Žižek turns to the words of Jesus from Luke 14:26: ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple’. For Žižek this verse embodies the ethical suspension

¹⁴² Žižek is diverging from trend here by focusing on Christ, for it is usually Paul’s emphasis on love, which becomes especially important for materialist readings. Beginning perhaps with Jacob Taubes’ (1993, pp. 52-53) warning that Paul’s love is not to be understood as in any way sentimental, but as ingredient to a rather clear-eyed political project. With reference to Romans 13:8-10, Taubes supposes that it is Paul rather than Jesus who is the decisive inventor of a love ethic and notes that where Jesus is said to have reduced the commandments to two – love of God and of neighbour – Paul dispenses with the first and emphasises only the latter. Of course, Žižek does uphold Paul to Christ as a Lenin to Marx, but it is important to note the engagement of Žižek with Christ and his teachings as a theological figure (just as Paul), rather than a militant figure.

achieved by the Cross (1999a, p. 115),¹⁴³ whereby the substance of social life is renounced, in order for it to exist as such. Thus the verse is not read as a constitutive exception of the social order, but the very means of breaking from it. Here ‘love itself enjoins us to “unplug” from the organic community into which we were born’ (Žižek, 2014, p. 121). It is in the light of this love that Žižek reads Galatians 3:28 as a call for a general universalism indifferent to social divisions.

2.8.1 Žižek’s Kierkegaardian suspension of the ethical

The work of this love is that which suspends the ethical. In Chapter Two of *The Parallax View* (2006b, pp. 68-123), Žižek develops this suspension of the ethical through a critical reading of Søren Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* (2005). In the very moment when the ethical becomes a temptation, Kierkegaard reflects, Abraham overcomes his own ethical convictions and only by faith alone, outside worldly coordination, by telling no one about this. In that very moment he assumes an almost higher position than God himself – Abraham stands in an absolute relation to the Absolute, where ‘the ethical is reduced to the relative’ (Kierkegaard, 2005, pp. 82-83). His behaviour appears absurd – he is willing to murder his own son, whom he treasures more than anything else. Certainly, Kierkegaard is not concerned with putting the ethical in general under question, but the scene presents an antagonism which cannot be overcome. Suddenly the man of God and a murderer of a child appear in the same person. It is this very

¹⁴³ Of course, Žižek puts a political spin on this verse by explaining that it is about respect and obedience towards superiors, while the original context is not so much about superiors but about familial ties. Nevertheless, the basic logic of argumentation can stand. This is another example of Žižek’s symptomatic attitude, where the text and theology do not necessarily match, as we have seen in his exegesis of Job and of Christ’s last words.

antagonism, as presented by Kierkegaard, which for Žižek demonstrates the tension of the Christ-event and the subsequent truth-events.

Thus the radical and individualistic position observed by Kierkegaard in Abraham's inhumane and yet God-fearing belief becomes for Žižek an argumentative vehicle which enables the thinking of a politically militant subject. Žižek reads the compelling of a higher necessity to betray the very ethical substance of one's being as the revolutionary compelling the subject (2001d, p. 14), introducing a gap into the very order of being (2003, p. 37). This subject is faithful to a truth-event, which is not legitimised by the symbolic order. Abraham's acceptance of the incomprehensible will of God sets about to destroy the symbolically imposed picture of the loving and caring father, the patriarch. For Žižek it is exactly his ability to sacrifice that which gives meaning to his life or world, which delivers the subject in a certain sense to freedom and thereby true subjectivity. This is also exactly the aspect that he sees in the death of Christ on the Cross – the self-emptying.

Therefore, the real paradox of Kierkegaard's faith lies for Žižek in the seeking after the meaning of life in reference to God, wherein the gap between God and man cannot be overcome. The believer risks everything for nothing (Žižek, 2006b, p. 97). It is only after Kierkegaard's 'infinite resignation', the realisation that there is no guarantee that the absolute dedication will be compensated, that Kierkegaard's radicality of the leap of faith is reached. In Kierkegaard's own words:

But the understanding comes to a standstill at the absolute. The contradiction is to require of a person that he make the greatest possible sacrifice, dedicate his whole life to being sacrificed – and why? Well, there is no why (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 120).

He continues in his journal: ‘At first sight the understanding says that this is madness. The understanding asks: What’s in it for me? The answer is: nothing’ (Kierkegaard, 1970, p. 186).¹⁴⁴

Žižek concludes that there is but a fundamental practico-ethical decision about what kind of life one wants to commit oneself to. Thus the new community is called upon to repeat this fundamental shift in coordinates, the primordial choice made by Christ, for itself (Žižek, 2001b, pp. 148-149).

Indeed, as Žižek’s engagement with theology develops it becomes ever more reliant on Kierkegaard. When discussing crucial questions such as the Law and transgression,¹⁴⁵ love, the religious suspension of the ethical, the fundamental Christian break, he defers to Kierkegaard. For example, Žižek quotes from *Works of Love*: ‘We do not applaud the son who said “No”, but we endeavour to learn from the Gospel how dangerous it is to say, “Sir, I will”’ (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 102 cf. Žižek, 2000b, 148). Kierkegaard’s comment here refers to Matthew 21:28-31, which he understands as the radical demand that requires one to give up everything in order to follow Christ. Žižek employs this thought when it comes to Luke 14:26 as a suggestion that one should in fact ‘hate the beloved out of love and in love’ (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 114 cf. Žižek, 2000b, 126). According to him, this is the work of love, comparable to Che Guevara’s or Lenin’s revolutionary violence (Žižek, 2003, p. 30) – not only love, but Christian love. Luke 14:26 then is to be read in the context of the following account in Matthew to highlight its intent of breaking down ideological constraints:

¹⁴⁴ This is my own translation of the German: ‘Auf den ersten Blick sagt der Verstand, daß dies Wahnsinn ist. Der Verstand fragt: Was springt für mich dabei heraus? Die Antwort lautet: nichts’.

¹⁴⁵ In the idea of a subversive act as following the law to the letter (Žižek, 2000b, pp. 147-148).

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’ (Matthew 12:46-5-).

When Jesus speaks of ‘hating’ one’s parents, he means in so far as they stand for the social hierarchy or system with its ideological structure, which the community of the Holy Spirit bypasses. It is with regards to the ideological constraints that the Christian love brings division rather than unity; it uncouples from the given ethnic and political identities and is redefined as a position of active engagement, a struggle.¹⁴⁶

2.8.2 The Other of the Neighbour

The radicality of Galatians 3:28 is of course an implication or elaboration of Romans 13:8, wherein Paul writes that ‘he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law’. The theological injunction to love one’s neighbour originates from the covenant at Sinai in the Old Testament: ‘Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18). In the New Testament, however, the meaning of the concept of “neighbour” has been universally transformed, based on Christ’s teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), where it is indifferent to social divisions and includes everyone.

In his contribution to *The Neighbour* (Žižek, 2013a, pp. 134-190), Žižek ponders what this call to love the neighbour as yourself reveals about subjectivity and argues that it stands as a challenge to the so-called ethical turn in contemporary thought,

¹⁴⁶ According to Žižek, this is also how one is to read the imperative to ‘turn the other cheek’, found in Matthew 5:38-40, as a subversive gesture which destabilises, rather than an act of obedience of either doing nothing or striking back. Again, the latter is really a constitutive exception.

a turn often linked to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (Žižek, 2007, pp. 164-166). Žižek's main target is what he characterizes as an ethics of the paradigmatic citizen of contemporary Western civilizations, who in his search for happiness without stress exhibits a fear of an excessive intensity of life that might disturb it. For Žižek, a whole series of contemporary commodities and phenomena embody this anxiety and vulnerability apropos of excess: coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol, up to the desire to prosecute wars without casualties (Žižek, 2002a, p. 10). Žižek proposes that this fear of excess reveals not only that there is something more to the subject, but that this itself is the subject, and that this dimension is missed in the ethical turn in contemporary thought in general, and in the work of Levinas in particular (Žižek, 2013a, pp. 159-169). Insisting upon it reveals the properly political potential of the Christian love of the neighbour.

The attempt to account for oneself is always conducted within a certain intersubjective context and reveals our constitutive exposure to the Other (Žižek, 2008b, p. 45). That also means that the Other is not or ought not to be recognised in an absolute manner,¹⁴⁷ but to recognise its impenetrability. It is this exposure that grounds our ethical status, a solidarity of the vulnerable: 'what makes an individual human and thus something for which we are responsible, toward whom we have a duty to help, is his/her very finitude and vulnerability' (Žižek, 2013a, p. 138).

Any type of the big Other, as the symbolic order, seeks to mediate and regulate our coexistence, but the excess or the Real cannot be gentrified and with it, reciprocal exchange is impossible (ibid., p. 143). In other words, our intersubjectivity depends on

¹⁴⁷ As in knowing who the subject really is.

the Symbolic order. The challenge posed by Christian love, Žižek argues, is to resist this gentrification of the neighbour, and instead accept its radical impenetrability. Thus a collective emerges, which no longer relies on an ethnic identity, but is instead struggling (ibid., p. 154). This love is thus not against the background of universal hatred, but of universal indifference, where one is indifferent toward all and in this way loves the individual. ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28).

2.8.2.1 A consideration of Žižek’s Holy Spirit community

Given that the ultimate concern of Žižek is political, that might seem utopian or at best an idealistic hope for the political future, but Žižek argues that such a non-ideological social bond has been experienced after Apostle Paul as well. Examples include the Ancient Greek democracy, Lenin’s Bolshevik revolution, Eastern Europe’s undermining of Communism in the eighties, or indeed the recent Occupy movement against Capitalism (Christ is their precursor, a mythic form of something that reaches its true form in the logic of the emancipatory political collective).

Žižek’s theoretical reasoning or argumentation itself is logically stronger than it might first appear. First, this kind of community is not maintained by the big Other, and therefore it does not parallel the contemporary fundamentalist perversions. Those are a mere mirror image and reaction against the current condition that has made them what they are, but still remain caught in the mirror.¹⁴⁸ Second, following on from Žižek’s

¹⁴⁸ A horrific example of this is illustrated in the brutal act of execution of the Jordanian pilot by ISIS in early February 2015. Upon capturing the pilot, ISIS supporters launched a Twitter campaign (global neoliberalism?) calling for brutal execution suggestions, prompting numerous ideas, including the actual

insistence upon the contingency of materialist grace described above, he is clear that this new sociality is therefore capable of, but does not guarantee, a truly ethical or political act, outside of its ethico-legal entanglement. It represents only a possibility of something new; it is not ensured. Third, this form of sociality is also not united by the lack or absence of the big Other, as in that being the only thing that holds the community together.¹⁴⁹ The dismantling of the big Other only marks the catalyst for a community which then develops, or is able to develop – a community of deference. In that sense it is not a negative community.¹⁵⁰ Fourth, Žižek is quick to admit and deliver a warning that this form of social collective is inherently fragile. In the case of Lenin’s revolution, it led to the perverse ideology of Stalinism; likewise, the communality of the Arab Spring was taken over by religious fundamentalists¹⁵¹. Christianity also declined into perversion, when it transformed Christ’s sacrifice into an insurmountable debt and thus bound the subject, rather than setting him/her free (Žižek, 2003, p. 110). The big Other was thus resurrected and Christianity became a new kind of law, hiding the impotence of the big Other. Without the proper stance in relation to what happened on the Cross, its unique form of universal love collapsed in on itself. Christianity, then, has transformed its subversive kernel into its perverse core. Žižek argues that the only way for Christianity to discard the present perverse core is by returning to its founding moment – the death of God. What is needed is not only an atheist religion where

execution. Thus they used a ‘democratic’ method of deciding the pilot’s fate, which, however, with its determined outcome, was far from democratic, but merely an act of formal, rather than actual freedom.

¹⁴⁹ I.e.: the only thing we have in common is the missing other.

¹⁵⁰ The Arab Spring protests were not merely negative in that they represented a reaction to the corruption and abuse by their government, but included an attempt towards or experiment in communality.

¹⁵¹ The student and academic protesters were then proclaimed as the enemies of the movement by the religious fundamentalists, whose dream was religiously fundamental and intolerant of any other vision.

subjects do not believe in God, but where God himself doesn't believe in himself – he is an atheist. Žižek concludes *The Puppet and the Dwarf* in this way:

In what is perhaps the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, it is possible today to redeem this core of Christianity only in the gesture of abandoning the shell of its institutional organisation (and even more so of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits¹⁵² Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself – like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge (Žižek, 2003, p. 171).

However, recognising Žižek's argumentations – that this kind of community is not held together by the big Other and is at the same time not negative, and qualifications of fragility and contingency –, the question remains whether such a community can be anything else than an event? It is well to point out its fragility; however, is it not more important to ask whether such a community of radical love can exist without the ideological support of the big Other? Even for the absence of the big Other, its existence is essential in the first place. In Žižek's case, the death of God event is necessary and cannot be excluded since otherwise we would remain trapped in the system of debt – without God there is no death of God. If the Symbolic is just about everything that we call "reality", will not the subject be eternally resurrecting the big Other – an arbitrary and changing chain of signifiers – be they God or "History" or "development" or something else? Following Žižek's argument, was this not the case with Christianity and the Bolshevik revolution? After all, if we again follow Žižek, the subject exists on the borders of the Real and the Symbolic. The question then is: Do we need ideological support to 'be'? It seems Žižek does not aim to present us with a

¹⁵² Notice the word 'awaits,' which is here used not to announce what will necessarily happen in the future, but in order to emphasise the rightness of this gesture, and express a hopeful expectation. Otherwise it would be used in the spirit of the Stalinist big Other – the progress of history.

sustainable and resilient alternative, but rather a possibility of a break or radical change, which we have to continually repeat as a series of unplugging. What he proposes is not so much a thought of revolution, but ‘revolutions’ – as in the final instalment of the Matrix trilogy. To the earlier question Žižek would respond that with ideological support authentic being is perverted.

Having explored the background, context and content of Žižek’s theological materialism, the second part of this thesis will engage it in a critical reading of Bonhoeffer’s *Sanctorum Communio*. Given that the work’s social theology arises through Bonhoeffer’s engagement with social philosophy, it is apposite to begin with a discussion of his intellectual background.

Chapter 3: *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Background*

3.1 Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Biography

In this section I seek to provide a sort of intellectual biography of Bonhoeffer. I am not attempting to provide an account of his life. There are good works which pursue that particular goal, exemplified best by Eberhard Bethge, but also numerous other biographies, which make for valuable reading. Instead, I am merely providing a background which can shed further light upon his thought, both theological and philosophical. My aim is not to argue for a unity of Bonhoeffer's life and work, or to construct an account of his thought as built upon life experience – the first would be outside the scope of this thesis, while the second would be inappropriate, as knowledge of Bonhoeffer's biography alone is insufficient for understanding his intellectual contribution. Rather, the purpose of this section is restricted to demonstrating how certain biographical elements can further enlighten Bonhoeffer's intellectual development and contribution. Like its counterpart in Žižek, this very brief and concise overview can serve to enlighten further some of the matters discussed in the section on the intellectual background of his thought, as well as providing a canvas on which his thinking can develop.

3.1.1 From Berlin to Tübingen and back again

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into an upper-middle class family with eight children in 1906 in Breslau (today's Wroclaw). His family moved to Berlin and settled there when he was six, for his father Karl, a prominent psychiatrist and neurologist, became a

Professor at the university and also the director of its associated Charité hospital. His mother, Paula von Hase, whose father and grandfather were both professors of theology, completed training as a teacher and instructed her children personally in particular subjects up to a certain age. Consequently, the children quickly jumped ahead in several classes when they entered the German Gymnasium.¹⁵³ Dietrich excelled in the humanistic disciplines, studied Hebrew and read Friedrich Schleiermacher, while also becoming something of an accomplished pianist. When he announced his desire to study theology, his family, while sceptical of the value of theology, supported him and he entered the family favourite University in Tübingen to read theology at the age of seventeen. During his two semesters there his work encompassed logic, epistemology, music, political science and history of religion, in addition to biblical, church historical and dogmatic subjects. A year later he returned to Berlin due to rising cost of living away from home because of hyperinflation. However, before he returned, he spent a term in Rome, where he was especially enthralled by the Vatican as symbolizing the church as a tangible, universal entity with ancient roots and where he even had an audience with the Pope.

Having returned to Berlin in 1924, he enrolled at the Friedrich Wilhelm University (later Humboldt University), where his main professor was Reinhold Seeberg in the area of systematic theology and ethics, together with Adolf von Harnack and Karl Holl in church history. Their work on Christian doctrine and Church history became a medium for Bonhoeffer's knowledge of the classic theologians such as

¹⁵³ The Gymnasium is a humanities-oriented German secondary school that prepares students for University education.

Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Schleiermacher. He concomitantly became acquainted with the thought of Barth and philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Dilthey. He graduated in 1927, completing his dissertation, entitled *Sanctorum Communio: eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* [*Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*] (DBW 1, 2005/DBWE 1, 2009). This theologico-sociological reflection brought together a Barthian theology of revelation and Hegel, Weber and Troeltsch, resulting in a ‘theology of sociality’ built upon a relational view of personhood. The social form of revelation, described as ‘Christ existing as community’, elevated interrelatedness between ‘I’ and ‘Other’ to the highest importance, at the heart of the way one understands God, self and other.¹⁵⁴ Yet, Bonhoeffer’s dissertation was far from a simple harmonization of theology with modern thought. More radically it explored the social intention of basic Christian concepts. It argued that insofar as the concept of God ought to be conceived as formed in relation to persons and community, the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘Other’ is to be understood as providing an ethical boundary for one another (DBWE 1, pp. 554-57). A boundary where the other is encountered as a limit introduces a notion of sin as a breaking of that limit, whether the Other is God or a fellow being (see ‘Sin and Broken Community’ in DBWE 1: pp. 107-121). Sin thus denies the freedom of the other, turning them into an image of oneself. This is where Bonhoeffer introduced the concept of *stellvertretung* [vicarious representative action] as the willingness not merely to allow the other to exist, but to allow the other to place upon me the burden of their freedom to be who they are (DBWE 1: pp. 155ff, 293ff, 303f). For Bonhoeffer, this was

¹⁵⁴ As will be shown in Chapter 4, Bonhoeffer’s personalism and attention to interrelatedness is derived from the phenomenology of Max Scheler’s value personalism.

the essence of Christ's messianic vocation and ethical challenge for humanity. Karl Barth described *Sanctorum Communio* as a 'theological miracle', finding it hard to believe it was written at the age of twenty-one (Barth, 2003, p. 4; 2010a, p. 533).

3.1.2 Postdoctoral academic and pastoral activities

Dietrich spent the following year as a pastor-in-training to the German community in Barcelona, mostly practicing youth care and preaching occasionally. While there, he complained about the lack of theological discussions with his supervising minister (Bethge, 1994, p. 106), but used the time to revise his dissertation for publication. He decided to engage in postdoctoral work, while remaining unsure about whether to pursue an academic or pastoral career in the long term. By 1929 he was back in Berlin at the University as an assistant to Wilhelm Lütgert, a specialist in German idealism in the Faculty of Theology, while working on his professorial dissertation *Akt und Sein: Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der systematischen Theologie* [Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology] (DBW 2, 1988/DBWE 2, 1996). This study on theological anthropology explored the border area between theology and philosophy, again placing modern and contemporary thinkers into dialogue with one another and with theologians. Bonhoeffer further developed his theological category of revelation accentuating 'Otherness' which he considered as answered inadequately by idealist philosophy. To that end Luther, Barth and Bultmann were engaged with Hegel and Heidegger, resulting in a critique of the moral process of knowledge itself, where knowledge was accorded with an authentic otherness, beyond mere control and power of the subject. Re-visiting human sinfulness with the help of Luther's *cor corvum in se* [the heart turned upon itself], Bonhoeffer elaborated further

that any attempt to define the being of the other is an imposition of one's own totalizing desire (DBWE 2: p. 80). He submitted the dissertation and passed his second theological examinations in 1930.

The same year, at the age of 24, Bonhoeffer received approbation as an assistant professor of theology and delivered his inaugural lecture, 'The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology', which explored the theological anthropology under development in his dissertations. Throughout this time he was active in the youth work of his Grunewald (locality of Berlin) congregation. It is important to add that this was a time of crisis for the Weimar Republic, whose foundations were being shaken by economic hardship and the electoral success of the National Socialists. Although Bonhoeffer's resistance to the growing German nationalism was indicated by his occasional presence at the church of notorious pacifist Günther Dehn, he did not become directly engaged in politics. Rather, he threw himself into his academic, as well as youth work.

3.1.3 Union theological seminary

Very soon he embarked upon a ship to the United States, where he spent a sabbatical studying as a Sloane Fellow at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. The exposure to theology and philosophy of that institution had a marked impact on Bonhoeffer's own thought, in particular visible or crucial for his later ethical writings. At that time, Union was the flagship of American divinity schools and a centre of liberal Christianity, but also of neo-orthodoxy and Black Liberation. Under the faculty's prominent figures, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, John Baillie and Harry Emerson Fosdick, Bonhoeffer fostered a deep fascination with American philosophy, especially

pragmatism, its premise and socio-ethical theological import. At first he struggled with the lack of dogmatic and exegetical subjects (DBWE 10: pp. 265-266), which were replaced by topics such as ‘Church and Community: The Cooperation of the Church with Social and Character-Building Agencies’, ‘Ethical Issues in the Social Order’, and ‘The Minister’s Work with Individuals.’ He described the students as ‘intoxicated with liberal and humanistic phrases’ (DBWE 10: p. 256). Having said that, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer struggled with the lack of theological rigour undergirding social action, rather than the action itself. The Marxist-Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was an outspokenly public Christian intellectual and activist. He was a popular professor at Union during Bonhoeffer’s time there, and the latter took his classes on ‘Ethical Interpretations’, ‘Ethical Viewpoints in Modern Literature’ and ‘Religion and Ethics’ (Bethge, 1994, p. 159). Bonhoeffer described him as ‘one of the most significant and most creative of contemporary American theologians’, whose political theology was strongly active, making him ‘the sharpest critic of contemporary American Protestantism and the present social order’, and as understanding ‘the right way between neo-orthodoxy, for which Jesus Christ becomes the ground of human despair, and a true liberalism, for which Christ is the Lord, the norm, the ideal and the revelation of our essential being’ (Bonhoeffer, 1965, p. 116). Beyond Niebuhr, by the end of the semester Bonhoeffer had read ‘almost the entire philosophical works of William James, which really captivated me, then Dewey, Perry, Russell, and finally also J. B. Watson and the behaviourist literature’ (DBWE 10: p. 310). Indeed, he even requested an extension of his leave in order to engage with pragmatist thought in American theology and

philosophy (Bethge, 1994, p. 161).¹⁵⁵ Union certainly proved to be very influential, for it provided Bonhoeffer with a broader intellectual context to engage in his theologico-sociological reflection.

Bonhoeffer's time in the States proved as formative outside lecture halls as well. His fellow student Albert F. Fisher invited him to visit the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where he was captivated by the emotional style of worship and powerful sermons of legendary preacher Adam Clayton Powell Sr. He became active in the ministry, by teaching Sunday school, Bible study and weekday church school, and by visiting parishioner's homes. This experience was further bolstered by reading black literature, listening to recordings of Negro spirituals, and through Reinhold Niebuhr's course 'Ethical Viewpoint in Modern Literature' (see Young, 2008). It is fair to say that in less than a year Bonhoeffer experienced more of African American culture than most American whites did in a lifetime. He witnessed segregation first-hand on his train journey through the South and provided a poignant analysis of the church's role in it (see 'The Negro Church' in Bonhoeffer, 1965, pp. 112-114, Young, 2006, pp. 293-294). Another fellow student – the French pacifist Jean Lassere, who accompanied him on his Cross-country drive to Mexico – challenged him with a perspective on the Sermon on the Mount that made Jesus' peace commandment inescapable.¹⁵⁶ In summary, Bonhoeffer was exploring American culture and academia, and through that becoming acquainted with its social gospel, which sought to combat the explosive issues of social injustice and racism on the grounds or basis of the Gospels. If at first he suspected that

¹⁵⁵ While Bonhoeffer never specified what drew him to James, Cahill draws attention to the similarities between them in matters of truth and ethics. See Cahill (2013), pp. 28-30.

¹⁵⁶ Rasmussen (1972) provides an account of the development of Bonhoeffer's views on pacifism. For a discussion of Lassere's influence, see in particular pp. 94-126.

the political questions which captured the attention of American theology students were at the expense of theology, he eventually grasped its challenge personally, later observing ‘it was then that a turning from the phraseological to the real ensued’ (22 April, 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 358). The American learning experience about the demands of the world on the life of the church was to be further stretched upon his return to Germany.¹⁵⁷

3.1.4 The socio-political dimension of his theology

Upon his return to the University in Berlin in 1931, Bonhoeffer found Germany taken by the growing nationalism and his crowded systematic theology department with leanings toward National Socialism. He delivered lectures and seminars as an unpaid assistant lecturer and was gaining a following among students, particularly due to his approachability and engagement – meeting students for evening discussions and weekend getaways at his cottage (Bethge, 1994, pp. 204-205). His characteristically contemporary lectures, such as ‘orders of creation’, were challenging some of the underlying links of Nazism with God’s will. The four semesters at Berlin resulted in two of his courses being published – *Schöpfung und Fall: Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1-3* [Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3] (DBW 3, 1988/DBWE 3, 2007) and *Christ the Centre*.¹⁵⁸ In the latter Jesus was again understood as the person, the sought-for limit to human pretensions, or the centre of human

¹⁵⁷ In fact, the two were difficult to separate, as during his time at Union, Bonhoeffer was in demand to report or lecture on the current situation in Germany and the prospects for another war. While refusing to ignore the suffering brought on Germans by the Great War or the effects of the Versailles Treaty’s insistence on German ‘war guilt,’ Bonhoeffer emphasised the burgeoning aspirations for peace in his homeland.

¹⁵⁸ The latter was based on student notes from his 1933 lectures on Christology and published posthumously. It can be found in DBWE 12.

existence, history, and nature. Best described as a messianic event, he brings into our midst God-who-is-our-boundary, the creative limit that allows humanity to be authentically human, rather than a mere usurper of divine power. God allows violence be done to God's very self, so that an authentic limit or boundary might be encountered in all its concreteness. Bonhoeffer concluded that 'if we speak of the human being Jesus Christ as we speak of God, we should not speak of him as representing an idea of God, that is, in his attributes as all-knowing and all-powerful, but rather speak of his weakness and manger' (DBWE 12: p. 354). In *Schöpfung und Sünde* [Creation and Sin], as the original lectures were called, Bonhoeffer again took up interrelatedness or intersubjectivity, understanding creation in the image of God as an analogy of relationship with God's own intertrinitarian relationship, rather than as an analogy of being, concluding that 'the creatureliness of human beings [...] can be defined in simply no other way than in terms of the existence of human beings over-against-one-another, with-one-another, and in-dependence-upon-one-another' (DBWE 3: p. 64). The Fall was accordingly translated as an attempt to play God – *eritis sicut Deus*¹⁵⁹ – and is defined by the violent transgression of the limit of the Other, as is evident in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. All this time then, Bonhoeffer's theologico-sociological reflection continued.

At the same time, he entered a new sphere of activity: ecumenical work. He was made part of the German youth delegation to the annual conference of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches in Cambridge.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Genesis 3:5: 'You will be as God.'

¹⁶⁰ A predecessor of the World Council of Churches.

While there, he was made honorary international youth secretary of the Alliance, thus becoming part of the organization's circle. He was responsible for central and northern Europe and thus his work began to take him across many borders. However, in Germany there was a growing anti-internationalism, due to the progress of nationalism. Bonhoeffer spoke out against any nationalist theology and developed a driving concern for international peace. Together with Franz Hildebrandt he experimented with a catechism rejecting the church's sanctioning of war. This was also expressed in his lecture 'Christ and Peace', in which he argued that any form of war service is forbidden for the Christian. A change in his thinking was becoming more and more apparent, compared to his 1929 statement that 'love for my people will sanctify murder, will sanctify war' (DBWE 1: p. 119; DBWE 10: p. 372).¹⁶¹ After the Nazi revolution in Germany, Bonhoeffer's ecumenical work thus took on a new dimension – publishing abroad the true nature of Nazism and securing the international community's support in combating heresy within the German Church.

3.1.5 Work in the Confessing Church and the letters from Tegel

Bonhoeffer was clearly recognizing the Nazi threat. After Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in January of 1930, he spoke out against the operation of the concept of the Führer as a Verführer [leader as misleader] (Bethge, 1994, p. 260). After the Reichstag fire Hitler sought to consolidate power through a series of acts and emergency decrees, such as the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which stated that non-Aryans could be dismissed from civil service, including

¹⁶¹ See also Bethge (1994), pp. 188, 209.

church ministry.¹⁶² In mid-April, Bonhoeffer spoke out against a campaign to include this ‘Aryan paragraph’ in the ecclesiastical realm, in an essay entitled ‘The Church and the Jewish Question’, wherein he asserted that the church can act toward the state when it fails to exercise its divine vocation (DBWE 12: pp. 361-370, particularly pp. 365-366). What is more, he expressed concern for the fate of the German Jews as such, whether or not they happened to be members of the Christian community. In opposing German Christian attempts to bring the church into alignment with Nazi values, Bonhoeffer affiliated with a series of opposition groups active in the church struggle – the Young Reformation movement, the Pastors’ Emergency League¹⁶³ and the Confessing Church. Ultimately none of them went far enough for Bonhoeffer, for they failed to recognise that application of the Aryan paragraph was not a matter of indifference, but a matter of heresy (Bethge, 1994, p. 315). In August 1933 he was sent to Bethel as part of a working group charged with drafting a confession that would detail the theological convictions of the church opposition. The Bethel confession claimed that the barrier between Jew and Gentile was removed by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, after passing through several stages of the editorial process the Confession’s message of solidarity with Jews was so weakened that Bonhoeffer refused to sign the final draft. In September 1933 he attended the World Alliance conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he informed the organisation’s leadership about the anti-Jewish campaign in his country. The result was a resolution that decried ‘state measures against the Jews in Germany and protested the church’s exclusion of

¹⁶² Ministers of the German Evangelical Church were civil servants.

¹⁶³ Bonhoeffer helped form this group, together with his colleague Martin Niemöller.

“non-Aryans” as “a denial of the explicit teaching and spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (Bethge, 1994, p. 315).

When the Aryan paragraph was officially adopted in September 1933 at the general synod of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union, Bonhoeffer began to question seriously whether he could remain in it at all. This concern and frustration with the Church’s actions led him to accept a church position in London, in the German congregations at Forrest Hill and Sydenham (DBWE 13: p. 23). He assumed the role of de facto leader of German pastors in England, convincing them to join the Pastor’s Emergency League, supporting Jewish-Christian pastors. Together they sent telegrams of protest to the Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller in Berlin. When he was summoned to Berlin under suspicion, he used the opportunity to attend the first free synod of the church opposition, where the national ‘Confessing synod’ at Barmen was planned. After that, prominent Britons looked to him as a reliable interpreter of the church-political situation in Germany – Bonhoeffer became particularly close to George K.A. Bell, Bishop of Chichester. He influenced the latter’s pastoral letter that decried the abuses of state and church in Germany. At all times, Bonhoeffer called for a separation from what he regarded as an apostate church, no matter what the consequences (ibid., p. 56).

In 1935 he was offered the directorship of the newly established Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde, after the Reich Bishop closed the preachers’ seminaries of the Old Prussian Union. It was an experimental non-state community and Bonhoeffer influenced or shaped it profoundly. It was during that time that he produced two further pieces of writing: in 1937 *Nachfolge* [Discipleship] (DBW 4, 1989/DBWE 4, 2003) and in 1939 *Gemeinsames Leben* [Life Together] (DBW 5, 1987/ DBWE 5,

2004). The first was a series of lectures outlining the idea of ‘cheap grace’, the relationship between faith and obedience in dialogue with the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. Bonhoeffer proposed that what is extraordinary about Christianity is Christ’s command to love one’s enemies. Rather than merely loving family and friends, Jesus defined love by ‘putting it into the clear-cut context of love for our enemies’ (DBWE 4: p. 137). Indeed, during the 1930s the theme of loving one’s enemies assumes a prominent role in Bonhoeffer’s writings. The second was a sort of experiment of life in this community of love, in which he proposed to start a more permanent, quasi-monastic community, where ordinands would remain after the completion of their training. More than that, it sought to provide a theology undergirding this community. This theology of sociality did not merely tolerate the freedom of the other, but delighted in it:

God did not make others as I would have made them. God did not give them to me so that I could dominate and control them, but so that I might find the Creator by means of them [...] God does not want me to mould others into the image that seems good to me, that is, into my own image. Instead, in their freedom from me God made other people in God’s own image (DBWE 5: p. 95).

Life Together became Bonhoeffer’s most widely read text during his lifetime. Of course, in the eyes of the Reich Church, Finkenwalde was illegal; it was proclaimed as such through a decree in December of 1935 and finally shut down in September of 1937.

While Bonhoeffer remained involved in the training of Confessing Church pastorates, he received a call-up for military service in May of 1939. At the same time an opportunity arose to again travel to the United States, with the prospect of a permanent teaching position at Union Theological Seminary. In this way he would

avoid the national service and through his father's connections secured a one-year deferment. Leaving Germany had been on his mind for a while, he admitted in a letter to George Bell (see Bethge, 1994, p. 637) and he did so in June. However, upon arrival in America he felt that his place was in Germany and that he could not hope to partake in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if he did not share its current trials (ibid., p. 655). He sailed home in July, returning to his ministry training duties.

The state authorities kept a close eye on his 'subversive' activities and decided to prohibit him from speaking publicly, as well as requiring a report of his movements. His right to publish was rescinded in 1941 'due to lack of requisite political stability' (DBWE 16: p. 181). Bonhoeffer rejected charges of subversion in a letter to the Reich Central Security Office (RHSA), even signing the letter with 'Heil Hitler' (ibid., p. 77). However, in reality he had already become allied with the anti-Nazi resistance. The resistance movement was far from unified, but shared the conviction of opposition to events in Germany. His chief contact was his sister Christine's husband Hans von Dohnanyi, who in 1939 joined the Abwehr [Military Intelligence], an epi-centre of anti-Hitler resistance headed by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. Bonhoeffer was assigned to the intelligence office, which was supposed to capitalise on his international connections, while in reality, those connections were utilised in the service of the resistance. He was exempt from military service and with a passport was able to travel freely during the war. Entering into a kind of double life, he continued to work for the Confessing Church and military intelligence, but in reality worked for and with those who enacted resistance within military intelligence and were making preparations for a putsch.

During travels to Switzerland, Scandinavia and Italy, Bonhoeffer attempted to use his ecumenical connections to inform the rest of the world about this organised military resistance and his own intentions. He began to write again, knowing full well that he was not allowed to write, beginning work on his *Ethik* [Ethics] (DBW 6, 1998/ DBWE 6, 2008). A work that was never finished and remains a series of thirteen manuscripts, it represents another step in Bonhoeffer's theologico-sociological reflection, an exploration of what constitutes responsible Christian action in the world. In it, Christ is portrayed as God's embrace of the entire created-and-fallen reality and thus the utmost expression that we were created in and for relationship, with God and one another (DBWE 6: pp. 92ff). The church is thus to be the *Stellvertreter*, vicarious representative – the concept introduced in his first dissertation – whose denial of compassion to the outcast is a constitutional failure. Thus the church is understood as 'that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form' (ibid., p. 97). It should be noted that Bonhoeffer conducted this exploration in the context of Nazi Germany, not as an academic exercise in abstraction and speculation, but out of concern for the future of the church, his country and humanity per se.

Bonhoeffer was aware of the resistance's realisation that a change in government must begin with Hitler's assassination and he sympathised with various failed plots, but this was not the extent of his subversive activity. He used connections to obtain deferments for Confessing Church clergy, who were targeted for military or labour conscription, and sought to expose and undermine Nazi Jewish policy, even helping Jews out of the country to neutral Switzerland. In April 1943 he was arrested together with Hans and Christine von Dohnanyi in a concerted effort to bring down the

Abwehr, just months after he became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer. He was charged with subversion through evading military service, circumventing the Gestapo ban on public speaking and continuing his church work. During his months in the military prison Tegel in Berlin, where he was questioned, he read voraciously on a variety of topics including early church history, contemporary science and philosophy and nineteenth-century German literature. During this time, he also exchanged letters with family and friends, discussed in the introduction to the thesis, which were first published by Bethge in 1951, under the title *Widerstand und Ergebung* [Resistance and Surrender or Letters and Papers from Prison] (DBW 8, 1998/DBWE 8, 2010).

In late September 1944 the Gestapo uncovered a cache of incriminating secret documents containing plans for a coup d'état, references to secret discussions with the British government via the Vatican, excerpts from the diary of Admiral Canaris and correspondence related to Bonhoeffer's resistance activities. This spelled the end not only for Bonhoeffer, but also for Dohnanyi and Canaris. He was transferred to the cellar of a Gestapo prison in central Berlin and spent the next four months there, losing contact with the outside world. In February 1945 he was sentenced to death, transferred to the concentration camp in Buchenwald and executed by hanging in Schönberg on April 9 in the final weeks of the war.

3.2 The context of Bonhoeffer's thought: modern theology

In this section I aim to contextualize Bonhoeffer's thought as belonging to modern theology. As a modern theologian, Bonhoeffer carried out his intellectual reflection on faith in a modern world, seeking to exegete and apply the ethical and sociological potential of traditional theological concepts in this context.

The church must get out of its stagnation. We must also get back out into the fresh air of intellectual discourse with the world. We also have to risk saying controversial things, if that will stir up the discussion of the important issues in life. As a 'modern' theologian who has nevertheless inherited the legacy of liberal theology, I feel responsible to address these questions (3 August 1944 in DBWE 8, pp. 498-499).

If one defines theology as the intellectual reflection on the act, content and implications of the Christian faith, then that reflection is always carried out in a specific historic and cultural context. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian of the twentieth century and finds his place in the context of modern theology, a theology influenced and to some extent shaped by modernity. Modernity affected both the theological method and content, while, at the same time, theology critically evaluated and responded to modernity. Therefore, modern theology does not only denote a temporal category of theology, or indeed a theological character of modernity, but is also a term describing an engagement between theology and the modern. Insofar as it does not denote a mere persistence or reiteration of traditional theology in the modern era, nor an adaptation into the modern worldview, modern theology is rather to be considered as a particular example of the dialectical relationship between theology and its cultural context – the modern and theology.

Twentieth century thought represented an age of transition from the classical modernity of the nineteenth century to the postmodern culture of the twenty-first century. In theological circles, the historical milestone of the First World War (1914-1918) could be considered as the threshold between the theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, understanding of twentieth century theology must be grounded in an understanding of its theological dialogical partner and predecessor.¹⁶⁴

Nineteenth century theological thought in Germany was characterized by a liberalism that developed as a consequence of the Enlightenment, embracing its aim of objectivity and methodologies of rationalism and empiricism rather than any preconceived notions of the authority of its sources. Thus, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) considered belief as pre-moral and pre-cognitive and to be discussed in relation to other disciplines in order to work out the modern content of faith (Schleiermacher, 1928),¹⁶⁵ while Kant's account of knowledge excluded claims by natural theology or revelation (Kant, 1793). Kant's own account was further challenged by Hegel's notion of rationality as God (or the Absolute) realizing itself through a dialectical process in history.¹⁶⁶ This initiated a historical and process-oriented way of

¹⁶⁴ For a comprehensive treatment of nineteenth century theology, the key text remains Ninian Smart's three-volume *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West* (1985). There is also a two-volume work by Claude Welch, entitled *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1974) that is also notable.

¹⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer himself engaged with Schleiermacher's work from the early stages of his theological formation, even reading his work while still in school (Bethge, 1994, p. 27), and a discussion of his work is found in both of his theses (DBWE 1, pp. 64, 113f., 132f., 193ff and DBWE 2, pp. 131, 154). Bonhoeffer rejects Schleiermacher's 'religious a priori' and upholds the exclusivity of God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the ground for theology and ethics. See also Bonhoeffer's characterization of Seeberg's position in DBWE 2, pp. 55-58. On the relationship between Schleiermacher and Bonhoeffer, see Christiane Tietz, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher and Dietrich Bonhoeffer' (Tietz in Frick, 2008, pp. 121-143).

¹⁶⁶ Twentieth century modern theologians have engaged with Hegel in diverse ways: Karl Barth in *Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics* (1975), Karl Rahner in *The Trinity* (1970), Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Revelation as History* (1968), while Jürgen Moltmann in *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1981) considered his integration of history in the Trinity. Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (1974) and Eberhard Jüngel's *God as the Mystery of the World* (1983) and *Unterwegs zur Sache* (1972) engaged with Hegel's death of God, Rahner's (1976) affirmation of reality as rational, Hans Urs von Balthasar's (1961, 1973-1982,

understanding reality, taken up by David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) in his application of historical critical methods to the accounts of the life of Jesus (Strauss, 1864) or indeed Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) and Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), who investigated the socio-historical and cultural mechanisms that gave rise to theological ideas and will be explored in the next section on Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation. For now, it is appropriate to note that Troeltsch, on the borders of the nineteenth and twentieth century, in a way summed up nineteenth century German theology.¹⁶⁷

The theological agendas of the nineteenth century were not only the background of their twentieth century counterparts, but, as indicated in Troeltsch, were their constituents. The attempt to integrate faith with modernity was either reacted against, as observed with Karl Barth's stress on the wholly otherness of God in *The Epistle to the Romans* (1933, p. 315f), or explored so far as to claim the point of contact between them was 'internal', as in Paul Tillich's ultimate concern observed in *The Courage to Be* (1952) or *Dynamics of Faith* (1957). The theological shift with its emphasis on the ethical or practical content of Christianity, which came about in no small part due to the

1985-1987) genres of epic, lyric and drama, Pannenberg's (1963) concepts of rationality and universal history or Hans Küng's (1987) approach to incarnation.

I will devote more attention to Bonhoeffer's own engagement with Hegel in the next section in which I consider his intellectual formation at the University in Berlin, as well as in the final chapter of this thesis, where it will also enable a critical reading of his *Sanctorum Communio*. Suffice to say here that in 1933 Bonhoeffer expressed appreciation of Hegel as a theologian (DBWE 1: p. 74; Tödt, 1988, p. 137) and in *Act and Being* read his own idea of Christian community against the latter's. Charles Marsh examines this in 'Christ as the Mediation of the Other' in *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology* (1994, pp. 81-109). See also his article 'Human community and Divine Presence: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Critique of Hegel' (1992, pp. 427-428).

¹⁶⁷ Perceiving comprehensive historical consciousness as the main development of the nineteenth century, Troeltsch advocated a more thoroughly historical method of theology. In analysing late nineteenth century history of religion and sociology, he wrestled with notions of the absoluteness of Christianity (Troeltsch, 1912), the role of the historical Jesus in the Christian faith (Troeltsch, 1911) and the inseparability of all religion from its social and historical context. Resisting naturalistic, reductionist explanations of religion, Troeltsch instead emphasized Christianity's distinctive values worked out contextually through the centuries and called for a fresh, creative social embodiment of those values in twentieth century Europe (Troeltsch, 1923).

to the challenge posed by (modern) thinkers providing alternative accounts of religion, morality and values in general, was also carried through as a common characteristic to twentieth century theology, whether focusing on freedom and ethics such as with Bonhoeffer, or on social and political form as with someone like Jürgen Moltmann and his *Theology of Hope* (1967) and Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (1974). All of these show how the main issues in twentieth century theology have developed from and revolved around the theological agendas of the nineteenth century, for both have found themselves in the context of modernity, faced with intrinsically intertwined challenges relating to matters of knowledge and rationality, historical consciousness and/or alternative explanations of religion.

This engaging of modernity is also exemplified in an exchange of letters between two theologians, which took place at the time of Bonhoeffer's enrolment at Tübingen in 1923. Both men would come to significantly influence Bonhoeffer's thought: the liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack was engaging Karl Barth's theology of crisis in the pages of the liberal journal, *Die Christliche Welt* ('Ein Briefwechsel mit Adolf von Harnack' in Barth, 1957, pp. 7-31). At the turn of the century, von Harnack claimed in his lectures *Das Wesen des Christentums* that 'those of us who possess a more delicate and therefore more prophetic perception no longer regard the kingdom of love and peace as a mere Utopia' (von Harnack, 1902, p. 123). While nineteenth century theological thought, exemplified by von Harnack, began the confrontation with issues of modernity, Barth called for a clear break with the theological development of the nineteenth century. He was just one of the theological students whose foundations had

been shaken by the First World War. The classic text denoting the move was Barth's Epistle to the Romans:

The more profoundly we become aware of the limited character of the possibilities which are open to us here and now, the more clear it is that we are farther from God, that our desertion of him is more complete... and the consequences of that desertion more vast [...] than we had ever dreamed. Men are their own masters. Their union with God is shattered so completely that they cannot even conceive its restoration. Their sin is their guilt; their death is their destiny; their world is formless and tumultuous chaos, a chaos of forces of nature and of the human soul; their life is illusion. This is the situation in which we find ourselves (Barth, 1933, p. 37).

Barth's desire to break with nineteenth century optimism was due in part to the onset of two World Wars, which brought about a major crisis in European culture and society and arguably had the greatest impact on twentieth century thought in general – including theology. Giving rise to themes of doubt and radical critique, as opposed to the positivity of Enlightenment progress, the crisis launched a critical examination of questions about human progress and end. In the rising anxiety over humanity's place in the universe, modern theology continued its pursuit of questions about God, the Trinity, revelation and Jesus Christ, but specifically and significantly in an exploration of their social and ethical dimension or application. This was certainly the case for Bonhoeffer, who discussed Christological concerns in light of their ontological and ethical import, succinctly revealed in the line from Letters and Papers: 'What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?' (30 April 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 362). His Christology was the driving force of his ecclesiology, where the church as community was the locus of Christ's presence, and the life of the

community revolved around imitating Christ as a vicarious representative.¹⁶⁸ Thus Bonhoeffer exemplifies modern theology's focus on matters of living in a century of crisis.

This demonstration of Christianity's socio-political potential was carried out as part of a larger engagement of theology with modernity. Within this context, twentieth century theology attempted to revise the optimistic liberalism of its nineteenth century counterpart, as well as address the gradual erosion and decline of modernity and its eventual transition into postmodernity. In so doing, it sought not only to recover and defend Christianity in the face of an unprecedented challenge, but more so to engage in a theological exegesis of modernity and demonstrate its own relevance. In Bonhoeffer's case, this becomes most evident in *Letters and Papers*, but it began much earlier, with the phrases 'cheap' and 'costly' grace.¹⁶⁹ The latter is what Luther uncovered when he returned from the cloister to the world, for he learned that 'Jesus now had to be lived out in the midst of the world' (DBWE 4: p. 48). This following of Jesus into the world became the central theme of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers*. In it one finds descriptions of a 'world-come-of-age', in which humans operate autonomously, without sensing a need to refer to either the divine grace or truth. In the world-come-of-age, people no longer require God as a working hypothesis, whether in science, in human affairs in general, or increasingly even in religion (8 June 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 267ff). The older view of God as God-of-the-Gaps was false and as man became more and more independent God was pushed out of increasingly larger dimensions of life, with

¹⁶⁸ See DBWE 1: pp. 120, 157, 189; DBWE 2: p. 120; DBWE 12: p. 323. See also Phillips (1967), p. 48.

¹⁶⁹ 'Cheap grace', Bonhoeffer elaborates, 'is preaching forgiveness without repentance, it is baptism without the discipline of the community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin, it is absolution without personal confession' (DBWE 4: p. 44).

theology retreating to the inner world of man. Bonhoeffer sought to provide a response to the world-come-of-age and called for Christians to understand it better than it understands itself (8 June 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 269ff). This was a distinctly modern theology, attempting to come to terms with, orient and situate itself in a modern world, which seemed to operate without God's involvement, observed in the scientific approach, but also in the terrors of both World Wars.

3.2.1 Concluding thought

In conclusion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a theologian of the twentieth century, found his place in the context of modern theology. His theological thought was influenced and to some extent shaped by modernity, which affected his theological method, as well as the content of his thought. At the same time, he critically evaluated and responded to modernity. True to the character of modern theology, Bonhoeffer's thought then represents an engagement with modernity and its challenges, in the dialectical relationship between Christianity and its cultural context. The next section will explore his intellectual formation in this context, specifically the influence of the Theological faculty at the University in Berlin upon Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality and its engagement with philosophy.

3.3 Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation

This section will discuss Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation with a specific interest.

Rather than functioning as a general presentation of the various thinkers (or texts) which have shaped or driven his thought, it will focus on a selection of particular thinkers during his studies at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin who influenced Bonhoeffer's sustained engagement with philosophy.

I thus begin with a declaration that the selection of thinkers which I consider is purposefully limited, rather than extensive.¹⁷⁰ To attempt a thorough discussion of Bonhoeffer's intellectual grounding is beyond the scope of this thesis and also outside of its aim.¹⁷¹ The content of this consideration is thus limited and determined by its aim, which is to reflect upon the roots of Bonhoeffer's theological exploration, appropriation and engagement with philosophy. It is further limited by its scope, insofar as the latter is undertaken alongside Žižek's philosophical exploration, appropriation and engagement with theology, and as part of a critical reading of that engagement between them. Its consideration is thus properly restricted and stringent, in that it cannot provide a broader consideration of Bonhoeffer's philosophical influences, as much as it may be required and desired.¹⁷² Instead, the discussion will focus on the influence of the key members of the theological faculty during his studies in Berlin, who shaped his philosophical concern, content and manner. These liberal theological thinkers – Ernst Toeltsch, Reinhold Seeberg, and Adolf von Harnack – introduced and in a way projected

¹⁷⁰ Indeed, neither was the list of thinkers considered with regards to Žižek's formation.

¹⁷¹ There is a brief but helpful discussion, or at least naming, of attempts to develop a more thorough approach by Peter Frick in the introduction to his *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation* (2008, pp. 2-4).

¹⁷² Frick himself finds the existing attempts to provide an account of Bonhoeffer's philosophical (rather than theological) intellectual formation lacking (ibid., pp. 3-4).

Bonhoeffer into a dialectical engagement with philosophical thinkers, such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, which also distinguished him from Barth's dogmatic perspective. Bonhoeffer's engagement with Hegel in his Berlin dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis, where it will also enable a critical reading of the work alongside Žižek's thought.

3.3.1 The philosophical influence of the theological faculty at the University of Berlin

As observed in the previous section, the twentieth century was an age of transition from the classical modernity of the nineteenth century to the postmodern culture of the twenty-first century. At the time of Bonhoeffer's arrival for his studies in Berlin, the University there was a stronghold of nineteenth century liberal theology. Its theological faculty boasted four prominent thinkers who were trained in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl and represented various reactions to or modifications of his thought – Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Holl, Reinhold Seeberg and Adolf von Harnack. They moved away from Ritschl's disinterest in culture and the philosophy of religion and his isolation of theology from other intellectual disciplines (Mackintosh, 1937, pp. 181-183). For his understanding of the decline of religion, Troeltsch drew upon Max Weber's conception of sociology and Neo-Kantian thought. By his concentration upon the church, the theme of the redemptive community and seeking a synthesis with Hegelian metaphysics, Seeberg placed a conservative view of church history at the service of the Liberal Spirit.¹⁷³ Von Harnack, on the other hand, substituted Ritschl's centrality of ecclesiology for a broad sweep of cultural interests and an individual spirit which drew

¹⁷³ This is observed in the lectures Seeberg gave to students on 'the principle truths of the Christian religion' in 1901-1902. See Cremer (1903).

its strength from the heroic transcendence of history and nature. The thinking of all four of them influenced Bonhoeffer's own intellectual development, its philosophical concern or orientation, content and manner, be it positively or negatively.

3.3.1.1 Ernst Troeltsch

It could be said that the systematic theologian of the History of Religions School¹⁷⁴ Ernst Troeltsch provided the most radical liberal reaction against Ritschl. Unlike von Harnack and Seeberg, he did not look for an irreducible essence or absolute principles of Christianity, but instead desired to complete the process initiated by Schleiermacher and construct a modern Christianity under the auspices of philosophy of religion, the psychological analysis of religious consciousness and the religious idea as it manifested itself in history (Troeltsch, 1911, p. 6). Deeply influenced by Hegel, he argued that even though Christianity is the highest religious form with its perfect expression of the unity of God with man, it must recognize that it is limited and conditioned, and that its idea can now maintain itself by means of its own intrinsic resources. Therefore, that idea must be guarded against any ecclesiastical or religious encroachments:

If the absolute authority has fallen which, in its absoluteness, made the antithesis of the divine and human equally absolute, if in man an autonomous principle is recognized as the source of truth and moral conduct, then all conceptions of the world which were specially designed to maintain that gulf between the human and divine, fall along with it. With it falls the doctrine of the absolute corruption of mankind through original sin, and the transference of the ends of life to the heavenly world in which there will be deliverance from this corruption. In consequence, all the factors of this present life acquire an enhanced value and a higher impressiveness, and the ends of life fall more and more within the realms

¹⁷⁴ The term Religionsgeschichtliche Schule denoted a group of German Protestant theologians associated with the University of Göttingen in late nineteenth century.

of the present world with its ideal of transformation (Troeltsch, 1912, pp. 22-23).

The departure of this ‘absolute authority’ results in its place being taken by a ‘truth and morality producing autonomous principle’ in Man that is not in the possession of any religious or otherwise community. Troeltsch certainly had no illusions about the future course of world history, the outcome of the growth of what he called ‘militaristic, nationalistic bourgeois states’, but his emancipation rather recalls Žižek’s own negativity of the Cross. Given its Hegelian dialectical motor, it is of no surprise that Troeltsch’s argument here reminds one of Žižek’s own Hegelian model of religion, where Christianity represents the final stage in the autonomy of Man, resulting in the community of abandoned solidarity, without recourse to the big Other or indeed an afterlife. This emphasis on the present life of Man was at the forefront of Troeltsch’s sociological approach to the doctrine of the church presented in his *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* [Social Teachings] (1923).

Even though Troeltsch died before Bonhoeffer could attend his lectures, his thought very much pervaded the subjects on offer and influenced the topic and approach of Bonhoeffer’s own dissertation – to produce an understanding of the church outside the terms of general religious principles, setting forth its structure in terms of a sociological analysis carried into the service of dogmatics. While Troeltsch focused on the historico-sociological shapes and conditions of the church, ‘the intrinsic sociological idea of Christianity, and its structure and organization’ (Troeltsch, 1923, pp. 33-34), Bonhoeffer wished to present a genuinely theological concept of the church, all the while insisting that Troeltsch was correct in seeing the church as an empirical structure because ‘revelation means nothing beyond, but an entity in this historically and

sociologically shaped world' (Bethge, 1963, p. 34). Taking over his sociological tools, Bonhoeffer examined the spatial question of faith in community, rather than engaging in discussion over the temporal problems of faith and history. Later, in *Ethics and the Letters*, he attempted to come to terms with the basic questions Troeltsch had raised. Thus in the letter on June 8th which outlines the implication of the world-come-of-age for Christianity, Bonhoeffer stated to Bethge that liberal theology began to apprehend it, specifically mentioning Troeltsch's name in parenthesis (8 June, 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 428). Thus Troeltsch's influence on the development of Bonhoeffer's thought is not to be overlooked and there are traces of it in all of his writings, but foremost in his sociological and modern qua contemporary orientation.

3.3.1.2 Reinhold Seeberg

This sociological concern with the modern man was certainly also characteristic of Bonhoeffer's dissertation supervisor and historian of dogma Reinhold Seeberg, who taught at the University from 1898 to 1927, and his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* [Text-Book of the History of Doctrines] (1953). The work represented an argument against Ritschl's dismissal of dogmatics, instead attempting to preserve the Christian faith by expressing it in a form intelligible to modern man, a sort of rewriting of dogma for a modern age.¹⁷⁵ Yet what proved crucial for Bonhoeffer's thought was Seeberg's focus on the moral and social dimensions of theological reflection, grounded in his conviction that theology ought to be life-related and experience-focused rather than

¹⁷⁵ See Seeberg's preface to the English translation of his *Die Grundwahrheiten der christlichen Religion* (1908, pp. v-viii). Seeberg's task was rooted in an understanding of the mind as the contact point between man and God, a religious a priori possessing the intrinsic capacity for becoming aware of his being and activity, which Bonhoeffer challenged in *Act and Being* (1996). See also Seeberg, (1927a), p. 104 and Bethge (1994), pp. 87-89.

purely theoretical. He convinced Bonhoeffer about the social reality of existence, in history and community. The disciple attended all of his systematic theology seminars, where he observed his rigour and pursuit of knowledge, which led him to approach Seeberg about supervising his dissertation. This theme of sociality became Bonhoeffer's lens through which he considered theology.¹⁷⁶

Seeberg and Bonhoeffer's shared sociological conviction centred upon a particular field of theology – ecclesiology. Seeberg's ecclesiology was part of his dialectical historical understanding of the Trinity, wherein the church was understood as the visible, tangible and incarnate Holy Spirit, and interpreted the social reality of existence (Seeberg, 1927b, p. 357f).¹⁷⁷ It was in this context that Bonhoeffer proposed in his thesis a 'Christian philosophy of spirit [...] that will provide a direction for Christian philosophy' (DBWE 1, pp. 43-44 [30]). This proposal is masterfully laid out in the prologue and deserving of a full quote:

The goal of the following ecclesiological study is a dogmatic-theological reflection on the church in light of insights from social philosophy and sociology. Creating a real conceptual connection between theology and both social philosophy and sociology is the basic task and also the difficulty in this essay, whose concrete subject matter is the idea of the church as *sanctorum communion*. The dogmatic character of the work prevails; both disciplines of social science are to be made fruitful for theology.

Thus the basic problem can be defined as the problem of a specifically Christian social philosophy and sociology. My intention is to discuss neither a general sociology of religion, nor genetic-sociological questions; rather, I intend to show that an inherently Christian social philosophy and sociology, arising essentially out of fundamental

¹⁷⁶ However, Green (1999, p. 24) is quick to rightly point out that the complex set of concepts Bonhoeffer uses to explicate sociality are not simply taken over from Seeberg, but in discussion with others.

¹⁷⁷ This thoroughly Hegelian understanding of the church, in contrast to Žižek, results in Seeberg's attempt to relate the significance of the church to history in general.

concepts of Christian theology, is most fully articulated in the concept of the church.

The more I have focused on this problem, the more clearly I have recognized the social intention of all fundamental Christian concepts. ‘Person’, ‘primal state’, ‘sin’, and ‘revelation’ appeared fully understandable only in relation to sociality [...].

I hope this study will be seen as a modest contribution to a ‘philosophy of the church’ as was recently called for by Reinhold Seeberg in his *Christliche Dogmatik* [cf. Seeberg, *Dogmatik*, 2, 385], namely one which not only clarifies the nature of the church and of religious community, but which ‘would result in new understanding of the cohesion of the spirit of humanity [...]. My [...] wish in presenting this study is to contribute something to the understanding that our church, profoundly impoverished and helpless though it appears today, is nevertheless the sanctorum communion, the holy body of Christ, even Christ’s very presence in the world (DBWE 1, pp. 22-23 [5]).

Bonhoeffer’s conviction regarding ‘the social intention of all fundamental Christian concepts’,¹⁷⁸ as well as his desire to develop ‘a real conceptual connection between theology and both social philosophy and sociology’, speaks strongly of Seeberg’s influence upon the form of his thought and also his later explorations of questions about what it means to be human in the concrete contingencies of life.

Following the completion of *Sanctorum Communio*, Seeberg suggested that Bonhoeffer proceed with a historical investigation of ethics, such as the ethics of Scholasticism, or to move onto discussing the method of interpretation of Scripture (Bethge, 1967, p. 132). Instead, Bonhoeffer’s *Act and Being* (1996) discussed God’s revelation epistemologically in light of the clash between the transcendental philosophy of liberal theology and Barth’s scepticism about its capacity for critical reflection (to be

¹⁷⁸ According to Richard Roberts (2005, pp. 375-377), it also qualifies *Sanctorum Communio* as a classic illuminating the relation between theology and the social sciences.

discussed later).¹⁷⁹ Thus Bonhoeffer's second dissertation was not supervised by Seeberg, but by his successor Wilhelm Lütgert. Bethge (1967, pp. 69-72) remarks that after 1933, when the national socialists made expansion of the German Reich their official policy and some of Seeberg's thoughts on community appealed to values that nurtured nationalism, Bonhoeffer's break with the latter became complete. Nonetheless, Seeberg's influence upon the form and philosophical orientation of Bonhoeffer's thought should not be overlooked.¹⁸⁰

3.3.1.3 Von Harnack

Finally, and of no less importance, was the influence of the church historian Adolf von Harnack.¹⁸¹ Of Bonhoeffer's Berlin professors, von Harnack alone had a personal relationship to his family – he was a friend of Bonhoeffer's father and both families lived in Grunewald, which was a neighbourhood of academics.¹⁸² After retiring from teaching at Berlin (from 1888 until 1921), he personally chose Bonhoeffer as one of a handful of students who worked with him in his seminars on church history after retirement. The latter described the experience in a letter as 'too closely associated with my whole personality for me to be able ever to forget it' (Bethge, 1967, p. 34). It is

¹⁷⁹ A thorough presentation of Bonhoeffer's second dissertation can be found in 'Bonhoeffer's Act and Being: The Priority of the Other as Critique of Idealism', in Floyd (1988).

¹⁸⁰ Volume 17 of BDWE: Register und Ergänzungen, lists a total of 168 references to Seeberg, 134 of these before Act and Being. This goes to show the influence the latter has had on Bonhoeffer's formation as a thinker, not only as a teacher, but also in Bonhoeffer's challenge of or response to his thought.

¹⁸¹ Volume 17 of the German edition of BDWE: Register und Ergänzungen lists 134 references to Harnack. Unlike those to Seeberg, these appear throughout Bonhoeffer's writings, after the publication of his second dissertation. Certainly, he remains in Bonhoeffer's view an influence of a much more positive disposition.

¹⁸² A description of the personal relationship between them is beyond the scope of this thesis. For an insight into that, see Bethge (1967, p. 72).

understandable, then, that von Harnack strongly influenced Bonhoeffer's intellectual development.

Von Harnack's thought was characteristically liberal insofar as his thought in pursuit of knowledge was without limits and marked by a confidence in the human spirit and ability to pursue objectivity under the scrutiny of reason.¹⁸³ In contrast to Troeltsch's understanding of dogmatic theology as a possibility for neo-Protestantism, or Seebergs redrafting of dogma in modern metaphysical language, he adopted yet a different approach. His *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* [History of Dogma] (1890) narrated the history of dogma as an obscuration of the Gospel through Hellenization, concluding that the task of contemporary theology is to continue destroying dogma:

Moving forward, Christianity must learn that even in religion the simplest is the hardest, and that everything that burdens religion only blunts its gravity. Therefore, the goal of all Christian work, even of all theological work, can only be this – to discern ever more distinctly the simplicity and the gravity of the Gospel, in order to become ever purer and livelier in spirit, and ever more loving and brotherly in action (von Harnack, 1890, p. 764).¹⁸⁴

With that conviction he founded in 1891 the Commission on the Church Fathers, intending to publish a critical edition of the Greco-Christian literature up to the year 325,¹⁸⁵ one which would instead focus on the way belief shapes one's life. Bonhoeffer

¹⁸³ A good account of von Harnack's liberal theology can be found in Rumscheidt's *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height* (1988).

¹⁸⁴ This is my own translation of the original German [Fortschreitend muss die Christenheit lernen, dass auch in der Religion das Einfachste das Schwerste ist, und dass Alles, was die Religion belastet, ihren Ernst abstumpft. Darum kann das Ziel aller christlichen Arbeit, auch aller theologischen, nur das sein, immer sicherer die Schlichtheit und den Ernst des Evangeliums zu erkennen, um in der Gesinnung immer reiner und lebendiger, in der That immer liebevoller und brüderlicher zu werden.] For von Harnack, the archetypal hero was Luther, who discarded dogma and substituted it for an evangelical view (*ibid.*, pp. 691-764).

¹⁸⁵ By 1924 forty-five volumes had appeared, most of them edited by von Harnack himself.

admired the epistemological rigour with which the church historian sought to engage or present theology to the modern man. Of particular influence was von Harnack's positive perception of 'the world', compared to the isolationist attitude of his teachers – something he clearly expressed in the text of his address at von Harnack's funeral (DBWE 10: pp. 379-381).

While the influence of von Harnack on Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation was immense and multifocal,¹⁸⁶ it is within the remit of this section (as outlined above) to focus on the following areas of Bonhoeffer's thought, which have been shaped by his teacher: his ethical concern oriented towards action, the maturity of the world come-of-age, the notion of arcane discipline and the emphasis on Jesus' humanity.

The ethical orientation of Bonhoeffer's thought was already visible (and will be discussed in Chapter 4) in *Sanctorum Communio*, where Christ existing as community poses the question of how the community should act.¹⁸⁷ Later, at the end of his stay at Union Seminary, Bonhoeffer set out an understanding of the import of Christianity for the world as the deciding contribution of American Christianity: 'Taking seriously the kingdom of God as a kingdom on earth is biblically sound and is justified compared to an understanding of the kingdom as one beyond' (DBWE 12: p. 241). Indeed, in all Bonhoeffer's works the ethical, and specifically questions of ethical implications of

¹⁸⁶ Rumscheidt delivers a glimpse into von Harnack's influence in the formation of Bonhoeffer's theology in the *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Rumscheidt, 1999, pp. 50-70 at p. 54). A very helpful introduction to Harnackian characteristics of Bonhoeffer's thought can be found in Kalternborn's (1973) illuminating study of von Harnack as Bonhoeffer's teacher. See in particular pp. 125-128 and the more detailed analysis that follows. Alternatively, Kalternborn's brief contribution to *Klassen* in English relies on that work. See 'Adolf von Harnack and Bonhoeffer' in *Klassen* (1981), pp. 48-57.

¹⁸⁷ For Bonhoeffer the emphasis lies on community, rather than von Harnack's individual. That does not mean that Bonhoeffer ignores the individual, but rather that the two are inseparable.

Christianity, assume utmost importance. Bonhoeffer contemplates the gravity of the ethical in contrast to knowledge of good and bad in Ethik:

The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. This attack on the presuppositions of all other ethics is so unique that it is questionable whether it even makes sense to speak of Christian ethics at all. If it is nevertheless done, then this can only mean that Christian ethics claims to articulate the origin of the whole ethical enterprise, and thus to be considered an ethic only as the critique of all ethics (DBWE 6: pp. 299-300).

This understanding of Christianity's subversion of the ethical preoccupation with the knowledge of good and evil lends itself to Žižek's own reading of the atonement as an act suspending the Law, or in Bonhoeffer's words, 'a critique of all ethics' (ibid.). Indeed, it can be read as a critique of modernity's preoccupation with knowledge (as an act).

The described ethical orientation is situated within a world which, for both von Harnack and Bonhoeffer, is characterised by maturity or has come-of-age. In both of their thought, this concept of Mündigkeit, that is maturity or come-of-ageness, performs a crucial function in understanding Christianity today. Thus, in his Bericht über die Ausgabe der griechischen Kirchenväter der drei ersten Jahrhunderte, von Harnack argues that of all religions Christianity best expresses the Mündigkeit of the Greeks and Romans (1906c, p. 166). He also remarks that it is unworthy of a people come-of-age 'to be patronized and bound to the inner spheres of religion' (ibid., pp. 89-90).¹⁸⁸ For Bonhoeffer also the maturity of the world engages or co-determines the purpose of

¹⁸⁸ My own translation of the original German ['auf dem innerlichsten gebiete, dem der Religion, bevormundet und gebunden zu werden'].

ecclesiology, its role and identity today. The church, he contends in *Ethik*, can no longer be the purpose in and of itself, but exists for the world that has come-of-age.¹⁸⁹ If it fails to do so, it also profanes the gospel, which itself has brought the world to maturity. Here is how he then expresses this again in *The Letters*:

Thus our coming of age leads us to a truer recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage their lives without him. The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34!). The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the Cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! (16 July, 1944 in *DBWE* 8: pp. 478-479).

Conviction about the *Mündigkeit* of the world plays a part in another sphere of von Harnack's influence – Bonhoeffer's concept of 'arcane discipline' protecting the riches of Christianity from profanation. Thus Bonhoeffer's contention on 5 May 1944 that 'there are degrees of cognition and degrees of significance. That means, an "arcane discipline" must be re-established, through which the mysteries of the Christian faith are sheltered against profanation' (5 May, 1944 in *DBWE* 8: p. 373)¹⁹⁰ can be read alongside von Harnack's contention that 'what matters is not the form but the reverence with which one lays hold of the mystery of the person of Christ and then submits one's life to the spirit of Christ' (1906a, p. 296).¹⁹¹ The parallelism in the wording is not

¹⁸⁹ See 'Church and World I' in *DBWE* 6, pp. 339-351, and 'On the Possibility of the Church's Message to the World' in *DBWE* 6, pp. 352-362.

¹⁹⁰ See also Staats (1981), p. 105.

¹⁹¹ My own translation of the original German: [Nicht auf die Fassung kommt es an, sondern auf die Ehrfurcht, mit der man das Geheimnis der Person Christi umfasst und das eigene Leben unter den Geist Christi beugt].

coincidental, even though ‘profanation‘ is perceived differently – by Harnack in relation to those segments of the church that held to some form of untouchable orthodoxy (von Zahn-Harnack, 1951, p. 131), while Bonhoeffer argued for a protection from the assertions of German Christians that what was being carried out in Germany was the will of God. In light of this Bonhoeffer calls for an intellectual discussion that will challenge the world:

It is not for us to predict the day – but the day will come – when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus’ language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power – the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God’s kingdom is drawing near (18 May, 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 390).

Finally, Bonhoeffer’s thought reflects von Harnack’s emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Admittedly, von Harnack prioritizes Christ’s human nature when he says:

[T]he thesis: ‘the life of Jesus was not purely human’, can only mean: the life of Jesus offers brush-strokes, for which our history does not possess any analogies. Any other formulation is not permitted or possible for a scientific man [...] (von Zahn-Harnack, 1951, p. 187)¹⁹²

or indeed ‘If you are assuming that the life of Jesus was not purely human, you also deprive it of its peculiarity’ (von Harnack, 1906c, p. 223).¹⁹³ In contrast, Bonhoeffer maintains that the humanity of Jesus cannot be separated from his divinity.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² My own translation of the original German: [... die These: ‘das Leben Jesu war kein rein menschliches’ darf nur lauten: Das Leben Jesu bietet Züge, für die wir in der Geschichte Analogien nicht besitzen. Eine andere Formulierung kann und darf ein wissenschaftlicher Mann nicht brauchen...].

¹⁹³ My own translation of the original German: [Behauptest Du, das Leben Jesu sei kein rein menschliches, so entziehst Du auch dem Glauben sein Eigentümliches...]

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, ‘The Image of Christ’ in DBWE 4, pp. 281-289.

Nonetheless, there remains an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, fully expressed in the Letters, where he writes to Bethge:

In the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more of the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being – in contrast, perhaps, to John the Baptist (21 July 1944 DBWE 8, p. 541).

By positioning the humanity of Jesus in contrast to the Baptist and designating the *homo religiosus* as negative, Bonhoeffer seeks to protect the humanity of Jesus against any ‘religionising’ imposition of religion. In other words, Christ’s humanity ought to be presented together with his divinity, whilst refusing to be overtaken by it, for it alone prevents any invocation of the ‘*deus ex machina*’:

Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world: God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help (16 July 1944 DBWE 8, p. 479).¹⁹⁵

What remains is the paradox of pointing at the man Jesus and proclaiming that this is God (DBWE 4: p. 225), the man existing for others, rather than man in himself. In Outline of a Book (3 August 1944 DBWE 8: pp. 499-504), Bonhoeffer writes under Chapter Three:

The church [...] must tell people in every calling what a life with Christ is, what it means ‘to be there for others’ [...] It will have to see that it does not underestimate the significance of the human ‘example’ (which

¹⁹⁵ ‘The Incarnation, Jesus’ words and deeds, and his death on the Cross are integral elements of this image. It is an image different from the image of Adam in the original glory of paradise. It is the image of one who places himself in the very midst of the world of sin and death, who takes on the needs of human flesh, who humbly submits to God’s wrath and judgment over sinners, who remains obedient to God’s will in suffering and death; the one born in poverty, who befriended and sat at the table to eat with tax collectors and sinners, and who, on the Cross, was rejected and abandoned by God and human beings – this is God in human form, this is the human being who is the new image of God!’ (DBWE 4, p. 284)

has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul's writings!) (ibid., pp. 503-504).

Another letter deserving of mention can be directly compared with the *Das Wesen des Christentums*, in which von Harnack wishes 'to remind humanity over and again that a man named Jesus Christ was in their midst' (von Harnack, 1902, p. 1). On 21 August 1944 Bonhoeffer writes, 'If this earth was deemed worthy to bear the human being Jesus Christ, if a human being like Jesus lived, then and only then does our life as human beings have meaning' (21 August 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 515). Despite their differences in relation to the divine nature of Jesus, Bonhoeffer very much shared the emphasis on his humanity with von Harnack, both in implication and application.

Perhaps their difference in relation to the divine is illuminated even further by Bonhoeffer's criticism of von Harnack's overt confidence in the human ability to comprehend. Rumscheidt describes this confidence as follows: '[In] liberal theology [...] the distance between the knower and the known [...] is reduced to the extent that what is known cannot be a limit on the knower' (Rumscheidt, 1999, p. 54). Bonhoeffer, however, in his notion of sociality in *Sanctorum Communio* (DBWE 1: p. 51) and then again in *Act and Being* (DBWE 2: p. 88), argues for limits that are imposed by the other and are as such insurmountable methodologically and ethically. He concludes that when those limits are transgressed, as in the case of von Harnack's confident liberal theology, it is revealed that the subject does not know the other – man or God – epistemologically at all, but knows only oneself.

Bonhoeffer's references to von Harnack began to recede with Karl Barth's prominence in his thought from the late 1920s.¹⁹⁶ However, as Bethge reports, in *The Letters* the references pick up again, due to Bonhoeffer's desire 'to become better acquainted with particular aspects of nineteenth-century literature and rehabilitate the tradition of the forefathers, from Keller to Harnack, from Pestalozzi to Dilthey, over against more modern existentialist tendencies' (Bethge, 1967, pp. 844-846). Amongst works of others, Bonhoeffer asked for Harnack's *Geschichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie* [*The History of the Prussian Academy of Sciences*] (1900)¹⁹⁷ and expressing a sadness that so few people appreciate the intellectual achievements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (29-30 January, 2 March 1944, in DBW 8: p. 279, p. 316). This comment reveals the continued influence and context of von Harnack within which Bonhoeffer developed the orientation, concern and emphasis of his own thought.

3.3.2 Conclusion for the Berlin section

It has hopefully become clear that Bonhoeffer's Berlin faculty has left an immense intellectual imprint on the development, content and overall concern of his work.

Bethge sums up the formative influences as follows: 'Troeltsch's interest in the sociological realities of Christianity, [...] Harnack's intellectual incorruptibility, and

¹⁹⁶This was not solely down to Barth, but also due to the political circumstances, argues Bethge. (1967, p. 126). Having said that, while von Harnack's influence receded, it certainly wasn't absent. Thus in his 'lectures on the History of twentieth-century systematic theology' he devotes an entire chapter to 'Wesen des Christentums'.

¹⁹⁷ Von Harnack was asked to write the work in connection with the celebration of its 200th anniversary in 1900, because of his contribution to the natural and medical sciences for the Prussian Academy of Sciences. He was a member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin, director of the Prussian State Library and president of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (now the Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science) after 1911.

Seeberg's philosophical openness' (Bethge, 1963, p. 28). As already acknowledged, my focus has been on their contribution to Bonhoeffer's sustained engagement of theology with philosophy and his understanding of the church and sociological realities of Christianity in a mature modern world, including the corresponding interpretation of dogma. Bonhoeffer's interest in philosophy, evident already at the time of his secondary education, was nurtured and developed further by the theological faculty in Berlin, embodying the period's special relationship between philosophy and theology. I contend that an understanding of this background is necessary in order to fully appreciate the philosophical dimension of his thought, observed in statements such as 'The church is church only when it is there for others' (3 August 1944 DBWE 8: p. 503). Indeed, his intellectual formation at Berlin serves as the ground for his 'Christ existing as church-community' (DBWE 1: p. 121), the key principle around which his thought revolves. Thus, importantly, what started as a term in Hegelian dialectics under Seeberg, became an essential concept for Bonhoeffer's growing understanding of sociality, first embodied in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*. This will be examined in Chapter 4, when his engagement with Hegel will also enable a critical reading of the work alongside Žižek's thought. For now, however, a supplementary note on Hegel's influence is in order, since he is not among the most common thinkers consulted in consideration of Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation.

3.3.3 Supplementary note on the influence of Hegel

As already observed in Section 3.3.3 on Bonhoeffer's context, Hegel shaped the intellectual modern theological environment and his idealist philosophy had an important part to play in the development and content of Bonhoeffer's thought at

Berlin.¹⁹⁸ Unfortunately, Hegel has not been given the appropriate attention in examinations of Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation, something Jacob Holm links to an uncritical acceptance of the simplified opposition between Bonhoeffer and Hegel that persisted until the 1980s (Holm, 2002, pp. 64-65). Thus, for example, in his early account of Bonhoeffer's intellectual biography, Bethge claims that Bonhoeffer's second dissertation is 'basically addressing philosophers, whom he schematically finds guilty of the original sin of idealism, namely imprisonment in the self' (Bethge, 1967, p. 97).¹⁹⁹ Perhaps Bonhoeffer's own early treatment of Hegel contributed to that insofar as *Sanctorum Communio* lacks most references to specific texts but also fails to substantiate his generalizations about Hegel and the diverse movement of German idealism (See Marsh, 1994, p. 89). Furthermore, an examination of his footnotes reveals that he mostly relies upon others' presentation of Hegel.²⁰⁰ Possibly a combination of all these contributed to a lack of consideration of Hegel's influence upon the development of Bonhoeffer's thought.

Change came about after the publication of Oswald Bayer's article 'Christus als Mitte: Ethik im Banne der Religionsphilosophie Hegels' in 1985 (later published as a chapter in his *Leibliches Wort*, 1992, pp. 245-260), evidenced by the publication of student notes from Bonhoeffer's 1933 lectures on Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* in

¹⁹⁸ For an introduction to Hegel and Bonhoeffer see Floyd (2008), pp. 83-119.

¹⁹⁹ Admittedly, Bethge goes on to say that the philosophers did not recognise themselves in this characterisation, and later sided with critics of Bonhoeffer's conceptual oversimplifications (pp. 97-99).

²⁰⁰ For example, a heavy reliance upon Emmanuel Hirsch is observable in Bonhoeffer's criticism of the idealist misconception of the subject, including a brief outline of the resulting distorted community in which individuals surrender absolutely and dissolve into it. *DBWE 1*: p. 193-198 cf. Hirsch (1926), p. 66f.

1988 as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Hegel-Seminar (Tödt, 1988).²⁰¹ Those very lectures reveal an appreciation for Hegel, whose thought is to be 'judged as a whole'.²⁰² After that, in the 90s, Charles Marsh examined the way Bonhoeffer read his own idea of Christian community in *Akt und Sein* against Hegel's.²⁰³ Holm concluded his 2002 observation with the statement that Hegel's positive impact upon Bonhoeffer is still not fully recognized or even acknowledged (Holm, 2002, p. 65).

The final chapter of this thesis will thus highlight that rather than a matter of simple disagreement, Bonhoeffer's treatment of Hegel in *Sanctorum Communio* is also an attempt to develop his thought.²⁰⁴ Marsh aptly observes that his approach is 'less concerned with overcoming Hegel than in thinking along with the philosopher on the meaning of God's presence in the complex drama of divine worldliness' (Marsh, 1994, p. 91). Consequently, as will be observed, Bonhoeffer's own thoughts are distinctly Hegelian and retain that form and dialectically tense content, even while being developed. Indeed, Bonhoeffer's engagement with Hegel and the sociological structure of the church functions as a necessary social philosophical background of and formal model for his later thought, including *The Letters*.²⁰⁵ In a way, then, it is entirely

²⁰¹ These student notes reveal Bonhoeffer's interest in the theological dimensions of *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Lectures in the Philosophy of Religion*.

²⁰² On an occasion when a student in Bonhoeffer's class pointed out a passage in Hegel that he deemed as non-Christian [nichtchristlich], and thus dismissing his *Philosophy of Religion*, Bonhoeffer responded: 'Man soll einen Autor nicht von einem negative Satz aus angreifen oder interpretieren; man soll fragen, was er mit dem Ganzen meint oder will' [One ought not to attack or interpret an author solely on the basis of a negative sentence; but rather inquire about its meaning or purpose] (ibid., p. 137).

²⁰³ 'Christ as the Mediation of the Other' in Marsh (1994), pp. 81-110.

²⁰⁴ I am far from arguing that Bonhoeffer wasn't critical of Hegel, but rather pointing out how Hegel still shapes his thought positively rather than merely negatively. For an example of a straightforward critique of Hegel, see *The Letters* 16 July 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 477, wherein Bonhoeffer accuses Hegel of pantheism ('Kant is basically a deist; Fichte and Hegel are pantheists').

²⁰⁵ Cf. Marsh (1994), p. 175, n. 11.

appropriate to at least discuss Bonhoeffer as a Hegelian,²⁰⁶ even though his development or appropriation of Hegel is creative and critical. Hopefully, the final chapter will contribute – albeit in a very limited way as this is not its primary aim – to the demonstration of the foundational role Hegel has played in the development of Bonhoeffer’s thought, for the latter’s engagement with Hegel’s communitarianism, be it in reaction to his understanding of the subject-object relationship or the utilization of the concept of objective spirit, is indispensable and highly formative.

3.3.4 Addendum: the influence of Karl Barth

While liberal theology had an immense impact on Bonhoeffer’s intellectual formation and his appreciation of it was clear, he also saw and challenged its shortcoming. Reflecting on his post-WW1 context, he disagreed with its anthropological optimism and reduction of religion to man at the expense of God, who was considered as ultimately unknowable. This he later clearly expressed in *The Letters*, stating that liberal theology was confined to the self, individualistic and inward, insofar as it attempted to preserve God’s place ‘at least in the realm of the “personal”, the “inner life”, the “private sphere”’ (8 July, 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 455). This was alarming for Bonhoeffer, as it implied spheres in life where God was absent or forced out. He was adamant that God, that is Christ, cannot be excluded from the world. The distance between him and Seeberg grew ever more decisive, leading to a ‘break’ in 1933.

In response to this shift Bonhoeffer recognized the value of the Swiss pastor and theologian Karl Barth’s (1886-1968) emphasis upon revelation as a way to maintain

²⁰⁶ Marsh has observed ‘whether Bonhoeffer turns out to be a Hegelian by default is a question that must not be ignored’ (ibid., p. 80).

God as wholly Other.²⁰⁷ Thus, in his 1930s essay, 'The Theology of Crisis and its Attitude Toward Philosophy and Science' (DBWE 10: pp. 462-476), where he set forth Barth's position against that of idealism, Bonhoeffer understood liberal theology's idealist religious structures as mere attempts to avoid the embarrassment of revelation, by circumventing it philosophically and rendering it superfluous (ibid., pp. 464-465). This perception was shaped by Barth's conviction that the starting point of theology was not human religious experience, but the Word of a transcendent God, marking a dialectical theology that emphasised the infinite distance between the human and the divine and making any understanding of our knowledge of God paradoxical in character, because it was self-authenticated through God's revelation. Not only was God the object structuring man, Barth argued, but man was at the same time the subject directed by the recognition of faith in the objective reality of God (Barth, 1933, p. 28).²⁰⁸ This inversion of the meaning of subject and object enabled the possibility of the dogmatic understanding, validating speech about God in his action (Barth, 1960, p. 171). Barth was thus able to maintain both God's objective reality as wholly Other and his communicability (Barth, 1933, pp. 6-11). This attracted the young Bonhoeffer, who was disillusioned with liberal theology's placement of God's transcendence under the

²⁰⁷ Barth rebelled against nineteenth century liberal subjectivism and exegesis, its preoccupation with historical authenticity of texts and their cultural reinterpretation, as moralistic and individualistic reductionism, imprisoning God in man's consciousness; see Barth (1933), pp. 6-10. The contentious relationship between the liberal theological faculty in Berlin and the upstart theology was on display in a public exchange of letters between Barth and Adolf von Harnack during 1923, as discussed in 3.2. on pp. 160-161.

²⁰⁸ Having said that, for Barth God is also the subject who is revealed. For a helpful analysis of Barth's use of subject-object terminology as applied to God, see Chapter VI of Brown's *Subject and Object in Modern Theology* (1955).

control of the subject, who asserts its boundlessness and autonomy, making himself God and other men his creatures.

The impact of Barth on Bonhoeffer's thought began to be felt after the young student's first semester in Berlin, even though Barth was absent from the curricula of his professors. In 1924 he discovered Barth's *Der Römerbrief* [The Epistle to the Romans] (1933) and *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* [The Word of God and the Word of Man] (1925). Following that, he obtained notes from lectures Barth would publish as *Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik* [Prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics] (1975). This encounter shaped the development of Bonhoeffer's theological approach, as was expressed in a classroom discussion of Barth's theology in which Bonhoeffer contradicted von Harnack 'politely, but on objective theological grounds,' (Bethge, 1994, p. 67), and in von Harnack's warning to Bonhoeffer about the threat posed by 'contempt for academic theology and by unscholarly theologies' (DBWE 10: pp. 196-197). In 1928 Bonhoeffer offered a Barthian assessment of religion as sinful self-justification and the very antithesis of faith. 'In this sense,' he contended, 'religion and morality can become the most dangerous enemy of God's coming to human beings, the most dangerous enemy of the Christian message of good news' (ibid., p. 353). Later, during his visit at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he became known as an apologist for Barth's theology,²⁰⁹ and, upon his return in 1931, a personal relationship between them was established. Bonhoeffer travelled to Bonn and anonymously attended one of Barth's lectures. Catching his attention with a quotation from Luther, Bonhoeffer

²⁰⁹ This is exemplified in the above-mentioned seminar, 'The Theology of Crisis and its Attitude to Philosophy and Science'. See DBWE 10, pp. 462-476.

was invited to Barth's home for dinner and conversation, and what followed was a theological relationship of meetings and correspondence over the ensuing years. During that time Barth's thought impacted Bonhoeffer significantly,²¹⁰ as is clearly seen by his decision to include a detailed presentation of Barthian thought into his Berlin lectures on the history of 20th century systematic theology in early 1932.

Yet, it is important to note that although Bonhoeffer was and still is referred to as a Barthian (e.g. by Pangritz, 2008), it is perhaps more accurate to see him as charting his own course in the charged space between liberalism and Barth's own dialectical theology.²¹¹ Thus, while he accepted the basic outline of dialectical theology, he was highly critical with regards to its positive content, specifically the church. In *Sanctorum Communio* and then also in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer expressed a corrective of shortcomings in the dialectical method for failure to uphold the church as the 'community of revelation', insofar as Christ exists as the church:

When works on doctrinal theology end by presenting the concept of the church as a necessary consequence of the Protestant faith, this must not imply anything other than the inner connection between the reality of the church and the entire reality of revelation. Only if the concept of God is understood to be incomprehensible when exclusively connected to the concept of the church is it permitted, for technical reasons of presentation, to 'derive' the latter from the former. In order to establish clarity about the inner logic of theological construction, it would be good for once if a presentation of doctrinal theology were not to start with the doctrine of God but with the doctrine of the church (DBWE 1: p. 134).

²¹⁰ For a general discussion of Barth's impact on Bonhoeffer see Pangritz's *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (2000). For examples of interpretations of the relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer see Prenter's 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth's Positivism of Revelation' (1967), pp. 93-130, and Ott's *Reality and Faith* (1972, pp. 58-61, 120-142).

²¹¹ Green's *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (1999) attempts to present Bonhoeffer's sociality in contrast to Barth.

Bonhoeffer struggled with the appropriateness of Barth's description of the church as an institution in which 'human indifference, misunderstanding and opposition attain their most sublime and their most naïve form' (Barth, 1933, p. 418). The cited criticism is far deeper than a mere defence of the church as the locus of revelation, for it highlights dialectical theology's individualistic tendencies. While it did direct attention from man towards God, it did so at the expense of attention towards community within which this revelation takes place, despite its sinfulness (DBWE 1: p. 126). When Barth published his *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* [Church Dogmatics], this became even clearer, for the church was presented as a parable which pointed to God's action, but in no way participated in it.²¹² While Barth's picture of God's transcendence was formal and impersonal, where he is bound by nothing, utterly free and unconditioned, Bonhoeffer's God was personal, not a formal construction, who offered himself to man – he revealed himself within a community of man through faith.²¹³ God is indeed met in Christ, Bonhoeffer argued, but insofar as the church is the contemporary Christ, he is met in the church. That way revelation of the transcendent is concrete, not located in the transcendent, but in Christ who is met in the community.²¹⁴ Far from a mere follower of

²¹² Barth (2010b), p. 779: 'To be sure, it [the Church] is not itself the Good Samaritan who has come into the world as the Saviour, active not for Himself but only for it in the manner and the power of God. And it [the Church] is well advised not to try to play this role. But it is gathered and upbuilt by this Good Samaritan for active service on His behalf, and it is actually sent out into the world in this service. If it cannot do what He does, and it should not pretend it can, it may and should follow Him in what He does. It may and should be obedient to His command'.

²¹³ See 'The Mode of Being of Revelation in the Church' in DBWE 2: pp. 11-116. As we shall see in 4.1 this is closer to a Hegelian understanding of the church.

²¹⁴ Bonhoeffer also extrapolated this import of Barth's claim that no finite historical moment is capable of the infinite. He wonders whether this contention does not rule out concrete ethics and proclamation, given that 'empirical human activity – be it faith, obedience – is at best a reference to God's activity and in its historicity can never be faith and obedience itself'. See Bethge (1994), p. 182.

Barth, Bonhoeffer outlined his own theological approach not only in reference to, but also against, the positive content of Barth's dialectical theology.

Bonhoeffer's criticism points out the profoundly Christological disagreement with Barth, which became ever so clear in Bonhoeffer's later writings, such as *The Letters*, where Christ exists solely for others, the suffering one who gives himself to the world.²¹⁵ However, Bonhoeffer's critical approach was evident already in his lecture at Union, where he attacked dialectical theology's methodological problems inherent in a position that never portrays God as an object approachable through formal or cognitive presuppositions (Bethge, 1994, p. 114). Indeed, Barth rejected all theological, philosophical, cultural and especially ecclesiological structures which owed their conceptions to the positing of a continuity between God and man. Bonhoeffer, in turn, argued that some philosophical formulation is necessary in order to describe revelation, otherwise one risks losing touch with reality. Even Barth, he points out, in his description of revelation, used elements from 'idealism [which] sees God as eternal subject, [and from] realism which sees reality as transcendent object' (ibid., p. 123), thus enabling a convergence of essential subjectivity and the most objective reality. The lecture shows Bonhoeffer following the lines of Barthian dogmatic, but also reveals a concern that speech about God must be able to cope with philosophical questions about speech as such. This contention was further developed in *The Letters*, where Bonhoeffer wondered whether Barth's positivism of revelation doesn't ultimately end up in a purely detached speculative abstraction (DBWE 8: pp. 373, 428-431). If, as Barth indicated in *Church Dogmatics*, objective revelation becomes all-inclusive so that every biblical

²¹⁵ See DBWE 8: pp. 373, 501, 503-504.

passage has its own self-evident worth, it no longer has any verification in reality.

Bonhoeffer instead wished to acknowledge theology's dialogical relationship with the reality [Wirklichkeit] of the everyday world.²¹⁶ As he wrote on 30 April 1944: 'for the working person or any person who is without religion, nothing decisive has been gained here [positivism of revelation]' (30 April 1944 in DBWE 8: p. 364).²¹⁷

To summarize Bonhoeffer's criticism of Barth, it suffices to say that Bonhoeffer was disapproving of dialectical theology's neglect of the critical questions posed by liberal theology, specifically the sociological dimensions of church, interaction with the world and other disciplines and interpretation of dogma – the very concerns of this thesis. Neglect of these resulted in an inability to ground an ontology in Christ, provide a dogmatic base for the empirical church and develop a concrete ethic. While Bonhoeffer did point out the shortcoming of his liberal Berlin professors as the reduction of God to man, he also criticized Barth for fixating his attention on the transcendent at the expense of revelation as concrete and apprehensible in its community – the church.

3.3.4.1 Concluding thought

It is thus appropriate to conclude this addendum by noting that Bonhoeffer was developing his own critical approach, one that appreciated the strengths of liberal theology or Barth, while also pointing out their errors. It will become abundantly clear

²¹⁶ Does Bonhoeffer's position over against Barth not lead to what Žižek would call the Symbolic, comprehensive and self-contained, excluding the Real and as such merely attempting to smooth over its edges, or hide it?

²¹⁷ For more on the origin of the concept positivism of revelation in Bonhoeffer's thought, see also Wüstenberg (1998), pp. 60-65.

in the reading of *Sanctorum Communio* that in the development of his thought, recourse to both proved a crucial role.

Having explored the emergence of Bonhoeffer's social theology through engagement with social philosophy, the thesis now turns to an exploration of it through a critical Žižekian reading.

Chapter 4: *Žižek in the Service of Critical Theology*

This chapter is the culmination of the thesis – a critical reading exercise in which Bonhoeffer’s *Sanctorum Communio* is read alongside Žižek, enabled by their mutual conviction about the sociological relevance of theology as they both search for an authentic form of community. How does Bonhoeffer’s transcendental personalist community and its ethic of universal love compare to Žižek’s materialist ontological community and its ethic of indifference?

Similar to the section on Bonhoeffer’s intellectual formation, this chapter is selective in line with the scope of the whole thesis. It discusses only his first thesis where he lays out his conviction about the sociological import of theology and which serves as a point of departure for his further work. Therefore, rather than pursuing a comprehensive presentation of Bonhoeffer’s thought²¹⁸ or even a straightforward presentation of his first dissertation, it focuses specifically on Hegel and Bonhoeffer’s understanding and development of his thought, particularly the concept of objective spirit. Hegel thus functions as a contact point with Žižek, enabling a critical examination of Bonhoeffer’s attempt to deal with sociological issues theologically from his perspective.

²¹⁸ For a thorough introduction to Bonhoeffer’s theology overall, a good place to start is Feil’s *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (1991).

4.1. A Žižekian reading of *Sanctorum Communio*

4.1.1 Introduction

Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer's first thesis, received the highest approbation from Seeberg and the Theological faculty in Berlin, but received little attention until after Bonhoeffer's death, as part of a renewed interest in the body of his work.²¹⁹ What set the work apart was its ambition to deal with sociological issues theologically or from a theological perspective. Bonhoeffer carried out his undertaking of a dialogue between theology and sociology with conviction and confidence aided by his liberal theological intellectual formation at Berlin and its own persuasion about the need for theology to engage other intellectual disciplines.²²⁰

4.1.2 Theoretical grounding of the authentic form of community: *Scheler's collective person*

In the first chapter, after providing his definitions of social philosophy and sociology, Bonhoeffer reflects on the import of social philosophy and states that 'the concern of sociology is to trace the many complex interactions back to certain constitutive acts of spirit that comprise the distinctive characteristic of the structure [of community]' (DBWE 1: p. 30). His pursuit in *Sanctorum Communio* is, then, just that – a sociological attempt to locate the constitutive acts of a true community, which he considers is exclusively the structurally distinctive community of saints. Thus both Bonhoeffer and

²¹⁹ The work was first published only three years after his doctoral exam in 1927 but it was truncated and received only three reviews. In the 1960s, versions that included more of the original dissertation were published but it was not until 1986 when the full text was included as the first volume of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW). The English translation part of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE) is based on that edition. See the editor's introduction to DBWE 1: pp. 9-13.

²²⁰ For a description of the original character of *Sanctorum Communio* in that respect, see Dramm (2001), pp. 67-70.

Žižek search for the structure of a genuine community and find its religious form enlightening, one from an ethical perspective that is distinctly religious and personalist, the other from one which is forthrightly materialist and ontological.

In order to employ social philosophy and social theory in pursuit of a theology of sociality,²²¹ *Sanctorum Communio* begins by engaging in a dialectical discussion of personhood as the foundation of sociality, but also as existing only in sociality. To denote this relational view of personhood, or interrelatedness, Bonhoeffer employs the term ‘collective person’ [Gesamtperson], a term originally used by the philosopher Max Scheler (1874 – 1928) in *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (2005a). There the term describes the distinctive unity of the execution of social acts,²²² which are inherently directed at other persons and are only fully executed in relation to others, in contrast to the intimate or singularizing acts.²²³ Together these acts show that the person is both an individual and a member of a community or collectivist, and that the individual person is formed and realized only in the context of sharing the responsibility for community. Bonhoeffer agrees with this relational view of personhood – indeed, his use of the term ‘person’ is completely relational in statements such as ‘for the individual to “exist”, others must necessarily be there’, and therefore personhood is possible and real only in sociality, i.e. responsibility toward the other (DBWE 1: p. 51). This is what Green has in mind when he says that Bonhoeffer ‘insists equally on the irreducible, independent integrity of the individual person, and on the fact that this person exists essentially in relation to others’ (ibid., p. 30). Bonhoeffer’s

²²¹ As laid out in the work’s foreword; see DBWE 1: pp. 21-23.

²²² These include promising, commanding and obeying.

²²³ These are acts of self-consciousness, self-love and self-respect, directed at the self and fulfilled with reference only to the self (ibid., p. 511).

personalism is marked by the dialectic tension between individuality and communality, where one is not overtaken by the other.

Bonhoeffer uses his personalist perspective of the collective person where ‘[t]he You sets the limit for the subject’ (ibid., p. 51) to challenge Hegel’s Idealist subject-object relation. Hegel sought to overcome the conscious gap between the individual and the world, or the subject and the object, in Part A of *Phenomenology of Spirit*: ‘Consciousness’²²⁴ and argued that perception of something as external is nothing but self-consciousness, our appropriation of the world around us. Thus the object cannot be considered as detached, apart from the subject, together with whom it forms a whole. Indeed, consciousness of self and the external world are part of a comprehensive, evolving, rational unity – the Absolute. Bonhoeffer considers that the Other is in Hegel’s talk of consciousness reduced to a mere object of the subject’s perception and is in that sense subsumed by it.²²⁵ In support of his argument, Bonhoeffer outlines four

²²⁴ Part A (pp. 58-103) comprises three chapters: Chapter 1: Sense-Certainty: or the 'This' and 'Meaning', pp. 58-66; Chapter 2: Perception: or the Thing and Deception, pp. 67-78; Chapter 3: Force and the Understanding: Appearance and the Supersensible World, pp. 79-103.

²²⁵ DBWE 1: p. 41 [20], p. 45. However, Bonhoeffer’s objection doesn’t seem to consider how Hegel’s thought develops from ‘consciousness’ to ‘self-consciousness’, which is the title of Part B. Thus in Chapter 4: The Truth of Self-Certainty (pp. 104-138), Hegel examines the intersubjective conditions of consciousness. Not only does the subject’s consciousness of the object as something distinct from oneself require awareness of self as a subject for whom something is distinct, but that itself depends on one’s recognition [Anerkennung] of other self-conscious subjects as such (as self-conscious subjects for whom any object of consciousness will be thought as also existing). This means that the subject’s self-consciousness of the other depends on the other recognising themselves as a self-conscious subject. As we shall see later, this complex pattern of mutual recognition constitutes Hegel’s objective spirit. There is thus a notable change in *Phenomenology*, from consideration of individual (self)consciousness in earlier chapters, to an exploration of what grounds them – the patterns of intersubjectivity. To quote Žižek: ‘This seems to be the lesson of Hegel’s intersubjectivity – I am a free subject only through encountering another free subject – and the usual counterargument is here that, for Hegel, this dependence on the Other is just a mediating step/detour on the way toward full recognition of the subject in its Other, the full appropriation of the Other. But are things so simple? What if the Hegelian “recognition” means that I have to recognize in the impenetrable Other which appears as the obstacle to my freedom its positive-enabling ground and condition? What if it is only in this sense is that the Other is “sublated”?’ See Žižek (2013a), p. 142.

Bonhoeffer seems to have missed this topic in his consideration of the *Phenomenology*. Rather than boldly claiming that this is a sign of his secondary familiarity with Hegel, it should be noted that

conceptual models of social basic-relation which demonstrate that every concept of community is essentially related to a concept of person but which fail to maintain the dialectical tension between them (DBWE 1: pp. 34-57): Aristotle's metaphysical ontological model, in which the essential being 'lies beyond individual-personal being'; the Stoic school model, in which the human being becomes a person 'by subordination to a higher imperative' (ibid., p. 37) and which Bonhoeffer compares with the Christian concept of a person,²²⁶ although he still locates the essential being outside the individual; the Epicurean model, which he understands as mere individualism; and the Cartesian epistemological model, which remains in the subject-object relationship, where 'the knowing I becomes the starting point of all philosophy' (ibid., p. 40). Bonhoeffer observes that all four of these models are based upon sameness, not unity, where 'it is the destiny of the human species to be absorbed into the realm of reason, perform a realm of completely similar and harmonious persons, defined by universal reason or by one spirit and separated only by the different activities' (ibid., p. 43). Along parallel lines the idealist subject-object schema, he argues, ends up denying the community by overtaking or eradicating distinctiveness and resulting in sameness, leading Bonhoeffer to conclude that they do not result in true community (ibid., pp. 41-43, 80), since they are merely epistemological rather than sociological concepts.

attention to Hegel's intersubjective conditions of consciousness gathered momentum only with Kojève and onwards. However, it is this missed movement in Hegel's thought that makes for an interesting comparison when Bonhoeffer claims that 'there would be no self-consciousness without community – or better, that self-consciousness arises concurrently with the consciousness of existing in community' (DBWE 1: p. 70). See also Marsh (1994), pp. 88-91.

²²⁶ In this conception the individual and universal are closely interconnected. The importance of this will become clearer later on.

Far from advocating a vulgar form of individualism, Bonhoeffer in turn insists upon intersubjectivity and is clear that personhood emerges and exists only in meeting with the Other:

[T]he person ever and again arises and passes away in time. The person does not exist timelessly; a person is not static, but dynamic. The person exists always and only in ethical responsibility; the person is re-created again and again in the perpetual flux of life (ibid., p. 48).

The theoretical framework and drive here is social rather than epistemological, hence the preference for the word ‘person’. This is the context of statements asserting that there is a ‘fundamental synthesis between social and individual being’ (ibid., p. 75), that the individual belongs with the other ‘even though, or precisely because, the one is completely separate from the other’ (ibid., p. 56)²²⁷ and that ‘social relations must be understood, then, as purely interpersonal and building on the uniqueness and separateness of persons’ (ibid., p. 55).

How can Bonhoeffer’s understanding of intersubjectivity be compared to Žižek’s ontological assertion that any attempt to account for oneself is always conducted within a certain intersubjective context and reveals our constitutive exposure to the Other (Žižek, 2008b, p. 45)? The difference is made clear in the following paragraph from *The Neighbour*:

My very status as a subject depends on its link to the substantial Other: not only the regulative-symbolic Other of the tradition in which I am embedded, but also the bodily-desiring substance of the Other, the fact that, in the core of my being, I am irreducibly vulnerable, exposed to Other(s). And far from limiting my ethical status (autonomy), this primordial vulnerability due to my constitutive exposure to the Other

²²⁷Bonhoeffer here, in footnote 12, refers back approvingly to Fichte’s recognition that persons cannot exist at all without others to spark their personhood-encounter.

grounds it: what makes an individual human and thus something for which we are responsible, toward whom we have a duty to help, is his/her very finitude and vulnerability. Far from undermining ethics [...], this primordial exposure/dependency opens up the properly ethical relation of individuals who accept and respect each other's vulnerability and limitation. Crucial here is the link between the impenetrability of the Other and my own impenetrability to myself: they are linked because my own being is grounded in the primordial exposure to the Other. Confronted with the Other, I never can fully account for myself (Žižek, 2013a, p. 138).

Bonhoeffer's and Žižek's intersubjectivity differs in its grounding – ethics as pre-existing and grounding ontology for the first and ontology grounding ethics for the latter.

For Bonhoeffer synthesis between social and individual being is based upon the 'concrete ethical barrier' (DBWE 1: p. 50) that exists between persons. He asserts in a dialectical manner that while personhood emerges in sociality, this sociality is established upon the barrier between individuals. Therefore 'only when my intellect is confronted by some fundamental barrier' do I enter the social sphere (ibid., p. 45). What is this barrier? Following Scheler, who asserts that the core of the person, irreducible to any physical or psychic characteristics, is not given in perception by the Other (Scheler, 2005b, p. 238), Bonhoeffer insists on the impossibility of knowing the Other as an independent subject in a cognitive way (DBWE 1: p. 45). If that is attempted, then the Other is no longer an independent subject but purely an object of the knowing mind, leaving the social sphere for the epistemological. Therefore, from page 45 onwards, Bonhoeffer argues that in order to avoid the Other becoming purely an object they must remain an 'alien I' (ibid., pp. 45, 52).

The use of the word “alien” lends itself nicely to a contrast with Žižek’s perspective which, concerned with the real of the subject or its core before and after symbolization, considers the Other as monstrous (Žižek, 2013a, p. 162). In comparison to Bonhoeffer’s Schelerian personalist theoretical apparatus, Žižek’s subjectivity is thoroughly Lacanian (as already noted in section 1.2 on his conceptual framework) for the subject is located on the borders of the Real and the Symbolic Order, with everything one can know about them being located in the Symbolic (Žižek, 1996, p. 43). However, besides the constant surplus of the subject of the other, Žižek insists upon the surplus of the subject itself. Furthermore, that which cannot be known directly is what the subject is in itself, therefore locating the subject in the lack. He speaks about the inhuman which makes the human human (Žižek, 2013a, pp. 159-160) and the hole in the order of being: I fully am not as an isolated Self, but in the thriving reality part of which I am.²²⁸ ‘I will never be able to account for myself in front of the Other, because I am already nontransparent to myself, and I will never get from the Other a full answer to “who are you?” because the Other is a mystery also for him/herself’ (ibid., p. 138). Not only is there more to the other subject than what I can know, but, what is more radical, the subject of the first or second person is that which cannot be known – the lack or gap itself. Bonhoeffer speaks of inability and impermissibility to recognise the other in an absolute manner, but for Žižek the absolute other and self are recognized, but is not known (ibid., p.143). Žižek’s impenetrability of the subject (whether I or the Other) is thus radically contrasted with Bonhoeffer’s mere impenetrability of the Other.

²²⁸ Cf. Bonhoeffer in DBWE 1: p. 80: ‘in relations with others, I do not merely satisfy one side of my structurally closed being as spirit; rather, only here do I discover my reality, i.e., my I-ness [...] community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another. The collective unit and the individual unit have the same structure’.

The being's ontological impenetrability of the former is completely distinct from the Other's ethical impenetrability of the latter.

Rather than merely a Bonhoefferian impenetrability of the Other, Žižek demonstrates that the Real of the subject is recognised only through the psychoanalytical introduction of the unconscious. On the other side, Bonhoeffer's use of 'real' in order to distinguish the ethical sphere from the epistemological when he says that 'only the experience of the barrier as real is a specifically ethical experience' is far from an ontological or psychoanalytic category (DBWE 1: p. 47). Therefore, while a cursory reading of the *Sanctorum Communio* would suggest that Bonhoeffer's struggle of the epistemological with the ethical perception of the Other can be compared to Žižek's struggle of the Symbolic and the Real of the subject, a closer reading shows a fundamental difference in the understanding of the subject. From Žižek's perspective Bonhoeffer's personalist consideration of the subject is limited or partial in its restricted ethical ruminations about the Other without a proper ontological foundation. It will be argued later that Bonhoeffer's consideration ultimately results in a sociality of separation.

4.1.2.1 Bonhoeffer's subjectivization upon the concrete ethical barrier

For Bonhoeffer the subject emerges in the ethical encounter with the Other or the experience of the 'concrete ethical barrier': 'The You sets the limit for the subject and by its own accord activates a will that impinges upon the Other in such a way that this other will becomes a You for the I' (ibid., p. 51).²²⁹ Yet this ethical ontology is in stark

²²⁹ Cf. DBWE 1, p. 50: 'One cannot even speak of the individual without at the same time necessarily thinking of the 'other' who moves the individual into the ethical sphere.'

contrast to Žižek's own ontological foundation for the relation of persons. Immediately the use of the word 'you' alerts the reader to a contrast of the subject knowing itself authentically but not the Other – it is an ontology based on separation. Here the Other addresses me with an unconditional transcendent (ibid., p. 52) call and constitutes me as an ethical subject:

The I comes into being only in relation to the You; only in response to a demand does responsibility arise. 'You' says nothing about its own being, only about its demand. This demand is absolute. What does this mean? The whole person, who is totally claimless, is claimed by this absolute demand. But this seems to make one human being the creator of the ethical person of the other, which is an intolerable thought (ibid., p. 54).

Bonhoeffer's insistence that the Other is a 'person in concrete, living individuality' (ibid., p. 48) is a sign that this is a completely heteronomous injunction, captivated within the symbolic rather than a recognition of the surplus which disrupts it. It is the ethical which calls the subject into being in a 'concrete, living individuality', rather than the subject in its intersubjective inhumanity grounding the (ethical) action. Far from an ontology, it is ethics: to the question about what constitutes being, Bonhoeffer answers ethics. But this ethic is completely external, an inescapable command coming from an entirely alien sphere, not from a solidarity of the vulnerable, but rather from the Other, who has now become the transcendent and 'overcomes' me, demanding obedience if I am to be constituted as a subject.²³⁰

²³⁰ In that sense a Žižekian challenge to Bonhoeffer runs parallel to his challenge of the Levinasian account of the emergence of the Ethical. See Žižek (2013a), pp. 142-151.

Bonhoeffer theoretically analyses the time when faced with this ethical call as ‘moment’ – a time dimension where the claim of ethics is effectual in concrete time and ‘only when I am responsible am I fully conscious of being bound to time’ (ibid., p. 48). Bonhoeffer is not merely arguing against a sort of universally valid decision as coming from being in full possession of a rational mind, but rather reiterating his understanding of subjectivization or the emergence of the subject: ‘I enter the reality of time by relating my concrete person in time and all its particularities to this imperative – by making myself ethically responsible’ (ibid.). Bonhoeffer thus reconceives the relation between subjectivity and transcendence by advocating the existence of the subject as grounded in its openness to a transcendent Otherness. His understanding of ‘concrete’ and ‘moment’ denotes a particularity at the expense of any notion of universality, for any other concept of person fragments the fullness of life of the concrete person. Insofar as all that exists is an ethical call deciding the continual emergence or fading away of the subject, this moment knows nothing but the particular.

How, then, does Bonhoeffer’s moment compare to Žižek’s ‘truth-event’? As explored in Chapter 2, in ‘The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul’ in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999a, pp. 127-170), Žižek proposes that revolutionary change only comes from an ‘event’ or location of the political act and subject, specifically the marginalised or excluded. This focus on the location and the marginalised is in contrast to Bonhoeffer’s focus on time and the concrete. Whereas Žižek focuses on the excluded, those unseen and barely discernible as a tic in the current order, Bonhoeffer focuses on the injunction of those temporally present. Bonhoeffer would no doubt dismiss Žižek’s reference to the universal as idealist aberration, yet

Žižek's conception of universalism as being embodied in the excluded is in stark contrast to Bonhoeffer's recognition of those presenting their particular interests (Žižek, 2003, p. 112). What about those who cannot be seen because they are excluded, unseen or inhuman? Žižek adopts Agamben's figure of the Muselmann²³¹ – the living dead of the concentration camp – as someone 'who fully witnessed the horror of the concentration camp and, for that very reason, is not able to bear witness to it' (Žižek, 2013a, p. 160).²³² Such a subject, reduced to the inhuman, is not present in Bonhoeffer's grounding of the subject temporally upon a response to the ethical demand of the present particular; neither can 'I' respond. It highlights Bonhoeffer's temporal concreteness of particularity at the expense of universality. Žižek in turn grounds the subject spatially upon the recognition of the universal lack, of that very inhuman:

What if it is precisely in the guise of [...] a Muselmann that we encounter the Other's call at its purest and most radical? What if, facing a Muselmann, one hits upon one's responsibility toward the Other at its most traumatic? (ibid., p. 162)

In Žižek's understanding universalism is the result of a great process of struggle of the excluded that opens with an event. For him this is the 'intrusion of the traumatic Real that shatters the predominant symbolic texture' (Žižek, 1999a, p. 142). It is thus necessary to detach oneself from Bonhoeffer's 'concrete' situation, for it is only through the murder of particularity that universality follows (Žižek, 2003, p. 17f). Anything else does not represent a meeting with the subject qua the Real of the Subject. Does Bonhoeffer not advocate avoiding the troubling excess, rather than exposing the self to

²³¹ This slang term was used by prisoners and guards in Auschwitz to refer to a concentration camp prisoner who has been reduced to no more than a shadow by starvation, exhaustion and resignation.

²³² Žižek here refers to Agamben (2002).

the real of the other (cf. Žižek, 2013a, p. 9)? This is the only way to meet the Real of the given order rather than merely its semblance, and as such a constitutive act of a ‘true community’ that Bonhoeffer and Žižek are searching for. This surplus, the Real, the inhuman, the alien or the monstrous, is what Žižek understands as the theological, and its recognition, concomitant with a detachment from that which is present, represented, included – or to use Bonhoeffer’s words, concrete and particular – represents an Event and breaking in or emergence of the true community. Much like in his understanding of the new community, recognition and detachment are the distinctive characteristics of the structure of genuine community. This tension between Bonhoeffer and Žižek will next be observed in Bonhoeffer’s grapple with Hegel’s concept of objective spirit.

4.1.3 The dynamic of the authentic form of community: Hegel’s objective spirit

In the final section of Chapter Three (DBWE 1: pp. 97-106), ‘The Primal State and the Problem of Community’, Bonhoeffer takes up a discussion of Hegel’s *Objektiver Geist* [objective spirit] from *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (see ‘*der Objektiver Geist*’ in Hegel, 1970c, pp. 554-654/1990, pp. 483f). Hegel proposed the concept as an embodiment of the Absolute in objective patterns of social interaction and the cultural institutions, the relational ties between individual wills conscious of their diversity and particularity, but beyond their individual control. As such it concerns philosophical questions of law, moral philosophy, political philosophy and history, in contrast to his philosophy of subjective spirit, which is a sort of philosophy of mind in the contemporary sense and deals with, among other things, anthropology and psychology. Bonhoeffer’s own understanding of the concept is guided by Seeberg’s *Christliche Dogmatik* (1927a, p. 505ff) and Freyer’s *Theorie des objektiven Geistes* (Freyer, 1923,

53ff).²³³ He finds much value in the concept and its ‘monumental perception’ of the spirit of sociality extending beyond the individual (DBWE 1: p. 74),²³⁴ and adopts it in order to develop a dialectical understanding of the emergence of the communal subject:

[W]here wills unite, a ‘structure’ is created – that is, a third entity, previously unknown, independent of being willed or not willed by the persons who are uniting. This general recognition of the nature of objective spirit was a discovery of the qualitative thinking that became dominant in romanticism and idealism [...]. Two wills encountering one another form a structure. A third person joining them sees not just one person connected to the other; rather, the will of the structure, as a third factor, resists the newcomer with a resistance not identical with the wills of the two individuals. Sometimes this is even more forceful than that of either individual [...]. Precisely this structure is objective spirit [...] the persons themselves experience their community as something real outside themselves (DBWE 1, pp. 98-99).

The objective spirit here is understood as the ineradicable core of the community – it enables and directs it and ‘to withdraw from it is to withdraw from the community. It wills historical continuity as well as the social realisation of its will’ (ibid., p. 100). This ‘bond’ or entity of the objective spirit is already in place and is encountered by a person wishing to enter an already existing community, where members also interact with each other only by its means.²³⁵ The objective spirit is the heart of community.

To distinguish his understanding of the spirit from that of Hegel, who proposes that the ‘spirit has reality, and individuals are its accidents’ (Hegel, 1986, p. 506/1995, p. 205), Bonhoeffer insists that it does not absorb the individual (DBWE 1: p. 103). His insistence is parallel to that which is observed in his critique in Chapter Two of the four

²³³ For a valuable secondary insight into Bonhoeffer’s understanding and appropriation of the concept see Kotsko (2005) and Nowers (2013).

²³⁴ See also p. 102.

²³⁵ Language is one such means; see DBWE 1: p. 69.

models of social-basic relation as enforcing sameness and the rejection of the Hegelian subject-object model as considering the other as an object of the subject's perception – it is based upon a conviction that each time the ethical boundary or limit of the relationship between 'I' and 'Other' has been transgressed. This is what he understands as sin ('Sin and Broken Community' in DBWE 1: pp. 107-121), as will be discussed later. For now, it is appropriate to summarize by noting that for Bonhoeffer, objective spirit is the tension or meeting place between the individual and the community and it is within this tension that a person exists:

Thus we are not dealing here with the conception of some spirit entity, called spirit of the people, that arises of its own natural strength from metaphysical depths. Rather, in the dialectical movement through which alone persons originate, individual collective persons come into being as well. Only with this insight does the richness of the monadic image of social life become clear. Collective persons are self-conscious and spontaneous (ibid., p. 103).

Bonhoeffer is here pursuing a dialectical conception of the objective spirit and introduces the concept of 'individual collective person' as 'one that transcends all individuals but would be incomprehensible without the correlate of personal, individual being' (ibid., p. 77). It is thus a personalist description of interaction or the relationship between the individual and community, where the individual is 'self-contained' but discovering its being in the engagement and shaping of community (ibid., p. 79). This unity, Bonhoeffer contends,

does not abolish the specific reciprocal movement of community. Individual persons remain completely separate from one another. The collective person is metaphysically autonomous in relation to the individuals, though at the same time genetically dependent (ibid., p. 105).

This contention is established upon the earlier presentation of basic relations given within the personhood of every human being – a net of sociality (ibid., pp. 65-80), which is characterised by openness on the one hand (the capacity and necessity of a person to participate in sociality with others), but also closedness on the other (the unity, integrity and irreducibility of the person) (ibid., p. 67). ‘The unity and closedness of the whole person is posited along with its sociality’ (ibid., p. 75), refuting the priority of either personal or social being.²³⁶

Bonhoeffer’s personalist rejection of Hegel’s universalism, or at least Bonhoeffer’s reading of it as already noted above, is that the latter is itself based on exclusion by destroying the particularity of the individual. In other words, its inclusion is achieved upon its exclusion. It resonates strongly with more current multi-cultural suspicion of suppression or exclusion of those that do not fit the notion of the universal. It is thus but a false solution. The history of the twentieth century has shown that underneath the concept of universality often lie instincts of domination, racism and sexism of a particular group at the expense of the other, who is effaced and suppressed (at any cost).

The question then becomes whether the same criticism can be directed at Žižek and his argument for and conception of universality. Is it ultimately hiding the same exclusivism and an attempt at articulating the interests of a particular post-Marxist Eurocentric perspective when he calls for an undermining of globalisation from the

²³⁶ See also DBWE 1, p. 80: ‘God does not desire a history of individual human beings, but the history of the human community. However, God does not want a community that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of human beings. In God’s eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another.’

standpoint of universal Truth (Žižek, 1999a, p. 211)? Is this what is really at the heart of his materialist utilisation and interpretation of Christian theology in which the murder of Christ the particular enables the emergence of the universality of Galatians 3:22?²³⁷

As I have demonstrated in Chapter 2, Žižek's challenge is rather that universality is the very principle of negativity which drives these particularities in antagonism to prevent the notion of totality.²³⁸ According to his Lacanian understanding of Hegel, universality is this negativity or tension that prevents a certain particularity from ever achieving self-closure. Rather than abolishing differences it articulates them (Žižek, 2003, p. 112). He reminds us that this is why Hegel calls it 'concrete universality' (Žižek, 2006b, p. 30) – it is an awareness of the present state of affairs, revealing internally unsolvable conflicts and emerging at the point of exception or marginalization: '[T]he whole point of the Pauline notion of struggling universality is that true universality and partiality do not exclude each other, but universal Truth is accessible only from a partial engaged subjective position' (ibid., p. 35).

Bonhoeffer also speaks of the community as struggling. He recognises that the unification of will is constituted upon the 'inner conflict of individual wills' (DBWE 1: p. 86) and observes 'that strife [Kampf] is recognised as a fundamental sociological law and basically is sanctified [...]. Genuine life arises only in the conflict of wills; strength unfolds only in strife' (ibid., pp. 84-85).²³⁹ However, in the next sentence he qualifies

²³⁷ Žižek (2003), p. 17f.; Žižek (1999a), p. 157.

²³⁸ A good and concise introduction to Žižek's understanding of Hegelian universality can be found on pp. 28-36 in *The Parallax View* (2006b).

²³⁹ Bonhoeffer refers here to Hobbes as in all likelihood the first to articulate the purely social meaning of strife when talking about *bellum omnium contra omnes*. The reference is missing but the Latin phrase occurs in *De Cive* or *The Citizen* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), pp. 13, 29, 104, while in *Leviathan* (Project Gutenberg, 2002) Hobbes speaks of 'warre of every one against every one [or man]' in

this with a statement that there has been no concrete and productive conflict in the genuine sense since the Fall, thus raising the problem of sin and pointing to the need for the community of ‘separate of persons’ (ibid., p. 83) to be maintained by someone else – God. The contrast becomes even more accentuated when Žižek distinguishes concrete universality from abstract universality, which is maintained by the big Other, be it the big Other of really existing Christianity (as in ‘real-socialism’) or capitalism. This abstract universality is mediated and regulated (Žižek, 2013a, p. 143) and remains trapped within particularity insofar as it disavows ‘the antagonism that inheres to the notion’ of ‘Christianity’ and ‘frees the universal notion of antagonisms [no more Greek, nor Jew etc.] of the way it is embedded in the system, by relegating this aspect to just one of its historical subspecies’ (i.e. they are now all Christian) (Žižek, 2006b, p. 34).²⁴⁰ As we shall see later, this is indeed how Bonhoeffer reads Galatians 3:22. Here is how Žižek understands it:

[T]he universal dimension he [Saint Paul] opened up is not the ‘neither Greek nor Jew but all Christians,’ which implicitly excludes non-Christians; it is, rather, the difference Christians/non-Christians itself which, as a difference, is universal, that is to say, cuts across the entire social body, splitting, dividing from within every substantial ethnic (ibid., p. 35)

Žižek’s materialist Christianity suspends the particular in its name along the line of Lenin’s repetition of the paradigmatic Christ-event in his advocacy of actual freedom (Žižek, 2001b, p. 114). This is the ‘Christian experience’ to which Žižek refers as

Chapter XIII of the *Naturall Condition of Mankind*, pp. 94, 96 and XIV of the *First and Second Naturall Lawes*, pp. 98, 102.

²⁴⁰ This is slightly paraphrased and applied to real-existing Christianity, while in the work it serves to elucidate the abstract universality of ‘alternate’ modernities.

necessary for concrete universalism, the recognition or realisation that Christ stands for a break with all totalities and cosmic schemes and enables an unplugging from one's symbolic community observed in Chapter 2. Instead of the indiscriminate, postmodern talk about differences, Christ divides between good and bad in accordance with the Gospel, saying, 'Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division' (Luke 12:51). Only in this way, Žižek argues, is the relationship between the universal and particular properly dialectical and the resulting universality concrete. As previously noted, according to him Christian love resists the gentrification of the neighbour and instead accepts its radical impenetrability. This kind of universality or a new collective no longer relies on an identity, but is instead struggling (Žižek, 2013a, p. 154). It is not against the background of universal hatred, but of universal indifference, where one is indifferent toward all and in this way loves the individual. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

No wonder Žižek interprets the resurrection in a Hegelian manner as the new community and identical with the Holy Spirit, for in doing so he avoids resurrection of the big Other and rests upon his absence. So, when Bonhoeffer writes that the essence of community is not commonality but rather reciprocal will, Žižek would respond that in this case the will is not their own but rather that of the big Other, who abstracts the community and prevents any 'conflict of individual wills'. It seems that, from this perspective, Bonhoeffer's drive to avoid a vulgar absorption of the individual by the community and to maintain separateness of persons solely by God results in the opposite – an abstraction of unity into particularisation. Instead, Žižek proposes that

only Christ-like unplugging or division is the constitutive act of the spirit of this new community.

The difference between Bonhoeffer's²⁴¹ and Žižek's understanding of Hegel is clear. While Žižek would consider Bonhoeffer's understanding overly simplistic and restrained by Seeberg and Freyer, his own understanding of Hegel is particular and strongly Lacanian.²⁴² Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer's personalism, which he wishes to differentiate from the idealist universalism of exclusion, seems to result in an abstraction itself. This will be explored further in the next section, with reference to that section of his thesis in which he engages the thus far explored concepts of social philosophy with theology.

4.1.4 The genuine form of community: community of saints

In the major section of his thesis, that is, Chapter 5, entitled 'Sanctorum Communio', Bonhoeffer presents a case for this distinctly theological community of saints grounded in, established and governed by God. He does so by engaging the thus far developed personalist perception of community with theology, developed and aided by the Hegelian conception of objective spirit described above which is equipped with the Holy Spirit, and thereby demonstrates the structure of a genuine community in the community of saints. The reason for the engagement, Bonhoeffer argues, is because the personalist perception of community falls short – as does Hegel's conception of objective spirit – for it rests upon an inadequate conception of person which ignores the

²⁴¹ In footnote 42 on p. 75 Bonhoeffer concludes: 'Thus our turning against idealist theory is clear; equally clear, of course, is what we have to learn from it.'

²⁴² A similar difference can be observed by Žižek and by his fellow critical theorist Ernesto Laclau (2001), who, in contrast to Hegelian concrete universality which 'sublates' all antagonisms into a higher unity, prefers the logic of irreducible antagonisms.

fundamental ontological concept of sin (guilt) and God (DBWE 1: p. 48). Without treatment of these, any discussion of being oversteps the ethical barrier and plays God – again, as exemplified in the Idealist case where the subject subsumes the Other as an object.²⁴³ Bonhoeffer thus goes about engaging the idealist and personalist conceptions with these theological concepts in order to demonstrate how community is necessarily grounded in them.

4.1.4.1 The theological concept of God

For Bonhoeffer any form of community without the community with God is not authentic (DBWE 1: p. 157). The importance of including the conception of God lies in the origin of the incomprehensibility of the Other – it lies in God the ‘impenetrable You’ (ibid., p. 34). In other words the subject is grounded in the openness to the unfathomable and transcendent Otherness of God.²⁴⁴ Furthermore the concept must be in appropriate form, rather than what is observed in idealism’s consideration of the subject and community with its inappropriate ‘immanentist concept of God or the identification of human and divine spirit’ (DBWE 1: p. 197), as Hegel’s understanding of the Absolute materialized in the historical community (Hegel, 2006, p. 470-489). Following Seeberg (1927a, pp. 73ff), Bonhoeffer calls for a ‘voluntarist’ concept of God, where the latter is the original will and in the encounter with which the human will

²⁴³ In *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (2006, p. 442-445), Hegel understands the Fall primarily as self-consciousness. While the form of the Genesis narrative is but an image, the content communicates humanity achieving knowledge of good and evil – cognition (ibid., pp. 446-451). Being self-conscious, humanity is also self-estranged, aware of its good and evil. Evil is tendency to follow desires and remain within natural being as selfish, while good is reaching beyond natural towards infinitude of thought as social – spirit. Hegel’s interpretation of the Fall is thus much like Žižek’s positive, or at least that which enables self-cognition as the beginning of the sublation to the pure realm of the spirit – the subject must become social.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Žižek (2013), p. 138.

is subjected in the process to being grasped, first intuitively and then intellectually (DWE 1: p. 49 [53]). In contrast to this, the immanentist drive of Hegel's identification of the Holy Spirit with the corporate spirit of the community, where God's will and human will are effectively collapsed into each other, ends up in a deprivation of a divine transcendence and an overbearing concept of unity (ibid., p. 198).²⁴⁵ Such a community is then broken insofar as it originates in its failure to recognise the human person in its 'creatureliness', which rests only in relation to the Divine (DBWE 1: p. 49). Its conflict or tension or 'meeting of wills' is not a necessary part in maintaining the conditions of freedom of the individual, but rather a way of transgressing it, stemming from the original transgression of creatureliness – the Fall (ibid., pp. 84-85).²⁴⁶ For it is only in God that a true meeting of wills takes place and individuals are able to understand each other.²⁴⁷ Outside of God any conception of person and corresponding community is based on the 'shared sinfulness' of transgression (ibid., pp. 108-109).

Bonhoeffer thus maintains that the 'conception' of community rests not only upon an appropriate understanding of person but that they both depend on the conception of God – they are 'inseparably and essentially interrelated' (ibid., p. 34). Only within this model is the concrete character of the community and the individual present as 'absolute and intended by God' (ibid., p. 45). In other words, 'only through God's active working does the other become You to me from whom I arises' and in this way 'every human You is an image of the divine You' (ibid., p. 54). God is here

²⁴⁵ While Bonhoeffer does recognise that Hegel retains an emphasis on the concrete individual life, he mentions that the latter also 'considers it to be merely a form of universal spirit' (DBWE 1: p. 197).

²⁴⁶ This is why Bonhoeffer earlier asserted that since the Fall, conflict of wills is not productive.

²⁴⁷ In offering this contention, Bonhoeffer shows some qualified appreciation of Fichte's treatment of the problem of the synthesis of the World Spirits, wherein the latter enquires about the common origin of persons so as to enable their mutual understanding. See DBWE 1: pp. 43-44 [8].

conceived not merely as the transcendence that enables and maintains the relationship between the subjects, but as the integral part of the relationship itself.²⁴⁸

According to this understanding the ethical barrier between persons comes from God, as well as the claim of the Other upon the subject and the latter's ensuing ethical responsibility (ibid., pp. 36-37, 49). Bonhoeffer describes this moment in a Kierkegaardian manner as a 'threat of absolute demand' causing 'infinite anxiety [Angst]' (ibid., p. 49) and argues that it is missing in the idealist model insofar as the claim comes from below or within, rather than the divine which transcends the human person. Interestingly, in 'Building Blocks for a Materialist Theology' in *Parallax View*, Žižek instead appropriates Kierkegaard to argue for the suspension of the ethical (2006b, pp. 68-123).²⁴⁹ He reads the account of Abraham's sacrifice as the subject's overcoming of the ethical coordinates or the Symbolic Order by faith and standing in an absolute relation to the Absolute, by betraying the very ethical substance of their being (Žižek, 2001d, p. 14). Žižek and Bonhoeffer both focus on the threatening or terrible moment of the call to responsibility, but while Bonhoeffer insists that it needs to come from the transcendent, Žižek convincingly argues that with the suspension of the big Other the 'ethical' act is no longer transposed or sustained by it, but the responsibility is fully assumed by the subject (Žižek, 2010c, p. 134). Only here can a full understanding of humanity arise.

²⁴⁸ DBWE 1: p. 55: 'One might then speak here of the human being as the image of God with respect to the effect one person has on another.' Bonhoeffer's later description of how one person becomes Christ for the another builds on this.

²⁴⁹ See also the section 2.8.1 on *Žižek's Kierkegaardian suspension of the ethical*.

The question is ultimately about which of the two proposed an authentic form of responsibility, not only with regards to its source but also its absolute value $|r|$ – its real magnitude without regard to its sign. What is its distance from 0, if 0 is the signless pure act of will and distance the assumed responsibility, irrespective of its sign $|r|=r$ *sgn*(r)? For the sign returns the sign only, irrespective of the absolute value of responsibility: $sgn(r)=\frac{|r|}{r}$ (insofar as $r\neq 0$). The problem with Bonhoeffer's assertion is that the sign – from the transcendent perspective – has no value and does not affect the absolute value of responsibility. The absolute value of responsibility $|r|$ is determined only in the distance between absolute values of both r_z and r_B or their distance from 0. To include the divine in the determination of the absolute value of the difference of both responsibilities is – to use Žižek's word – a perversion, for proper or true or thorough responsibility [qua] is ever only absolute, one that exclaims: we are alone.

No doubt, Bonhoeffer would reply that the truth about things as such, particularly in relation to judgments about the value of responsibility, is perceived only in the eyes of God, therefore any talk of absolute value falls short or is incorrect. That is also the reasoning behind his claim that the community of saints can never be grasped with sociological insights and is only understandable from within – *cum ira et studio*²⁵⁰ – with the eyes of (Christian) faith (DBWE 1: p. 33). In contrast to Žižek, the theology of Bonhoeffer in *Sanctorum Communio* is distinctively dogmatic and still Barthian, upholding the positivism of revelation by arguing that 'faith is not a possible method by which to gain academic knowledge; rather, by acknowledging the claim of revelation,

²⁵⁰ [with passionate zeal]. This is in contrast to Tacitus, *Annals*, 1,1: *sine ira et studio* [without passion and bias].

faith is the given prerequisite for positive theological knowledge' (ibid., p. 127). For Bonhoeffer there is no absolute value or knowledge apart from or outside God.

However, does this restriction to God not functionally abstract its object, be it the ethical act or community? Does Bonhoeffer's first and foremost ethical intersubjectivity, which is grounded and sustained by God, not characterise an abstract community insofar as it originates, is maintained and ends in the external? Is it true that a concept of person is misunderstood apart from God? Is it not rather that Bonhoeffer's ethics is based on a God as a third agent who gentrifies the surplus or monstrous of the Other, the big Other anchoring, pacifying the monstrous and regulating any engagement with the Other (Žižek, 2013a, p. 144)? God functions as the ultimate authentic foundation for community which manages the terrifying real Other. However, the encounter of the Other through God is not experience of the real Other, but rather gentrified, for what is met in the encounter is God. Certainly, it might no longer be conducted as an ethnic encounter; it does raise a new identity of 'Christian', but it is far from a collective of the alien, what Žižek calls a struggling universality, where the Other is encountered as it is, 'the ambiguity of the Real embodied, the extreme/impossible point at which opposites coincide, at which the innocence of the Other's vulnerable nakedness overlaps with pure evil' (ibid., p. 162). From a functional perspective Bonhoeffer's community rests upon God's obscuration of the neighbour by proclaiming it as the site from which the divine call to ethical responsibility emanates. His theological insistence upon the subject's being ultimately residing in a voluntarist conception of God is conducted at the expense of the Other. Žižek proposes a conception of community that seemingly does not abstract, a 'pure voluntarism' (Žižek,

2016, p. 107), within which humanity is freed through Christ's suspension of the ethical on the Cross and realization that the big Other does not exist, enabling the grasp of the human will and responsibility. The resulting terrible freedom is a refutation of Bonhoeffer's claim that the idealist model has 'no understanding of the moment in which the person feels the threat of absolute demand' (DBWE 1: p. 49). Absolute demand is only such if its magnitude is perceived without regard to its sign.

4.1.4.2 The theological concept of sin

The other concept that Bonhoeffer deems as indispensable to any theory of the subject and community and which has specific implication is that of sin (ibid., p. 58). Here too idealism is accused of failing to give it due consideration and neglecting the impact of the Fall on the 'primal state' and consequent sociological structures of community (ibid., pp. 59-60). Sin or the Fall, then, has a real qualitative historical character and Bonhoeffer argues that 'history in the true sense only begins with sin' (ibid., p. 63). It isolates the individual from God and consequently the Other, but at the same time, since Adam's Fall marks the Fall of the whole humanity, places them into the deepest, most immediate bond with humanity – a bond of culpability. This is where the communality of humanity resides for Bonhoeffer:

Now since in the individual guilty act it is precisely the humanity of human beings that has been affirmed, humanity has to be considered a community. As such it is also a collective person that has the same nature as each of its members (ibid., p. 145).

This nature of culpability places subjects in isolation from and in bondage to each other and into a constant overstepping of the borders between them, thus rupturing the community with God and the Other. The 'sinful humanity' which resides in each and

every individual and deserves condemnation is foundational to and indispensable in consideration of any community (ibid., p. 124).

In Chapter 4, 'Sin and Broken Community' (ibid., pp. 107-122), Bonhoeffer engages in an exposition of the social basic-relations between I and You after the Fall, which replaced love with selfishness, obfuscated morality to the point that it is visible only in the structures of legal order and brought about consciousness (of good and evil). Thus when individuals hear the Law and recognize their guilt they emerge as ethical persons, albeit in isolation. Their sense of culpability only intensifies upon grasping that this is the status of whole humanity – sin is a 'supra-individual deed' (ibid., p. 108). Not that man sins because the first man sinned and they are of the same biological species; rather, they share ethical personhood, where the individual is part of the ethical intersubjective. Therefore, as an individual sins, they do so as a member of the human race, which means that 'all humanity falls with each sin' (ibid., p. 115). 'Sin is the sign of belonging to the old humanity, to the first Adam; consciousness of guilt reveals to individuals their connection with all sinners' (ibid., p. 121). Bonhoeffer asserts in a dialectical manner that 'the experience of ethical solidarity is based upon the utmost singularity of the person' (ibid., p. 117), concluding that humanity is therefore a [dialectically] comprehensive [ethical] community:

The collective person of humanity has one heart. Participation in its ethical nature is demonstrated by individuals through every act of repentance and recognition of culpability. Wherever individuals recognize themselves both as individuals and as the human race, and submit to the demand of God, there beats the heart of the collective person (ibid., p. 121).

The concepts of sin, guilt and the Fall which form the distinctive foundation of the subject and community, Bonhoeffer claims, are overlooked by idealist philosophy:

For idealism, origin and telos remain in unbroken connection and are brought to synthesis in the concept of 'essence'. Nothing in between – sin, on the one hand, and Christ, on the other – can essentially break this eternal, necessary connection [...]. Such a view of history as an unbroken straight line basically eliminates everything specifically Christian. In this view, neither sin nor redemption alters the essence of history (ibid., pp. 59-60).²⁵¹

Is that also the case for Žižek? The latter considers the Fall as absolutely necessary, for it creates the conditions of 'salvation'. However, there is a fundamental difference insofar as for him there is no state from which humanity falls or (original community), rather 'the Fall creates that from which it is a Fall – or, in theological terms, God is not the Beginning' (Žižek, 2010c, p. 93). It is then an Event which enables Adam and Eve to undergo a paradigm shift through which they realise what they already are or were – naked and mortal:

So when God announces the punishment, he just spells out what Adam and Eve have already realized in noticing that they were naked, namely, their misery as two weak mortal beings [...]. It is not that the Fall is followed by redemption; rather, the Fall is identical to Redemption, it is 'in itself' already Redemption (Žižek, 2014, p. 127).

This logic was already observed in Žižek's reading of Romans 7 (Žižek, 1999a, pp. 147-149), where, according to him, the Law is given to point out its inherent transgression and thereby leads to its suspension and assumption of the subject's full responsibility in acting. It therefore contrasts Bonhoeffer's move to incorporate the ethical into God by

²⁵¹ See also p. 62.

making him the origin of our morality.²⁵² Bonhoeffer upholds the Law as holy and good due to its revealing the deficiency or brokenness of the community, and understands Christ's redemptive role as fulfilling the Law by love (DBWE 1: pp. 148-151). On the other hand, Žižek asserts that Christ rather suspends the Law by love and abolishes its logic of sin and punishment by bringing it to the point of self-relating. For him also the Fall is foundational and indispensable in the formation of community but without regard for the ex post facto sign which abstracts community.

Bonhoeffer insists upon a broken community where sin and guilt are fundamental elements of its ontology – no matter how much emphasis is laid on grace and the presence of God. That is why the first step towards a transcendental redeeming of such a dysfunctional community is a recognition of guilt and the resulting shame before God's gaze. What happens to this guilt and shame if we accept Žižek's suspension of the big Other? Does the guilt disappear? Žižek's poignant observation is that this guilt or shame does not arise from 'the Benthamic-Orwellian notion of the panopticon society in which we are (potentially) observed all the time and have no place to hide from the omnipresent gaze', but rather from 'the prospect of not being exposed to the Other's gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera's gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his or her being' (Žižek, 2013a, p. 180). The terror for Bonhoeffer seems to be that there is only us, inconsistent, ambiguous and lacking, and therefore he grounds the subject and community in the redeeming big Other by the notion of sin and guilt.

²⁵² Cf. Žižek (2014), p. 130.

Is Bonhoeffer's argument here not an example of Feuerbach's false essence of Christianity that alienates man as himself and man from community and its own perfections? His famous dictum that in order 'to enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing' (Feuerbach, 1989, p. 26)²⁵³ certainly seems to hold true with Bonhoeffer's *peccatorum communio* [community of sinners], where not only is that which is attributed to God withheld from the community of man itself but the deprived state of humanity also forms the basis of sociality.²⁵⁴

In the next section it will be described how, according to Bonhoeffer, God enters the broken community by revealing himself in and as Christ and redeems it by creating the church qua a new community no longer grounded upon culpability – Christ existing as community.

4.1.4.3 The theological concept of the church-community

After considering the derivation of the social form derived from the idealist metaphysical as flawed due to its inappropriate conception of God and sin and therefore to be rejected (DBWE 1: p. 28), Bonhoeffer attempts to demonstrate the preferred and apposite social form from the theological in the community of saints [*sanctorum communio*], where the conceptions of 'person, community and God have an essential and indissoluble relation to one another' (ibid., p. 22). This community of God – as in church of God – is presented as representing the source for any and all social considerations in theology (ibid., pp. 86, 122-123).

²⁵³ Might one not understand the passage from the gospel of John Chapter 3, where John the Baptist meets Jesus at the baptism, in this way? In verse 20 John utters the following: 'He must increase, but I must decrease!', thus projecting the predicates of perfection onto Jesus and then pushing himself into obscurity.

²⁵⁴ DBWE 1: pp. 148-149 cf. Feuerbach (1989), p. 27.

When Bonhoeffer writes about the ‘community of saints’, he has in mind the concrete or empirical²⁵⁵ church, not a ‘religious community, but the empirical church as the *sanctorum communio* present in its actual embodiment’ (ibid., p. 180). The term *sanctorum communio*, derived from the Apostles’ Creed and Augustine’s community of Christ, was brought to Bonhoeffer’s attention by his supervisor’s use of it in Textbooks of the History of Doctrines to portray the church as a distinctly visible social body in its worship and cooperation (ibid., p. 141). Bonhoeffer, however, wishes to highlight that the church is not isolated or secluded and focuses on its participation in the basic forms of society, such as the subject or sociality (ibid., p. 152). The full dialectical character of this participation is demonstrated in the observation that while these basic forms take on a new form they remain the same and are sublated upon encountering God. It is only through this interaction that the new basic relation of the church is constituted (ibid., p. 261). For Bonhoeffer *sanctorum communio* or the empirical church thus represents a ‘form of community *sui generis*’ (ibid., p. 266), a dialectically unique structure where the divine and human come together (ibid., p. 126).

To elaborate and lay bare the existing sociality of the community of saints which is sublated through its encounter with God, Bonhoeffer adapts and appropriates Hegel’s sociological category of the objective spirit discussed earlier, by ‘equipping’ it with the Holy Spirit. Insofar as the human objective spirit is the ineradicable core and bond of the community that gets its character from the historical context, this very historicity ‘implies that it is fallible and imperfect as far as its understanding and will are concerned’ (ibid., p. 215). It is therefore only through its meeting with the divine in the

²⁵⁵ Empirical as in grounded in reality and thus suitable for deduction. See DBWE 1: p. 97.

Holy Spirit that it is aufgehoben to a building and bearing of the church (ibid., p. 152). Yet the objective spirit and Holy Spirit remain distinct as observed in their function (ibid., pp. 203-204, 214) and are not to be confused: while the function of the first is to enable a degree of continuity, the latter actualizes the church here and now (ibid., p. 208).²⁵⁶ Thus both concepts bring about the two natures, or constituent elements of the church: while its actions are not simply those of the Holy Spirit (ibid., p. 214), the latter changes and influences the objective spirit, thus performing its redemptive role by impacting and maintaining it, lifting this fallible community into God's community (ibid., pp. 126, 143, 280-281). Indeed, Bonhoeffer understands the objective spirit, as corrupt as it may be, as the Holy Spirit's vehicle (ibid., p. 215) and explores the institutions of the church's objective spirit along the lines of Hegel's account of the spirit in the modern state (Hegel, 1986, pp. 579ff [1990, pp. 413ff]). To that end an individual congregation is contrasted with the universal church (DBWE 1: pp. 223-226), whereas Hegel contrasts the family and the state. To summarize, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church community form as distinctive from the basic forms of society and yet in dialectical relationship with them is in its foundation Hegelian, for it is founded upon the concept of objective spirit as objective patterns of social interaction.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ From this page onwards Bonhoeffer engages in an exegesis of the role of the Holy Spirit in the establishment and continuation of the church community, thus also distinguishing his understanding of objective spirit from the idealist. Cf. DBWE 1: p. 145.

²⁵⁷ Even though the concept of the objective spirit is not mentioned specifically in most of the works that follow *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, this Hegelian foundation of the dynamic of church-community persists. Kotsko's helpful article (2005) draws attention to its prominence in Bonhoeffer's 1933 lectures on *Christology, Discipleship and The Letters*, the first with regards to the presence of Christ in the human community, the second with regards to the church's doctrine and, the latter, with regards to the changing form of the church, specifically religiosity.

To the challenge that the basic sociological forms are merely overcome by God, Bonhoeffer responds that while this community is marked by ambiguity and the emphasis is on God as its sole source and maintainer (DBWE 1: p. 216), the community participates in those acts through its active being.²⁵⁸ This dialectic is best illustrated in Bonhoeffer's concept of *Stellvertretung*, or vicarious representative action, denoting representation in place of another or intercession on behalf of another and originating in Christ who bore the sins of humanity and accepted the punishment on Calvary.²⁵⁹ This fundamental theological concept throughout Bonhoeffer's writings, which appears already in *Sanctorum Communio* rather than being a later development of *Ethics*,²⁶⁰ is achieved by transforming Hegel's conception of the Spirit existing as community²⁶¹ into 'Christ existing as church-community'.²⁶² The line between human and divine agency is obscure here, fully expressed in the statement that 'in our intercession we can become a Christ to our neighbour' (DBWE 1: p. 187).²⁶³ Insofar as Christ's being-for-other is the experience of transcendence, the church participates in this being when it is there for others.²⁶⁴ Not only is Christ 'at all times a real presence for the church' (DBWE 1: p. 139),²⁶⁵ but the church is the real presence of Christ, where 'Christ truly is' (*ibid.*, pp.

²⁵⁸ Also, the church is not a triumphalist community where sin is absent, but instead the bringing in of a divine reality. See Luca D'Isanto (1992), p. 143.

²⁵⁹ DBWE 1: pp. 79, 120, 146, 148, 155ff., 178, 184, 191.

²⁶⁰ Cf. DBWE 6: pp. 231, 235, 257-258, 288, 404.

²⁶¹ 'Die Idee im Element der Gemeinde: Das Reich des Geistes' in Hegel (1971), *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion 2: 443ff* ['The realization of the Spirituality of the Community' in Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion 3:339ff*].

²⁶² DBWE 1: p. 121: 'It is "Adam", a collective person, who can only be superseded [abgelöst] by the collective person "Christ existing as church-community"'.²⁶³

²⁶³ See also pp. 178-180.

²⁶⁴ Cf. DBWE 8: p. 501.

²⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer is here referring to 1 Corinthians 12:2ff and Romans 12:4ff.

140, 158).²⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer again highlights the dialectical participation between the divine and human agency of this community centred in the figure of Christ.

Bonhoeffer's upholding of the church as the presence of Christ can be compared to Žižek's own upholding of Christ's continued presence as the emancipatory collective of the Holy Spirit community (Žižek, 2012a, pp. 85-86). The latter explains this Christological aspect through the use of the folk song 'Joe Hill' about the murder of a trade union organiser. The song takes on the form of Joe's post-mortem apparition to someone in a dream. To their insistence that Joe is dead, he responds, 'What they forgot to kill went on to organize' (quoted in Žižek, 2012a, p. 68). What survives, Žižek argues, is that which is more than the body – the excess or immortal part, the Real of the subject – and therefore not as the body or ghost but in the context of its intersubjective exposure, the 'collective'. With regards to Christ, the body dies as the site of overcoming the law and any attempt to 'resurrect' it by looking for him outside the community is seen as a mistake 'which Christ corrects with the famous words: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there"' (ibid., p. 86). Could this not be read in parallel with Bonhoeffer's assertion that 'there is no relation to Christ in which the relation to the church is not necessarily established as well' (DBWE 1: p. 127)? Of course, for Bonhoeffer the presence of Christ is only possible because resurrection actually occurred,²⁶⁷ whereas for Žižek it is the very absence of the resurrection that makes the presence of that which is more than the body of Christ possible in the Holy

²⁶⁶ Likewise, Bonhoeffer asserts, the Holy Spirit also is 'only in the church-community, and the church-community is only in the spirit: "Ubi enim ecclesia ibi et spiritus; et ubi spiritus dei, illic ecclesia et omnis gratia" [for where the church is there is the Spirit; and where the spirit of God is, there is the church and every kind of grace]' (DBWE 1, p. 144).

²⁶⁷ DBW 12: p. 312: 'Only where the risen Christ is understood as the ground and the prerequisite for Christology is it possible to grasp his presence as person.' Cf. pp. 330-331, 359.

Spirit community. However, it would be a mistake to consider Žižek's understanding as some kind of a mystical power through memory. Instead, it is engagement with the Real Christ. Perhaps Bonhoeffer's own understanding is also stretched further in the later stages of his thought (The Letters), when he wonders about the church, the ethical challenge to be a stellvertretender [vicarious representative] with reference to God's place in the world:

Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the Cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! (16 July 1944 in DBWE 8: pp. 478-479)

The import of Christ and his social embodiment is common and foundational to both Bonhoeffer²⁶⁸ and Žižek.²⁶⁹

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christ-existing-as-community, compared to Hegel's God-existing-as-community, becomes of central importance in the preservation of divine transcendence and its relationship to man as the source of subjectivity and intersubjectivity:

The cord between human beings and God that was cut by the first Adam is tied anew by God, by revealing God's own love in Christ, by no longer approaching us in demand and summons, purely as You, but instead by giving God's own self as an I, opening God's own heart. The church is

²⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer's focus on the import of Christ for community is only further accentuated in *Life Together* (DBWE 5: p. 34.): 'Our community consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.' Note the word 'to' rather than 'for', denoting that Christ has done something to our sociality, rather than a mere punitive character.

²⁶⁹ Žižek agrees on the crucial role of Christ for the community as he calls for continual repetition of the act of Christ as a community (e.g. Žižek, 2001b, p. 105). Indeed, despite adopting Hegel's focus on the Spirit and describing the new community as the Holy Spirit, he advocates the central role of Christ and the incarnation (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 371-375).

founded on the revelation of God's heart. But since destroying the primal community with God also destroyed human community, so likewise when God restores community between human beings and God's own self, community among us also is restored once again (DBWE 1: p. 145).²⁷⁰

The preservation of transcendence is what sets apart the church community as a model for any other community in the first place (ibid., pp. 103, 146). While the latter is a fallen community composed of individuals in sin and enmity with each other and God, the church is built upon Jesus as the essential difference who brought fallen humanity into community with God and thereby also re-established the community with one another. Bonhoeffer reiterates that 'true' community requires recognition of the fallen humanity in Adam: 'the transformation into a new community-of-God is possible only if the deficiency of the old is recognised' (ibid., pp. 148-149). This is not a simple recognition that mankind was wrong in 'excluding' God and ought now to 'include' him, but rather one of total depravity and the necessity of Christ's soteriological death on the Cross (ibid., p. 124).²⁷¹ Bonhoeffer then develops the implication of this for the action of this community: 'what characterises the Christian notion of vicarious representative action is that it is vicariously representative strictly with respect to sin and punishment' (ibid., p. 155). The authentic community and its life is for Bonhoeffer only possible within the framework of sin and punishment (Žižek, 2013a, p. 177). The church community's difference from any other form of community, not only because of

²⁷⁰ See also pp. 138-139.

²⁷¹ That is why Bonhoeffer (DBWE 1: p. 155) also chastises Ritschl for his denial of the 'punitive character of the suffering of Jesus', when the latter argues that the notion of punishment originated in the context of a legal relationship and therefore ought to be rejected in the Christian religion. See Ritschl (1882), pp. 364f., 472ff.

its relationship with God but fundamentally because of its recognition of total depravity without him, qualifies it as a model to be followed.²⁷²

The above observed problematic of guilt re-emerges in Bonhoeffer's consideration of the church as a community-form paradigm and is again illuminated with reference to the law (ibid., pp. 148-151). Bonhoeffer describes or explains Christ and his vicarious representative action as fulfilling the Law. He upholds it as holy and good and concludes that Christ's 'love had to become complete by fulfilling the Law – that is, the claim of God and of human beings – even to death' (ibid., p. 149). Žižek, as observed in the chapter on his theology, instead interprets Christ's death as traumatizing the Law and suspending the logic of sin and punishment by committing a senseless act outside social convention – an act that overcomes the Law. Thus while Bonhoeffer considers the community itself as broken because of sin, Žižek considers the community as broken because of the utmost Symbolic Law and calls for its suspension. Rather than a person dying to sin (ibid., p. 123), Žižek speaks of the person dying to the Law or the Symbolic and coming to existence outside the Symbolic or the legal-ethical. The terror for Bonhoeffer again seems to be that there is only humanity, opaque and monstrous, and therefore he grounds the community in the constant and all-knowing gaze of the redeeming big Other.

The church also becomes a model for any other community because of its preservation of the dialectical balance between the individual and community, which is only enabled by, in and through God, specifically through Christ who becomes the

²⁷² Despite a marked difference with regards to total depravity, Bonhoeffer's assertion of the church as a paradigm for other communities reveals as Hegelian not only its form, founded upon the concept of objective spirit as objective patterns of social interaction, but also its function.

‘pioneer of a new humanity’ (ibid., p. 136). Christ’s action as a stellvertretender then functions as a model for the vicarious representative action of the church in place of another, rather than merely on their behalf, where their fate is accepted as own.²⁷³ It is through this action that the true collectivity of the church emerges – ‘Christ existing as church-community’ (ibid., p. 190),²⁷⁴ where the individual and community are one (ibid., p. 165).²⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer makes it very clear that this unity is not established upon uniformity of will or shared purpose, but is brought about by God as the transcendent. In fact, it finds its embodiment

precisely where the seemingly sharpest outward antitheses prevail, where each person really leads an individual life [...] where wills clash [...] it might very well lead them to remember the One who is over them both, and in whom both of them are one (ibid., p. 192f).

It is only in communion with God that this clashing of wills manifests a single collective person [Gesamtperson] (ibid., p. 193), a unity rather than unanimity.²⁷⁶ Specifically, the vicarious representative action, which is founded, grounded and takes place in Christ, characterises a collectivity from the perspective of Christ – not anthropocentric egalitarianism, but rather equal status in the eyes of God as described in Galatians 3:22 (ibid., pp. 204, 207).²⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer presents the New Testament view of the church arguing for its clear expression as a community transcending ‘all national

²⁷³ Cf. DBWE 1: pp. 118-121, 188.

²⁷⁴ Cf. pp. 121, 130, 136, 139, 141, 189f., 207, 211, 214, 216, 231, 260, 275, 280, 288. Also see DBW 11: pp. 269, 271f.

²⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer infers that this holds also for each individual community as the concrete form of the whole: ‘the church-community as a whole is real only in the individual congregation’ (DBWE 1: p. 135).

²⁷⁶ ‘The Christian idea of equality does not allow for an egalitarianism’ (DBWE 1: p. 207).

²⁷⁷ Insofar as the collectivity of the church is from the perspective of God, it therefore also depends and is acted upon in faith. See DBWE 1: p. 202.

and political boundaries' (ibid., pp. 135-139 at p. 135).²⁷⁸ In being from the perspective of God, this act is directed toward the independent neighbour as 'alien' rather than the perception of the subject (ibid., p. 169). Insofar as it does not emerge from the subject it avoids the latter's absolutization, maintaining the freedom of the other. At the same time the ability to assert oneself against the knowing subject is limited by the objective spirit, the collective person of the community of individuals, thus avoiding absolutization of the Other and maintaining the freedom of the subject and community. Together the independence of all three is preserved – the subject (and community), the Other and the ethical claim which remains regardless of whether the action is taken or not.²⁷⁹ Together with the neighbour, this claim and the act itself is grounded in God as the ultimate Other and seeks to establish God's rule over humanity (ibid., p. 170). It is a love that is marked by surrender to the Other, neighbour and God, where 'I love the You by placing myself, my entire will, in the service of the You' (ibid., p. 169) because God unreservedly surrenders to me (ibid., pp. 173, 177).²⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer claims that taking part in *Stellvertretung* marks the form of community which does not create community

²⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer views the adoption of the established Greek term *ἐκκλησία* denoting political assembly to describe this community as opportune, yet the rest of the quote reveals its problem: '[...] it is universal and yet "one people"'. It is, besides Gentiles and Jews, the "third people".' The term "third people" exposes that while Bonhoeffer's community of the saints overcomes some boundaries it creates a new one. This will be discussed next.

²⁷⁹ This claim is what Bonhoeffer has in mind when he writes that 'each one bears the other's burden' (DBWE 1: p. 188)

²⁸⁰ In describing this type of 'being-for-each-other' [Das *Füreinander*], Bonhoeffer draws on the scriptural accounts of how Moses and Paul were willing to set themselves outside of communion with God for the sake of their people. This is considered as 'the abyss into which intercession can lead the individual' (p. 185).

at the expense of the individual (ibid., pp. 203-204)²⁸¹ but rather preserves the collective person and a true ethical encounter:

Paul speaks of the church of God. As such it is God's reality of revelation, and the individual is really only a part of it – a part, however, as a whole person, as someone elected by God within the church-community [...]. With the notion of the organism, therefore, Paul wants to express, on the one hand, that all belong to the body of Christ, who is the unity of all members; Paul wants to express belonging to God's church community, in which alone the individual can live. But, on the other hand, from this membership there falls the demand, or rather the obvious consequence of operating with the whole (ibid., p. 138 [29]).²⁸²

Yet Bonhoeffer's claim that the grounding of the Other, ethical claim and act in God enables a true collectivity, where the individual is not overcome by community, is problematic from a Žižekian perspective.²⁸³ Insofar as the perspective is from God it does not represent an engagement with the monstrous Other but rather an abstraction or Symbolic image – as a sinner in need of redemption, brother/sister in faith or Christ – and therefore a distortion. It is not as if the subject catches a glimpse of the mysterious real Other through God – the Other exists only in its relation to the big Other rather than its constitutive exposure to the subject (Žižek, 2013a, pp. 146-147). This claim is thus heteronomous and from above, not only as a command from the neighbour, but further as a command from God. Consequently, the ethical is not genuine for it originates in

²⁸¹ This again is first and foremost in reference to Hegel, or rather Bonhoeffer's understanding of Hegel as the immanentist metaphysician of the Spirit with an epistemological consciousness of religion (DBW 1: pp. 131-132).

²⁸² This is in reference to Paul's notion of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12.

²⁸³ Bonhoeffer's argument is here along the lines of Milbank who, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, argues for a paradoxical constitution of the subject, where God is not only the maintainer of community but its sole source, or embodiment. Žižek, in contrast, talks about the subject and the new revolutionary community being constituted in the parallax dialectical view as revelation meaning absolute kenosis. See Milbank, 'The Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek' in Žižek and Milbank (2009), p. 110ff.

God rather than in the subject's constitutive exposure to the Other. It is rather vulnerability or finitude and dependency as described earlier that makes one responsible towards the other (ibid., p. 138). Therefore Bonhoeffer's collective person is but an abstraction and does not describe a properly ethical intersubjectivity. While it might overcome an ethnic collectivity (Gal 3:22) based in race, political status, even gender, it does not overcome God and remains abstract. While the big Other overcomes one set of symbolic differences it replaces them with a new set, where the Other is known only through and according to the big Other.

Perhaps here again Bonhoeffer's understanding regarding the ethical is stretched further during his stay in New York, when he describes something that is *prima facie* akin to Žižek's suspension of the ethical:

Christians stand in freedom, without any backing, before both God and the world; they alone bear the entire responsibility for how they will deal with this gift of freedom. Through precisely this freedom, however, Christians become creative in their ethical actions. Acting according to principles is unproductive and merely reflects or copies the law. Acting in freedom is creative. Christians draw the forms of their ethical activity out of eternity itself, as it were, put these forms with sovereignty in the world, as deed, as their own creations born of the freedom of God's children. Christians create their own standards for good and evil; only Christians themselves provide the justification for their acts, just as they alone bear responsibility for them. Christians create new tablets, new decalogues, as Nietzsche said of the Overman. Indeed, Nietzsche's overman is not, as he imagined, the opposite of the Christian; without realizing it, Nietzsche imbued the Overman with many of the features of the free Christian as described and conceived by both Paul and Luther (DBWE 10: pp. 366-367).

While the suspension of the ethical is comparable, Bonhoeffer still insists that suspension itself is from God and claims its exclusivity to the Christian identity.²⁸⁴ This is in clear contrast to Žižek, who understands the Christian core as subverting any identity, including and foremost the divine, and asserts that it is only from this standpoint that the ethical is suspended. The ethical is not truly suspended with Bonhoeffer, for his position remains identitarian. In that sense the difference between his own Christian identity and Nietzsche's non-or-over-identitarian Übermensch is clear: while both can create new decalogues, only one does so by rising above the identitarian, while the other remains firmly within it.

Bonhoeffer's problematic divine personalism is opposed by Žižek's challenge to pursue a community without symbolic differences, including those imposed by God as the big Other, one that does not have to be contrasted with egalitarianism and within which unreserved surrender to each other takes place without an injunction, grounded upon respect and acceptance of each other's vulnerability and limitation. In *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek and Milbank, 2009, pp. 301-303), Žižek describes such an ethical stance with the help of Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*, which is the first volume of her trilogy entitled *The Notebook – The Proof – The Third Lie* (1997). The story revolves around young twins who live with their grandmother and stand for authentic ethical naivety at its purest, in that they are spontaneously and without empathy doing what needs to be done in order to meet their neighbours' needs. 'With more people like

²⁸⁴ Cf. 1: p. 156, where Bonhoeffer speaks of *Stellvertretung* as 'not an ethical possibility or standard, but solely the reality of the divine love for the church-community: it is not an ethical, but a theological concept'.

this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion', Žižek concludes (ibid., p. 303).

Such a community looks beyond Symbolic difference and is not identitarian; characterised by love or, as Žižek calls it, the ethics of indifference, it is a community:

where I am indifferent toward all, the totality of the universe, and as such, I actually love you, the unique individual who stands/sticks out of this indifferent background. Love and hatred are thus not symmetrical: love emerges out of universal indifference, while hatred emerges out of universal love (Žižek, 2013a, p. 183).

This kind of love is different from Bonhoeffer's 'universal' love which is, as already observed, focused only on those present in the gaze of the big Other. Even if it is argued that all are present in this guise, it is still a love based on abstraction and furthermore allows for no existence of the subject outside of it. Love of universal indifference, on the other hand, is based on the constitutive exposure of the subject and its monstrous excess, a universality that does not exclude but is itself the excluded from the Symbolic – the sempiternally present inhuman human. This love is, according to Žižek, also exemplified in Christ's injunction in Luke 14:26: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.'²⁸⁵ Rather than being a love of Symbolic features it is obligatory indifference to those in preference to the existing excess and in that way a love of all.

²⁸⁵ As observed in section 2.8.1.

4.1.5 Concluding thought

While Bonhoeffer and Žižek agree on the sociality of theological concepts, as well as the theological essence of social concepts and therefore theology's relevance in pursuit of community, they disagree on their form. For Bonhoeffer true community is possible only through, with and from God, whereas for Žižek the big Other abstracts it. This difference emerges from their respective understanding of theology. While Bonhoeffer considers it to be foremost the study of the divine grounding – study of God –, Žižek deems it as the study of the alien or monstrous, the Real. Whereas Bonhoeffer seeks to apply the theological concepts of God, sin and the church to demonstrate the shortfall of the social-philosophical concepts of person and community, Žižek also employs theological concepts of Christ, the Fall and the Holy Spirit community for sociological implication, but not to reveal the divine truth and instruction; rather, he does so to reveal the cracks and fissures of the current or given order, intimating the existence or presence of excess.

From Žižek's perspective Bonhoeffer's Schelerian personalism betrays a very limited and second-hand understanding of Hegel's subject-object relationship, where universality is reduced to totalitarianism of the subject. His alternative of the collective person rests upon an ethical barrier between persons, asserting the inability and impermissibility to recognise the Other but also placing them in a relationship of ethical responsibility. According to Žižek, this ethical constitution of the subject and impenetrability of the Other is partial for it lacks an ontological foundation of the subject itself as unknowable. Insofar as intersubjectivity is located in the unknowable excess of the subject (and the Other), he considers Bonhoeffer's impenetrability

restricted to the Other as resulting in a sociality of separation, where the Other is always alien in their particularity and thus a source of heteronomous ethical demands.

This tension is also observed in Bonhoeffer's grapple with Hegel's concept of objective spirit, which he uses to illustrate the dialectically tense spirit of sociality, within which community emerges. He wishes to preserve the individual in contrast to his understanding of Hegel's transgression of the ethical boundary, where the particular individual is overcome by the universal. Žižek corrects Bonhoeffer's understanding of universalism by pointing out that it should instead be conceived as struggling, a principle of negativity constantly driving particularities in antagonism to prevent the notion of totality. According to Žižek, Bonhoeffer's sociality of separation seeks to preserve the individual but ends up sacrificing sociality.

Of course, for Bonhoeffer this is only the foundation, for in the final chapter of the thesis he grounds the community in the divine by engaging the sociological concepts of community with theological concepts of God, sin and church. Thus God, the transcendent Other, becomes the Other that grounds the subject, its relationship to the Other and the ethical claim of the community. However, by doing this Bonhoeffer abstracts them, for the subject, its relationship to the Other and the community no longer have absolute value apart from God, who assigns identity and orders engagement. Furthermore, their first assigned value is that of total depravity, for the individual and the community needs to recognise itself as sinful and guilty, in need of redemption from God.

Bonhoeffer then describes how God enters the broken community by revealing himself in and as Christ and redeems it by creating the church qua a new community no

longer grounded upon culpability but in God – Christ existing as community. This community, where the subject, the Other and the ethical claim of the community are all maintained by God, is for him the true community and the source for any and all social considerations in theology.

From Žižek's perspective, however, Bonhoeffer's attempt to escape the sinful totalitarianism of universality results in a total domination of the transcendent big Other, who abstracts all the concepts by assigning a new identity to the subject, the Other and the community. It does not represent an engagement with the Real but rather the construction of a new yet still Symbolic reality. The terror for Bonhoeffer seems to be that there is only us, inconsistent, ambiguous and lacking; therefore, he grounds the subject and community in the redeeming big Other by the notion of sin and guilt. Rather than grounding social forms and resolving their dialectical tensions in God, Žižek challenges Bonhoeffer to venture beyond the regulating of the big Other, where the latter's role is suspended and the Real subject emerges, to embrace the inconsistent and lacking struggling universality, not only to contest the *deus ex machina* as Bonhoeffer attempts in *The Letters*,²⁸⁶ but, from an ethical concern, to contest and surmount the *deus superanus* – the sovereign ordering the 'reality', including 'sociological forms and relations' – identity.

The Žižekian reading of Bonhoeffer's social theology of *Sanctorum Communio* thus highlights its problems. However, the reading also enables an application of

²⁸⁶ 16 July 1944 DBWE 8: p. 479.

Bonhoeffer's social forms in analysis of the contemporary struggle for social change located in the revolutionary body. This will be explored in the final section of the thesis.

4.2 Applying Bonhoeffer's social typology to the struggle for change

4.2.1 Introduction

A people is 'community' in the specific sense, not something that has grown but only as something willed, namely willed-community – recognised as an end in itself, is a value, for all community is community of will (DBWE 1: p. 89).

This short section demonstrates a potential application of Bonhoeffer's thought, gleaned from the Žižekian reading of *Sanctorum Communio*, to a contemporary socio-political discussion. It is thus undertaken in dialogue with Žižek so as to demonstrate the further dimension of a successful critical theological engagement. Toward this end, Bonhoeffer's discussion of the types of social forms is applied to Žižek's analysis of the contemporary struggle for social change located in the revolutionary community/body. This not only produces insight into the character of capitalist society, the form and function of emerging movements such as Occupy and the nature and possibility of change, but also outlines the dialectical relationship between them.

4.2.2 *Bonhoeffer's typology of social forms*

In Section C of *Sanctorum Communio's* third chapter, entitled 'The Sociological Problem' (DBWE 1: pp. 80-106), Bonhoeffer presents and discusses a typology of social forms through the lens of the objective spirit (ibid., pp. 86-97). In pursuit of an authentic form, he distinguishes between three types within which 'wills unite': society, the mass and community.²⁸⁷ He then proceeds to contrast the meeting of wills in each

²⁸⁷ This criterion of 'a meeting of wills' also explains the difference with Scheler's typology, upon which Bonhoeffer relies. In contrast to Bonhoeffer, Scheler identifies four different types of communities: the herd/mass, life-community [Lebensgemeinschaft], society [Gesellschaft], and collective person [Gesamtperson]. Out of them all, Scheler contends, only the latter (collective person) is the most profound level of community, characterised by a sense of solidarity rather than psychic contagion, over-

type and argues that, while in society and the mass wills will beside each other, resting upon common interests or reaction respectively, it is only in community that wills will together, resting on purposeful acts of will (ibid., p. 83). Thus while the mass and society are temporary [innerzeitlich] and limited by time [zeitbegrenzt], insofar as they rest upon coincidence of wills and their rationale, the community exists at the limits of time [grenzzeitlich] (ibid., p. 96).

The contrast Bonhoeffer draws between the forms of sociality reveals a dialectical tension between these forms and can be employed in a post-Marxist analysis of contemporary struggles for social change – their form and relation to the hoped-for goal – a new beginning. Therefore, first, the perversion of contemporary capitalist society will be discussed through the lens of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the problems of the social form of society. Then the contemporary movement for social change Occupy will be explored through the lens of the social form of the mass, its response to society and its limits. Finally, its limits will enable us to draw attention to its dialectically tense relation with a new beginning through the lens of the social form of community.

4.2.2.1 Society

Bonhoeffer’s consideration of the form of society as ‘shallow, suspicious and egotistic’ (ibid., p. 91) lends itself nicely to Žižek’s own view of the contemporary global neo-liberal society as perverse and serving only the interests of capital.

identification with community or common interest. He also contends that the church is by far the most expansive collective person, including all finite persons – past, present and future. See ‘Unser Personbegriff im Verhältnis zu anderen Formen Personalistischer Ethik’ in Scheler (2005a), pp. 522-595.

Having no substance beyond its coming together in pursuit of a common goal, society needs to be tied together with written documents and agreements, which ensure society's adherence to that goal. In that sense, Bonhoeffer argues, the society itself is used extensively in this pursuit and 'the only reason this is not called unethical is that it is based on consent and applies equally to all' (ibid., p. 90). What Bonhoeffer's acute observation conveys is the functional perversion of contemporary society's legal framework in the service of particular interests. Even though the legal framework was originally set up as a tool to ensure society's adherence to its stated purpose, it becomes the telos of society which itself serves the order – from serving the will of the people to people serving its will or the will of particular interests, to be precise. This is why Žižek describes the current global society as postpolitical, trapped in service to the legal philosophy of capitalism, ensuring that particular economic interests are set up as the legal order (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 118-119). Politics itself is in the service of the legal philosophy of the greater economic system. A double instrumentalisation is observed: of society in service to the legal system and of the legal system in the service of economic interests. Bonhoeffer's remark about the form of society as shallow, suspicious and egotistical thus also holds for the contemporary global society.

Bonhoeffer also asserts that any society is transitory (DBWE 1: p. 94), and this temporality has recently been shown in numerous calls for a change of the global order, such as the Occupy movement. In the discussion of these movements Žižek calls for a construction of new political subjects who break out of the legal entanglement and ground a new collective space. The Occupy movement will be explored next through the lens of Bonhoeffer's form of the mass.

4.2.2.2 Mass

In contrast to society as a rational willing of wills, Bonhoeffer uses the term “mass” to describe social bonding where wills come together as a mechanical response to certain stimuli (ibid., pp. 93-96). Given its purely mechanical nature, Bonhoeffer does not consider this form of sociality as genuine and only discusses it as human ‘because it is composed of conscious beings’ (ibid., p. 93). Furthermore, he infers that because of its mechanical nature any bonding is accidental and vanishes as soon as the stimuli disappear – it is temporary [innerzeitlich]. However, as this section will show, consideration of the function and form of mass is not to be abandoned too hastily, as Bonhoeffer’s insights will be applied to a post-Marxist analysis of Occupy. As a movement for social change it can be regarded as a response to the current socio-political conditions, yet is far from purely mechanical and is full of potential for the emergence of an alternative – a new beginning.

4.2.2.2.1 Occupy

Occupy, the diverse and multifocal international movement against social inequality and economic injustice, could be considered as corresponding to Bonhoeffer’s social type of mass, for it emerged as a response to the external provocation of neoliberal conditions and infringement of social rights and well-being. The social movement derived from the protests against budget cuts imposed by the University of California in response to the post-2007 financial crisis, as students occupied campus buildings under the slogan ‘Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing’.²⁸⁸ It first received widespread attention at the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protest in Zuccotti Park in September 2011 against the global

²⁸⁸ Bady and Konczal (2012).

financial system and within a month had spread around the globe. Soon there were localised protests in cities in eighty-odd countries against the way in which national and international politics have been thwarted in their service to the interests of large corporations. Insofar as Occupy emerges in and embodies the response to a set of wider socio-political stimuli it can, according to Bonhoeffer, be considered as mass.

In agreement with Bonhoeffer, the structure of Occupy corresponds to the nature of its emergence,²⁸⁹ set-up and unfolding in response to the existing politics as democratically compromised. The individual protests function as a platform for participatory democracy, where anyone can contribute in leader-less discussions, analysing the local situation and issuing statements with alternatives in due time. There is no privileging and rushing of decisions. Thus, for example, the movement in London released a statement on corporations and called for an end to tax evasion by wealthy firms in late November 2011, after initial occupation outside St. Paul's on October 15th (Occupy London, 2011). Occupy's anti-hierarchical structure, with direct access for all in its consensus-based decision-making process, is a response to the really existing hierarchical politics.

Where the difference begins to emerge is with Bonhoeffer's consideration that in the mass 'the boundary of personhood is lost' (DBWE 1: p. 93) and the individual is no longer a person but an anonymous particle of the mass – 'drawn into it and directed by it' (ibid., p. 94). However, is it true that the Occupy's bonding 'is not supported by the separateness of the person and thus cannot last' (ibid.)? Is this observed in their slogan,

²⁸⁹ Cf. DBWE 1: p. 93.

‘We are the 99%’ – individuals morphed into a faceless mass? Quite the opposite, for the protests embody the individualisation of those considered faceless in the financial global order. Thus the slogan was originally launched as a Tumblr blog page in August 2011, making visible individuals and their stories of social inequality and economic injustice. Furthermore, its participatory democracy is anything but totalitarian. Thus, even though Occupy is a movement of response, the emerging sociality is far from overcome by the mass.

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer observes that the social form of mass ‘creates the most powerful experiences of unity’ (ibid., p. 94), but quickly notes that this perception is a confusion of mass-unity and comm-unity. While the former rests ‘on the parallel direction of the wills of a number of persons’ (ibid., p. 93), the latter rests upon a true meeting of wills. As such, Bonhoeffer argues, it is unable to create a social form [Sozialgebilde] (ibid., p. 88). As previously noted, Occupy’s unity is not a totalitarianism of mass (rather it is particularised); the question now is whether it is able to create a social form. However, it is important to stress that no social movement is the alternative or the hoped-for goal in itself. Therefore, the mass-unity of an emerging movement is such in the current condition/global order and the alternative will emerge only after the latter is subverted. While Occupy performs the role of a catalyst for social change, it is not the community yet. However, without it and its mass-unity change is impossible, for the overcoming of Capitalism as the big Other tying the people together must begin from the position of this recognition. Otherwise, any ‘alternative’ will remain part of this system or ‘society’. While the mass is not yet the alternative, it is its necessary and, as we shall see, potential catalyst.

It is with regards to its potential for an alternative that Occupy has been criticized for its lack of clearly defined goals. Thus the political theorist of non-violence Gene Sharp warned that ‘the protesters don’t have a clear objective, something they can actually achieve. If they think they will change the economic system by simply staying in a particular location, then they are likely to be very disappointed. Protest alone accomplishes very little’.²⁹⁰ Žižek, who himself addressed the protesters in Zuccotti Park in October 2011,²⁹¹ in ‘Occupy Wall Street, Or, the Violent Silence of a New Beginning’ (2012b, pp. 77-89) warned against the protests ending in mere rejection of the current order and called for a start to the laborious task of imagining an alternative. However, Žižek at the same time defended the movement by affirming the essentiality of its initial pure negativity:

[O]ne always has to begin this way, with a formal gesture of rejection that is initially more important than any positive content—only such a gesture opens up the space for a new content. In the psychoanalytic sense, the protesters are indeed hysterical actors, provoking the master, undermining his authority; and the question with which they were constantly bombarded, ‘But what do you want?’ aims precisely at precluding the true answer—its point is: ‘Say it in my terms or shut up!’ In this way, the process of translating an inchoate protest into a concrete project is blocked (ibid., p. 84).

He thus dismissed the calls for a list of clear objectives and negotiations as compromise of the movement’s radical nature and potential and called for a thorough consideration in making ‘feasible and legitimate’ but ‘de facto impossible’ demands (ibid.), such as universal healthcare, which disturb the very core of the hegemonic ideology. The movement’s lack of clearly defined goals is thus not only due to its mechanical nature,

²⁹⁰ Sharp (2011).

²⁹¹ Žižek (2011).

but represents the only way to avoid being subsumed within the current order and to subvert it.

Far from an emerging movement such as Occupy representing merely a mechanical reaction to the neoliberal conditions, a sort of reflex which is unable to bring about anything concrete, it is rather where the emerging alternative is to be located. In other words, mass carries the potential to become a ‘critical mass’, reaching the point at which it converges into something more than a mechanical reaction – a community. It is to a discussion of the characteristics or parameters of this alternative in the social form of community that we turn next.

4.2.2.3 Community

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Bonhoeffer regards community alone as an authentic social form, as its essence is not commonality but reciprocal will.

Accordingly, its telos as the essence of community cannot be elaborated:

A community may have a rational telos, but its very essence is not absorbed by that telos, nor identical with it. Instead, community as such is characterised by value, as is history, and, as value-bearing, transcends inner historical limitations (DBWE 1: p. 95 [114]).

Rather than having a purpose/goal-oriented or applied essence, the community’s essence is completely objectless – that is its value. The community is an end in itself and thus pure will (ibid., p. 89). It is due to this grounding that it exists at the limits of time [grenzzeitlich] or outside time, manifesting in the present, the past and the future, and is therefore transcendental.²⁹² That is why, Žižek observes, it ‘can’ (as in “has the

²⁹² In elaborating this point the idealist Bonhoeffer is most visible: ‘The concept of community thus also contains the idea of infinite time, whose only limit is the boundary of time. The “duration” of community

potential to”) manifest in various guises, Christianity, Ancient Greek democracy, Lenin’s Bolshevik revolution, Eastern Europe’s undermining of Communism in the 1980s or indeed the Occupy movement against Capitalism.

It is this transcendence that attracts Žižek to the theological considerations of the revolutionary moment of the community and informs his understanding of its pure externality ‘from above’ as ‘grace’.²⁹³ For both Bonhoeffer and Žižek, this formative ‘moment’ is manifested in history but is not restricted to it or by it. Rather, in contrast to the form of society which exists only within history coming ‘to an end with the satisfaction of the individual’s wishes’ (DBWE 1: pp. 95, 101), the transcendent value itself breaks in and shapes history. This also means that community is not historically verifiable and is from that perspective invisible, even though it is always present and part of the historical community (ibid., pp. 216, 223-226):

The empirical church lives in history. Just as the individual spirit, as a member of the church, has particular tasks at particular times, so the objective spirit of the church has an individual character; that is, it is different at any given time. It gets its character from the historical context. But the fact that the objective spirit is part of history necessarily implies that it is fallible and imperfect as far as its understanding and will are concerned (ibid., pp. 214-215).

It is thus exactly in and through its particularity of understanding and will that community is transcendent.

The transcendental of this form of community, which for Bonhoeffer and Žižek is a theological category, also means that it is only understood within its actuality, not

is identical with the duration of history. Of course, we speak of community as an idea, not as an empirical entity’ (DBWE 1: p. 95 [114]).

²⁹³ See ‘Introduction: From Christ to Lenin... and Back’ in Žižek (2001b), pp. 1-5.

outside it. Bonhoeffer's assertion that the church can be 'understood fully only from within, on the basis of its own claim; only on this basis can we develop appropriately critical criteria for judging it' (ibid., p. 127), can be compared with Žižek's statement that it is cognitively accessible only from within (Žižek, 2001b, p. 105). Indeed, to an outsider, the community does not make sense and remains pure idealist utopia. That is why the radical demands of Occupy are perceived as impossible and why if an alternative is to emerge, it will have to be judged according to its own criteria, its radical core.

Moreover, in keeping with its transcendent dialectical nature, this knowledge precedes it; community is established upon already existing knowledge and acknowledgement. Bonhoeffer thus highlights the necessity of faith, which, together with revelation, is 'not a possible method by which to gain academic knowledge; rather, by acknowledging the claim of revelation, faith is given the prerequisite for positive theological language' (DBWE 1: pp. 127, 133[23]). For Žižek, faith is the miracle (Žižek, 2001b, 148) that enables the traversing of fantasy by acknowledging revelation as the impossible becoming possible and thus enables a political act, which might seem impossible from the current coordinates, yet once it arrives, it always already was and becomes 'routine' (Žižek, 2010c, pp. 13-14).²⁹⁴ Žižek and Bonhoeffer contend that the community logically establishes its own foundation in itself. Thus when the 'irrational' demand of Occupy is met and the coordinates of the current situation overcome, it will be of the future perfect.

²⁹⁴ Cf. DBWE 1: p. 144. Also see again section 2.7.1.

It is this impossibility of the authentic community that marks it as distinct to any other form. It is possible, Bonhoeffer argues, ‘to deduce certain impulses towards community that become visible in the empirical formation of community; but this still does not lead to the concept of the church’ (DBWE 1: p. 133). Accordingly, while it is possible to deduce certain impulses towards Žižek’s struggling community from various movements, including Occupy, it is important not to confuse the movement with community as such. They are but the necessary ‘place’ where the distinct community can emerge when revelation is believed or taken seriously.²⁹⁵ Thus any analysis of the Occupy movement as the end result ends in failure.

The empirical form of the community has a will and life of its own. Bonhoeffer describes it as guided by the Spirit (ibid., p. 209),²⁹⁶ while Žižek presents this in Christ’s act which, while irrational, from within the existing coordinates, actually suspends them (Žižek, 2000b, pp. 133, 135, 143). This is what the breaking in of community does with the existing forms of sociality: it suspends them. Yes, within the realm of other forms of society the acts of the community are perceived as madness. Is this not also the case with Occupy, whose refusal to produce a clear list of goals is frowned upon from the perspective of the global political order? That is why the movement’s demands ought not to be ‘feasible’ and ‘legitimate’, but ‘de facto impossible’ in order to change the very coordinates of the situation. Failure to do so would be to remain within the particular capitalist world order.

²⁹⁵ Cf. DBWE 1: p. 144.

²⁹⁶ From page 208 onward Bonhoeffer engages in a description of the empirical form of the church.

This statement brings us to the final characteristic of the new community – its contingency. Despite its absolute necessity it is only a historical potentiality and even then incredibly fragile. Since, as already observed, for Žižek (2001b, p. 105) its emergence through various ‘new beginnings’ is only a possibility, the Occupy movement carries the potential to bear an alternative, but this is not ensured. Furthermore, the community is incredibly fragile. Bonhoeffer writes about it, saying that the church ‘continues to fall again and again, it comes into being anew, passes away, and comes into being once more’ (DBWE 1: p. 213).²⁹⁷ Just as Lenin’s revolution led to the perverse ideology of Stalinism, the communality of the Arab Spring was taken over by religious fundamentalists, so too the Occupy movement, without the proper stance in relation to what happened in Zuccotti Park, that is by accepting the rules of the game or the coordinates dictated by the system, can transform its radicality into perversion.

4.2.3 Concluding thought

This section has applied Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the sociological function of the forms of society, mass and community in analysis of the contemporary capitalist society as selfish and perverse, the responsive nature of challenges posed to it by emerging movements, such as Occupy, as well as the transcendence of the alternative social form. With the help of Žižek, contrasting the two revealed the dialectical tension between their sociological function – the necessary responsive-to-the-current-conditions-of-society character of movements such as Occupy, their essentiality and potential, but also

²⁹⁷ Of course, for Bonhoeffer this is because of sin, in that the community of saints is still a community of sinners [peccatorum communio].

their difference from the transcendent form of their hope for a new beginning – a new form of sociality. Far from them merely excluding each other, they instead embody a tense relationship where one emerges at the cracks of the other. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer, every society is limited by time, mass emerging on its borders temporarily, only in order for the possibility of transcendental community, which is, however, inherently fragile.

Conclusion

Theology is always a form of criticism, a search for truth against all its ideological competitors (Floyd, 1991, p. 175).

This thesis set out to explore the potential of theology's engagement with critical theory – a critical theology. Specifically, it did so by observing Slovenian post-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek's appropriation of theology, the origin and context of this endeavour, as well as its result – a distinctly theological form of political thought. It briefly examined the theological responses to it and outlined the potential of engagement with his understanding of the exclusivity and necessity of theology for political thought in order to bring about change, whether actualized or prospective. To that end, an investigation of the grounds of this engagement was conducted in the form of a critical reading exercise, where the social theology of the modern theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed in his first dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, after exploring the origin and context of his engagement with social philosophy, was read alongside and from the perspective of Žižek's materialist political theology, to demonstrate the potential of Žižek's political thought for engagement with Bonhoeffer's manifestly social theological thought. The contact point between them was thus the shared conviction about not only the sociological potential of theology but its absolute necessity. In addition to this conviction, the intellectual formation of both and thus the form and content of their thought were influenced by G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of social relation. The exercise demonstrated ways in which Žižek's thought can be appropriated as a resource in the service of theology, as well as how Bonhoeffer's

thought can be appropriated in the service of critical theory, thus exhibiting how engagement with critical theory embodies the integral critical character of theology.

Žižek's utilisation of theology is part of the post-Marxist critical theoretical exploration of theological resources for the analysis and critique of contemporary society. This is rooted already in Marxist recognition of a revolutionary potential in theology, observed in the example of Thomas Müntzer, but liberated of orthodox Marxist preconceptions in Adorno and Horkheimer's rejection of the dualism between myth and enlightenment. Žižek also considers the demarcation between the categories of religion and the secular an obfuscating myth. That is why he regards current discussions of the postsecular, in which religion functions in service to the political, as a myth. Even though his voice at times is heard within these discussions, he instead sees them as a continuation of that myth which he seeks to subvert. Thus Žižek is in the company of post-Marxist thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben in recognising theology as the grounding element of the socio-political and therefore necessary for illumination of faults and cracks in the capitalist political order, and foremost the emergence of an alternative.

It is this decidedly Western Marxism which is the shaping force of Žižek's life, from childhood in a non-aligned and culturally comparatively free Yugoslavia, where he began to build his encyclopaedic knowledge of Hollywood cinema, to the pivotal University teaching of Božidar Debenjak, who introduced him to the Frankfurt School and German idealism. Indeed, it was in Debenjak's course that Žižek read Marx's *Das Kapital* through the lens of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, an approach which persists in his contemporary writings. Unfortunately, the role of Debenjak in his

intellectual formation remains completely unresearched, as does the period of his studies at the University of Ljubljana (1967-1981) and academic productivity before his international establishment with publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989. It was this critical theoretical Western Marxism that brought Žižek's attention to theology, be it through Hegel's idealism or Lacan's psychoanalytic theory – the more Žižek's Marxist political thought developed, the more theologically pronounced it became.

Certainly, it is the critical theoretical 'engagement' of these three theories – Hegel's idealism, Lacan's psychoanalysis and Marx's political theory – that shapes Žižek's multifarious and interdisciplinary thought. Marx provides the understanding of the mechanism by which the capitalist system perpetuates itself – ideology – and the motivation for Žižek's critique of capitalist ideology – the hope of revolutionary change. Supplementing Althusser's *Ideological State Apparatuses*, Žižek delivers a theory of the individual's complicity in the function of ideology and its perpetuation, interpolating themselves through the desire to live in a consistent reality. This understanding is gained through Lacan, who provides Žižek with the psychoanalytic framework of ideology as the Symbolic and its critique as the disturbing emergence of the Real, with the subject existing on the borders of the two. Ideology works when the subject identifies with the Symbolic but when cracks appear the Real subject emerges and highlights the abstruse and arbitrary character of ideology. It is thus in these instinctive and psychological processes, Žižek argues, that ideology functions. Finally, Hegel provides him with the methodology to carry out this analysis of the subject and its involvement in the understanding of the world – dialectics. Žižek's understanding of

Hegel is marked by tension or negativity that stretches the ideological construction and becomes the location of possible change through a concretisation of contradiction – revolution. This excess or the Real disrupting the perception of reality as well-ordered is by Žižek understood as theological (in function).

Žižek's revolutionary political thought, then, is enabled by the theological, for it is only the latter as the excess which enables change and escape from the ideological sempiternal cycle. Even though reference to the theological dimension in his thought is always present, Žižek begins to articulate this critical and/or radical understanding of theology and its subversive political potential through engagement with Badiou. What they both observe in Paul is an example of ontological subversion of the existing order. Paul's undermining of the Roman Imperial authority by bringing the excluded or unrepresented in that order to the fore thus becomes a model for that action in the global capitalist order. The excluded element represents the true universality and exposes the non-substantiality of the global capitalist order. This negativity is for Žižek the key, as only detachment from a given situation can bring about change. That is why Christ dies to the Law, rather than fulfilling it. This is the Christian experience that Žižek refers to as necessary for change, rather than it being a reference to actually existing Christianity, which is of course rejected as having reinstated the Law and thus perverse. This experience, already observed with Job in the Old Testament but fully realised by Christ, is characterised by doubt and resistance to meaning and realisation of the abstruseness and ambiguity of reality. Thus Christ's realisation is that there is no God as the big Other maintaining and directing things. In other words, what dies on the Cross is God as the big Other. Indeed, it is not only that Job doubts God and Christ realises that where

there is supposed to be God there is nothing, but rather that with Job, God doubts himself and himself dies on the Cross. Whenever meaning is no longer searched for, ideology collapses. That avoidance of meaning is theological, Žižek argues, the true subversive core of theology as challenging the imposition of meaning by pointing out the excluded and thus creating tension, the place where an alternative can emerge. The alternative is the struggling universality, where community is no longer reliant on any ethnic or political identity or order but directly confronted with each other and self-organising. This community is inherently fragile and thus far from stable, always more in need of emerging rather than existing. The question of whether community without the support of the big Other can persist should, from Žižek's perspective, be reformulated into whether the community relying upon it is authentic. Rather than maintaining a community form and thus assuming a position, materialist theology challenges it by recognising the excluded within it.

Therefore, what was pursued in the second part of this thesis was an application of the potential for engagement with Žižek's radical political theology to the social theology of the modern theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's first dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, wherein the latter engaged sociological analysis and church dogmatics in order to demonstrate theology's sociological potential.

Bonhoeffer's engagement of theology with social philosophy was set in the context of his life and modern theology, specifically his intellectual formation during his studies at the University in Berlin. Raised in the years following World War I in a world concerned with the future of humanity and critical of its progress, he developed an interest in theology and philosophy and ventured into theological waters, finding

himself at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, where the theological faculty cultivated the engagement between the two and also the general engagement of theology with other academic disciplines. It is within this context of situating theology in the modern world, built upon the foundations of nineteenth century figures like Kant, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Strauss and Hegel, that Bonhoeffer's own endeavour to exegete and apply the ethical and sociological potential of traditional theological concepts should be understood. This was observed in particular with regards to three figures: the systematic theologian Ernst Troeltsch and his interest in the sociological realities of theology, who, even though no longer alive during Bonhoeffer's education, influenced the thought of his lecturers and inherently his own dissertation; the historian of dogma and his dissertation supervisor Reinhold Seeberg and his philosophical openness in terms of the focus on the moral and social dimensions of theological reflection; and the church historian Adolf von Harnack and his ethical concern oriented toward action and the maturity of the world come-of-age and the place of faith within it. As observed in 3.1 on Bonhoeffer's intellectual biography, the social orientation, philosophical openness and ethical concern are distinct characteristics of the entirety of his works and indeed their application in life, be it in his ecumenical endeavours or work with the Confessing Church.

However, Bonhoeffer's distinctly modern sociological conviction of all theological concepts, in particular ecclesiology, which sets him apart from Barth's fixation on the transcendent, stems not only from these theological thinkers but also from the influence of Hegel. In the past the influence of the latter on Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation has been overlooked and has only begun to emerge over the last

thirty years. Thus Marsh's recognition of Bonhoeffer's appreciation and an attempt to develop Hegel's thought needs to be explored further. Hopefully this thesis has contributed to that project, albeit in a limited manner, by demonstrating the foundational role of Hegel's concept of objective spirit in the development of Bonhoeffer's communitarianism.

Attention then turned to a reading of Bonhoeffer's argument about the sociological relevance of the theological concept of the church in *Sanctorum Communio* alongside Žižek in order to compare their understanding of the theological import for social organisation and explore the potential for engagement between them. This exercise proved very helpful, for in a way it contextualised Bonhoeffer in his attempt to deal with sociological issues theologically as a theological search for an authentic community and thus made his thought clearer. The contrasting of his transcendental personalist community and ethic of universal love with Žižek's materialist ontological community and ethic of indifference revealed that while they both perceive their discipline to have a complex and interdisciplinary history and nature,²⁹⁸ and they agree that the essence of social concepts is theological and that theological concepts are social, they differ on the form that community takes. For Bonhoeffer an authentic form of community can only be grounded in and by God, while for Žižek it is grounded in the absence of God as the big Other. Thus, while the former sees a community without God as totalitarian, sinful, the latter sees the community with God as abstract. While the former employs theological concepts in order to ground his understanding as a sociality

²⁹⁸ They also could both engage a wider body of sources from other disciplines and do it with more care, with primary references, rather than relying on other people's interpretations.

of separation, the latter employs them to reveal the cracks and fissures of that imposed understanding. While the former wishes to preserve the individuality rooted in God, the latter deems that as sacrificing the sociality enabled by God's absence. While the former holds that the community, individuality and their ethical claim are maintained and mediated by God, the latter argues that true engagement only occurs when these are left to their own devices. In summary, while Bonhoeffer and Žižek agree on the sociological import of theology, they differ on the resulting sociological form – a community reliant on God or one of his absence.

The reading exercise indicated some ways in which Žižek's thought can be appropriated as a resource in the service of theology, as well as how Bonhoeffer's thought can be appropriated in the service of critical theory.

First, Žižek's struggling community can be appropriated in the service of theology to reveal the sociologically dangerous potential in Bonhoeffer's transcendent community of saints – that of identity politics. His illuminating critique of the traditional and Bonhoeffer's understanding of Galatians 3:28 as suspending identities only through the creation of a new one, hangs like a sword of Damocles, particularly in light of Bonhoeffer's immediate context.²⁹⁹ The short-sightedness of his fellow German Christians to recognise the full problem of the Aryan paragraph and lack of concern for their neighbours, whether or not they are Christian, highlights this entrapment within the particular at the expense of the universality it excludes. Upon this consideration, it

²⁹⁹ Pugh notes: 'In the context of Bonhoeffer's life, we see the manifestation of one of Western Christianity's greatest failures. Its inability to dissociate itself from the military and political apparatus of Nazi Germany [...]; all these things serve to illustrate that Christianity in that situation had become nothing more than an enfeebled and useless religion' (Pugh, 2008, p. 17).

seems that Žižek's drawing of attention to the theological character as the excess or monstrous, transcendental, never submitting to an identity but rather blurring the hypostasized boundaries between them irrevocably, ought to be considered carefully. Indubitably, this confrontational character of theology is decidedly 'queer',³⁰⁰ horizontal rather than vertical, located in the excess of an identity, even its own, thus exercising its critical role in an inherent manner.

Considered from the perspective of Milbank's accusation, is such a character of theology as perspective, rather than position, heterodox? While it perhaps is not traditional or conventional, it cannot take a different form in its operation, for theology's character has always been one of challenging narratives and revealing exceptions, as has been observed in the story of Job. Turning to the New Testament, are the gospel accounts not an embodiment of a challenge to the perceptions and expectations of those who meet Jesus? In the Sermon on the Mount he said to the disciples, 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot' (Matthew 5:13). The character of theology is necessarily critical or, to appropriate Ward, 'a radicality inseparable from its orthodoxy' (2005, p. 266).

In order to remain true to this character, theology must remain critical. If it fails to do so, it becomes trapped in the magical circle of political theology of abstraction, where theology, rather than challenging a particular socio-political setup, surrenders its apocalyptic (i.e. revelatory) capacity and validates it. Any yielding under the objection that this sounds too opaque and fails to offer an alternative, represents a compromise of

³⁰⁰ Similar to queer theory's challenge to categories of identity related to gender and sexuality as normative, its character is challenging any notion of identity.

its radical nature and potential and results in service to that which it is supposed to challenge. This refusal means that theology is more a perspective than a position but the shift of perspective is necessary if an alternative is to emerge. To paraphrase the words of another critical philosopher, Étienne Balibar, the task of the theologian

with respect to universality is precisely to understand the logic of these contradictions and, in a dialectical way, to investigate their dominant and subordinated aspects, to reveal how they work and how they can be shifted or twisted through the interaction of theory and practice or, if you prefer, discourse and politics (Balibar, 2007).

Only in this way is theology understood as critical, self-critical and constructive reflection on faith and its sanctity preserved. Thus, to paraphrase Kant (1998, p. 100 (Axi)) and Raschke (2016, p. 10), not only do we live in the age of the critical, where theology must submit to it and be employed in its service, but theology always is essentially critical.

Does that mean that the only advantage of theology is negative, continually challenging a position and not providing one? I argue that this negativity becomes positive when we perceive that its accession to a position leads inevitably, not to an expansion and implementation but, a narrowing and diminishing of its potential, threatening to supplant entirely its radical character in the service of a position. Critical theology then is no doubt characteristically negative – a critique rather than a doctrine, or, a canon rather than a new organon – but is for that reason functionally positive.

Second, Bonhoeffer's analysis of social forms in *Sanctorum Communio* can be appropriated in the service of critical theory. This was demonstrated in the final section 4.2 where Bonhoeffer's discussion of the types of social forms – society, the mass and

community – was applied in analysis of the contemporary struggle for social change located in the revolutionary community/body, together with Žižek’s own analysis. This produced insight into the character of the capitalist society as selfish and perverse, the responsive form and function of emerging movements, the possibility of change and the transcendent nature of a new form of sociality, and the dialectically tense relationship between them. Despite the difference in their understanding of theology – as the study of divine grounding or as the surplus or monstrous – this short section thus demonstrated a successful critical theological engagement.

This thesis has thus demonstrated that when critical theory is engaged in theological reflection, it draws attention to and clarifies the full dimensionality of the necessary critical character of theology. Appropriated as a resource in reflection on the act, content and implications of the Christian faith, it serves to evaluate the position, function and method of theology. It brings out its negative aspect and propaedeutic role, demonstrating its distinctly critical sociological potential. Therefore, engagement with critical theory is pertinent to the explication and enunciation of critical theology.

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