

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

God Without the Sacred: The Book of Job, the First Critique of Ideology

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. My goal here, as you know, is to make the lions roar, to make this heavy institution dance and when successful to make it levitate. This event tonight is part of a series of six events we're doing in conjunction with an exhibition, which opens to the public—which has opened to a public a few weeks ago. The opening night was about three weeks ago, and I

very much encourage you to go and see it. The exhibition, which I was hoping would be called *The Sacred*, because of my lisp, it is now called *Three Faiths*, which is very hard for me to say. *Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* runs from, runs through February 2011. Please come and see this magnificent exhibition, free and open to the public. I would like to thank the Carnegie Foundation for their support for this series.

Other LIVE programs, which you will find on your announcement, include Karen Armstrong, Reza Aslan, Mark Salzman, and one more yet to be announced. Stay tuned. I would like also quickly to tell you about other LIVE programs and for you to look on your menu as it were. I asked our designer to create menu, and he took it quite literally, so if you're interested, for instance, tomorrow I will be speaking to Edwidge Danticat, asparagus, A Night with the *National Lampoon*, pizza with Derek Walcott, wine with Zadie Smith, shrimp with Antonio Damasio and Marina Abramovic this Friday, and cupcakes quite naturally on Monday, but there are no more tickets left with Jay-Z.

I would like to encourage all of you to become Friends of the New York Public Library. For just forty dollars a year, which is a pretty cheap date, you will get discounts to all LIVE events. Tonight's program is being telecast in real time by fora.tv, so anyone can be live for the conversation by tuning in online. To access a live stream, you simply go to http://fora.tv.

It is a pleasure to welcome Slavoj Žižek back for I think the fourth time for a LIVE event.

The first time it was him speaking about Freud. The second it was about cinema, I

believe, the third it was with BHL, Bernard-Henry Levi, a conversation with him which I tried and failed to moderate. Impossible, trust me. Actually, Slavoj Žižek asked me a few weeks ago what we would be talking about onstage tonight and I said, "Slavoj, you're on your own." Tonight he will be speaking, I think, in part about God. (laughter)

Slavoj Žižek, in case you didn't know, is everyone's favorite Slovenian cultural theorist and philosopher, a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Ljubljana, I don't know if that is still current, as well as an international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in London, I don't know if that is current, either. He has described himself as a Hegelian philosopher, I think that is current, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, that may or may not be current, a Christian atheist, I think that is definitely current, a Communist political activist, which he sees as four parts of the same cause. His appearance here at LIVE from the New York Public Library four times is proof of his capacious appetite and wide-ranging interests. His latest publications are, in no particular order, in philosophy *The Parallax View*, in psychoanalysis, *How to Read* Lacan, in theology The Monstrosity of Christ, and in politics Living at the End of Times. He is the author of fifty books on subjects ranging from opera to religion to film to the war in Iraq and has been the subject of several documentary films, including *The* Pervert's Guide to Cinema, which I encourage you to see, which is the only work I know to analyze both *The Matrix* and Freudian penis envy. So, ladies and gentlemen, on that note, on that joyous note, it is a great pleasure—the word "pleasure" is used here with full intent—to bring to the stage Slavoj Žižek, who will be sitting.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Thank you very much. I am always a little bit embarrassed by such kind introductions, but I have a lot to say. I hope you will have patience, so let me begin with a wonderful anecdote which happened a couple of days after September 11th, in a taxi, to my good friend Udi Aloni. While he was in a taxi near Union Square here on Manhattan he engaged in a conversation with the Muslim driver, who tried to convince him that the attacks were a Jewish plot, of course, referring to the well-known rumors that no Jews died there since they were secretly informed a day before not to go to the twin towers. Udi, my friend, immediately of course told the driver to stop and stepped out, but what he then encountered when walking across Union Square was a group of Orthodox Jews trying to mobilize their followers. One of them was, as it were, preaching to others saying that "We have now a new ultimate proof that God is protecting the Jewish people. No Jews were killed in the September 11th attack," (laughter) so my friend was kind of perplexed by these strange bedfellows. This is how opposites coincide in our daily lives.

So how does God fit into all this? Let me begin with a well-known quote from Dostoevsky. And, as the joke goes, but in this case the joke is literally true, this is a quote from Dostoevsky, Dostoevsky just never said this, namely, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted." As far as I was able to establish, the first one to attribute this to Dostoevsky was Sartre in '43 in his *L'Être et le Néant*, allegedly Dostoevsky says this in *Brothers Karamazov*, he doesn't say, but okay he does render his insight in some way. Conservatives like to evoke this thought, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted," apropos scandals among the atheist hedonist elite, from millions killed in

Gulag up to animal sex and gay marriages, here is, so they say, where we end if we deny all transcendent authority which poses some unsurpassable limits to human endeavors. Without such limits, so the story goes, there is no ultimate obstacle to exploiting one's neighbors ruthlessly. To use them as tools for profit and pleasure, to enslave and humiliate them, even to kill them in millions. All that separates us from this ultimate moral vacuum are, in the absence of a higher, transcendent limit, temporary and nonobligatory pacts among wolves, self-imposed limitations in the interest of one's survival and well-being which can be violated at any moment.

But, I would like to begin with this naïve question: Are things really like that? Well, the first thing one cannot help noticing is that Jacque Lacan's well-known critical inversion of this—Dostoevsky's dictum. Lacan inverted it into "if there is no God, then everything is prohibited." This inversion is much more appropriate to describe the universe of atheist liberal hedonists. They dedicate their life to the pursuit of pleasures, but since there is no external authority which would guarantee them a space for this pursuit, they get entangled into a thick network of self-imposed politically correct regulations, as if a superego much more severe than that of the traditional morality is controlling them. They get obsessed by the idea that in pursuing their pleasures they may humiliate or violate others' space, so they regulate their behavior with deepened prescriptions about how to avoid harassing others, not to mention the no less complex regulation of their own care of the self: bodily fitness, health food, spiritual relaxation, and so on. Indeed, nothing is more oppressive and regulated than being a simple hedonist.

The second thing, strictly correlative to this first observation, is that today it is rather those who refer to God in a brutally direct way, perceiving themselves as direct instruments of God's will—it is rather to them that everything is permitted. It is the so-called fundamentalists who practice a perverted version of what Kierkegaard called "the religious suspension of the ethical." On God's mission one is allowed to kill thousands. So why do we witness today the rise of religiously or ethically justified violence?

Because we live in an era which perceives itself as post-ideological.

Since great public causes can no longer be mobilized as grounds for mass violence or war, that is to say since our hegemonic ideology calls on us to enjoy life and to realize our inner selves, it is difficult for the majority to overcome their revulsion at torturing and killing another human being. The large majority of people are, thank God, spontaneously moral. Torturing or killing another human being is deeply traumatic for most of us, so in order to make them do it, a larger sacred cause is needed which makes petty individual concerns about killing seem trivial. Religion or ethnic belonging or art or poetry fits this role perfectly. This is my old thesis that literally behind every ethnic cleansing there is a poet—it is not only Karadžić, there are others.

Of course there are cases of pathological atheists who are able to commit mass murder just for pleasure, just for the sake of it, but I claim they are rare exceptions. The majority needs to be anesthetized against their elementary decency and sensitivity for the others' suffering. Again, for these a sacred cause is needed. Without this cause, we would have to feel all the burden of what we did, with no absolute on whom to put the ultimate

responsibility. Religious ideologists usually claim that, true or not, religion makes some otherwise bad people to do some good things. From today's experience, one should rather speak to Steven Weinberg, to his claim that while without religion good people would have been doing good things and bad people bad things, only religion can make good people do bad things.

But I am far from, as you will hear of course, condemning religion. No less important, the same, another critical point, also seems to hold for the display of so-called human weaknesses. Isolated, extreme forms of sexuality among godless hedonists are immediately elevated into representative symbols of the depravity of the godless, while any questioning of, say, the link between the much more massive phenomenon of priests' pedophilia and the Church as institution, the Catholic Church, is rejected as antireligious slander. The well-documented story of how the Catholic Church as an institution protects pedophiliacs in its own ranks is another good example of how if God exists, then everything is permitted to those who legitimize themselves as His servants. What makes this protective attitude towards pedophiliacs so disgusting is that it is not practiced by tolerant hedonists but, to add insult to injury, by the very institution which poses as the moral guardian of society.

Now, you will say, and I will agree with this immediate counterquestion: "What about the Stalinist communist mass killings, what about the extralegal liquidations of the nameless millions in the Soviet Union?" But I claim it is easy to see how these crimes were always justified by their own ersatz God, "a god that failed," as Ignazio Silone, one of the great

disappointed communists, called it. They had their own God, which is why everything was permitted to them. In other words, the same logic as that of religious violence applies here. Stalinist communists do not perceive themselves as hedonist individuals abandoned to their freedom. No, they perceive themselves as instruments of historical progress, of a higher necessity which pushes humanity towards next stage of Communism, and it is this reference to their own absolute end, to their own privileged relationship to this absolute, which permits them to do whatever they want or consider necessary. This is why the moment cracks appear in this ideological protective shield, the way of what they—the Stalinist Communists did becomes unbearable to many individual Communists, since they have to confront their acts as their own, with no cover-up in the higher reason of history.

This is why after Khrushchev's '56 speech denouncing Stalinist crimes, many cadres committed suicide. They did not learn anything new during that speech. You know, when they say "Oh my God, we learned what horrors there were happening in the Soviet Union, they were of course lying. All the facts were more or less known to them, they were just deprived of the historical legitimization of their crimes in the Communist historical absolute, so to get rid of God, is this simply our task? Maybe to get rid of God is the big Other in the sense of higher authority covering up for us as it were, but definitely not to get rid of the figure of the Other, not only the Leviniasian other, another human being his face, but why not even the animal other?

Jacques Derrida, of whom I am otherwise rather critical, reported on a kind of primordial scene from his life. After awakening he went naked to his bathroom, where his cat followed him, then the awkward moment occurred. He was standing in front of the cat, which looked at his naked body. Unable to endure this situation, he did something—put a towel around his waist, chasing the cat outside, entering the shower. The cat's gaze stands for the gaze of the Other. An inhuman gaze, but for this reason all the more the Other's gaze in all its abyssal impenetrability. Seeing oneself being seen by an animal is an abyssal encounter of the Other's gaze, since, precisely because we should not simply project onto the animal our inner experience, something is returning the gaze which is impenetrable, radically other. The entire history of philosophy is based, perhaps, upon a disavowal of such an encounter.

I remember a photo of a cat after it was submitted to some lab experiment in a centrifuge. I saw this photo thirty years ago. A cat, its bones half-broken, its skin half-hairless, its eyes helplessly looking into the camera. This is the gaze of the Other disavowed not only by philosophers but by humans as such. Even Levinas, who wrote so much about the helpless Other's face as the original site of ethical responsibility explicitly denied that an animal's face can function like this. One of the few honorable exceptions was here, Jeremiah Bentham, who made this simple proposal, "Instead of asking, 'can animals reason and think? Can they talk?'"—all this humanist enterprises when you triumphantly say, No, they can't, they just exchange signs, they don't really talk and so on, we should, according to Bentham, ask, "Can they suffer?"

Human industry alone is continuously causing immense suffering on animals which is systematically disavowed. We know about it but we pretend not to know. Not only laboratory experiments but special regimes, for example, to produce eggs and meat, turning artificial light on and off to shorten the day, use of hormones, and so on. Beaks which are half-blind and barely able to walk, just fattened fast to be slaughtered and so on and so on. The majority of those who visit a chicken factory can no longer eat chicken, and all of us knows—all of us know what goes on there, but this knowledge has to be neutralized, again, so that we can act as if we do not know.

One of the ways to facilitate this ignorance is the Cartesian notion of animal machine. Cartesians already in the seventeenth century were warning people against compassion with animals. They claimed that when we see an animal emitting sounds of pain, we should always bear in mind that these sounds do not express any real inner feeling, since animals do not have souls. These are just sounds generated by a complex mechanism of muscles, bones, fluids, and so on. You can clearly see the origin of these sounds through dissection. The problem is that the notion of animal machine has to end up in La Mettrie's notion of l'homme machine, of a human man, as a machine. If is one is a fully committed neurobiologist, exactly the same claim can be made about sounds and gestures emitted by humans when they are tortured. There is no separate interior domain of soul where pain is really felt. Such sounds and gestures are simply produced by the complex neurobiological mechanisms that constitute a human body.

So back to the gaze of the cat. What if the perplexity the human looking at the cat sees in the cat's gaze is the perplexity aroused by the monstrosity of the human being itself? What if what we see in this abyss of the other's gaze is our own abyss or to quote Racine, a wonderful line from Jean Racine's *Phædre*: "Dans ses yeux je vois ma perte écrite," "In her eyes I see inscribed my loss." Gilbert Keith Chesterton proposed such a reversal of perspective. Instead of asking what are animals for us humans, for our experience, we should ask what—or try to imagine what are we humans for animals? In his practically unknown essay "Everlasting Man," Chesterton makes a wonderful mental experiment along these lines, imagining the monster that man might have seemed at first to the animals around him.

A quote: "The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being, almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and an unfair disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin. He cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He's wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes, he's propped on artificial crutches called furniture. Alone among the animal, man is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter. As if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself. Alone among the animals, man feels the need of averting his thought from the rude realities of his own bodily being, of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame."

So my point here is that if we try to imagine things like this, maybe this is the first step of wisdom, to extend this logic which was first formulated by Descartes, which is for me the origin of—and I use now the term in its positive sense, multiculturalism. When you find other people's customs strange, remember how your own customs must appear strange to the same foreigners. We should maybe try just to imagine what kind of monstrosity we were and still are for animals. Maybe this is what we should read in the perplexed animal gaze.

And now this brings me to the topic of this talk, the sacred. Maybe in this sense what the animals see in us is something sacred, sacred in its very monstrosity. Here I ask you to do what I did, although I have a kind of a natural revulsion for museums, like for me going to a museum is like for a vampire when you tell him, "Why don't you eat this wonderful plate of garlic?" you know, but nonetheless, I went, I wasn't disappointed. Why? Because I claim these three religions of the book, to whom the exhibition is wonderful and is dedicated here are precisely the three religions which systematically undermine the traditional notion of the sacred.

What do I mean by this? The sacred is as to its content the same as something terrifying, evil. The difference is purely formal, structural. What makes something sacred is its exorbitant character, which make it a limitation of ordinary evil. This is why, and I totally understand this, remember here on Manhattan the ruins of September 11 acquire almost the quality of something sacred, precisely because of this excessive horror, destruction.

To see this we should not only focus on religious prohibitions and obligations, we should also bear in mind the rituals practiced by religions and the contradiction, already noted by Hegel, between prohibitions and rituals. As a rule, rituals of a certain religion consist in staging the violation of prohibitions of this same religion. The sacred sacrifice to God is the same act as murder. What makes it sacred is the fact that it limits, contains, murders in ordinary life. In times of crisis of the sacred, this distinction disintegrates. There is no sacred exception. A sacrifice is all of a sudden perceived as a simple murder. But this also means that there is nothing, no external limit, to contain our ordinary violence.

Therein resides the ethical dilemma Christianity tries to resolve. How to contain violence without this sacrificial exception? Following René Girard, Jean-Pierre Dupuy described how Christianity stages the same sacrificial process, but with a crucially different cognitive spin. The story is not told by the collective which stages the sacrifice, as in the so-called pagan rituals, but by the victim, from the standpoint of the victim, whose full innocence is thereby asserted. The first step towards this reversal can be discerned, of course, already in the Book of Job where the story is told from the standpoint of the innocent victim of the divine wrath. Once the innocence of the sacrificial victim is known, the efficiency of the entire sacrificial mechanism of scapegoating is undermined. Sacrifices, even at the magnitude of Holocaust, become hypocritical, inoperative, a fake, but we also lose the containment of violence, enacted by the sacrifice.

A quote from Jean-Pierre Dupuy: "Concerning Christianity, it is not a morality but an epistemology. It says the truth about the sacred and thereby it deprives the sacred of its

I think the world historical rapture enacted by Christianity. Now we know about the fate of the sacrificial scapegoat logic, and we can no longer pretend we don't know. The impact of this knowledge one cannot get rid of once it is here is not only liberating but deeply ambiguous. It also deprives society of the stabilizing role of scapegoating and thus sets free the space for violence not contained by any mythic limit. This is how in a truly perspicuous insight, Dupuy reads the scandalous lines from Matthew, Matthew 10:34: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword."

Furthermore, we stumble here upon another ambiguity. It is not that this absence of limits should be read in the standard way of either humanity will find a way to set itself limits or it will perish in an uncontained violence. If there is a lesson from so-called totalitarian experience it is that the temptation is exactly the opposite one. The danger of the absence of a divine limit is to impose a new pseudo-limit, a fake transcendence on behalf of which I act, from Stalinism to religious fundamentalism. Even ecology functions as ideology the moment it is evoked as a new limit. It has all the chances of developing into a predominant form of ideology today, a new opium for the masses replacing the declining religion. It takes over the old religion's fundamental function, that of putting on an unquestionable authority, which can impose limits.

So it is fashionable in some of today's neopagan post-secular circles to affirm the dimension of the sacred as prior to religion, as a space in which every religion dwells, but

which is prior to religion. There can be sacred without religion but not the other way around. Sometimes this priority of the sacred is even given an antireligious spin, a way to remain agnostic while nonetheless being engaged in a deep spiritual experience. But I think that we should precisely turn things around here. The radical break of Judaism, Christianity, and so on, even of Islam—I don't have time to develop that—consists in the fact that these are the first religions without the sacred, religions whose unique achievement is precisely to demystify the sacred. Does it mean that no sublime shattering experience remains? It does but not that of sacred in the sense of sacrificial scapegoating.

Let me evoke to you one such experience. I will quote Jorge Semprún, who reported how he witnessed the arrival of a truckload of Polish Jews to the Buchenwald concentration camp. The Jews were stacked into the freight train almost two hundred to a car, traveling for days without food and water in the coldest winter of the war. On arrival all in the carriage had frozen to death except for fifteen children kept warm by the others in the center of the bundle of bodies. When the children were emptied from the car, the Nazis let their dogs loose on them, and soon only two fleeing children were left. Then, I quote from Semprun a passage, "The little one of the two children began to fall behind. The SS were howling behind them and then the dogs began to howl too. The smell of blood was driving them mad. And then the bigger of the two children slowed his pace to take the hand of the smaller. Together they covered a few more yards, until the blows of the clubs felled them, and together they dropped, their faces to the ground, their hands clutched for all eternity."

What should not escape our attention here is that the freeze of eternity is embodied in hand as partial object. While the bodies of two boys perish, the clasped hands persist for all eternity like—tasteless parallel—the smile of the Cheshire cat in *Alice*, of *Alice*. One can easily imagine how this scene should be filmed in a movie. While the soundtrack renders what goes on in reality—the two children are clubbed to death, torn apart alive—the image of their hands clasped freezes, immobilized for eternity, while the sound renders temporal reality the image renders the eternal real. The frozen image which insists over reality rendered by sounds stands for a kind of positive ethical image of eternity.

But is this sacred or not? How does Christianity fit into it? Let me begin where I think it all begins, the Book of Job, the first treatise on—critique of ideology. Why? Remember what happens there. After Job is hit by calamities, the three theological friends come, offering interpretations which render these calamities meaningful. You know, one says, "Oh, wait a minute. God is just, so if you are punished, you must have done something wrong." The second says, "maybe God is testing you," whatever, which is to say that they all try to argue that Job's suffering has some meaning. And the greatness of Job is not so much to protest his innocence but just to insist on the meaninglessness of his calamities. And you know the beauty of it, when God appears afterwards, he gives a ride to Job against the ideological defenders of faith.

Did you notice how here the structure is exactly the same as that of Freud's dream of Irma's injection, which opens *Interpretation of Dreams*. This dream 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, looks deep into her mouth, confronts the horrible sight of the live red flesh and, at this point of horror, the tonality of the dream changes. The horror all of a sudden passes into comedy. Three doctors—Freud's friends—appear who in a ridiculous pseudo professional jargon enumerate multiple and mutually exclusive reasons why Irma's poisoning by the infected injection was nobody's guilt. "There was no injection," "the injection was clean," and so on and so on. So there is first a traumatic encounter, in Freud's dream, the sight of the raw flesh of Irma's throat, which is then followed by the sudden change into comedy, the ridiculous exchange between three doctors.

The function of the three doctors is, I think, exactly the same as that of the three theological friends in the Book of Job, to obfuscate the impact of the trauma with some kind of symbolic comedy. And I am glad to tell you didn't you notice exactly the same scenario apropos of the Louisiana, Mexico Bay oil spill? First there was the horror, the correlative of the look into Irma's throat was you remember—my God I, at least, was transfixed onto that blurred TV shot of the crack in the ground just spilling out oil as—if you pardon me but I think it's justified here, a obscene metaphor—as some kind of a toilet throwing shit back at us, and then what was the comedy? Again the three doctors! Remember the Congress hearings, the three Halliburton and so on playing exactly the same game. First BP saying "Oh, we just approved the plan, we didn't do it." The second guy saying, "No we just provided the concrete," the third one saying, "No, we were just executing the plans of the others," and so on and so on.

It's another story about which I don't have time to go into today how, unfortunately, because I still as a foreigner whether this matters support him, President Obama's reaction was also slightly ridiculous to me, namely he all too much for my taste fell into this legal moralistic trap, of, "Oooh, it's BP's problem, let's find the culprits," and so on. No, sorry, it's not BP's problem, it's the problem of us all, it's something that may endanger our way of life, so we have to start, to stop this cheap game of finding the culprit and to ask much more radical questions. First, okay, BP has to be punished, but wait a minute, I have nothing good to say about BP, yes, but are you aware that it could have happened also, probably other companies are using similar materials, so more radical questions to be asked and so on and so on, so again we have to begin asking much more radical questions here. Unfortunately, again, this was unfortunately—this was not done. But let me go on.

So asked about—I return to the Book of Job—asked about why then did Job suffer, God replies with what is usually read as his supreme arrogance, as the assertion of the gap separating God from man, you know, that, "Who are you to ask me this? What do you know about all the monsters I created?" and so on and so on. But again Chesterton proposes here a radically different reading. I quote 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 make of all things is astonished at the things he has himself made." I prefer much this reading, which means God's answer is, "Who are you to complain? Look at all the mess that I've created, the whole universe is crazy, like, sorry, I don't control it." (laughter)

This resistance to meaning is crucial when we are confronting potential or actual catastrophes, from AIDS and ecological disasters to—up to Holocaust. They have no deeper meaning. This legacy of Job prohibits us to take refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret master who knows the meaning of what appears to us as a meaningless catastrophe. The God who sees the entire picture in what we perceive as a stain, so that, you know, what appears to us as a stain, God sees the total harmony, but when confronted with an event like Gulag, Holocaust, or today the death of millions in Congo in the last decade, is it not obscene to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning, you know, like, "oh, we are just blinded humans, we are not able to see how Gulag or Holocaust contribute to the global harmony of the univers," and so on. This of course is an obscenity. If there is a whole totality which can teleologically justify and thus redeem an event like the Holocaust, then we are finished.

Christ dead on the cross means precisely that one should drop without restraint the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts.

Christ's death on the cross is the death of precisely this God, the God above, the old guy up there so that when you are in trouble here you can say, "oh, don't worry too much,

somehow we all know it will end well." I think that Christ's death means to refuse any deeper meaning that obfuscates the brutal real of historical catastrophes.

Now, in order to explain what this means, I will do something horrible, horrible—don't be afraid, none of my dirty jokes, just the more horrible thing, even—to repeat an old joke that you all know. But I think it's crucial its logic here. Maybe I even repeated here already years ago. But I know you all know it, you know, that story about that man who believes himself to be a grain of seed taken to the mental institution. Finally he is cured, convinced that he is not a grain but a man. However, when he's allowed to leave the hospital he immediately comes back trembling of scare. He says, "There is a chicken outside the door," and that he is afraid that the chicken will eat him. Doctor tells him, "but you know very well now that you are not a grain of seed but a man." "Of course I know it," replies the patient, "but does the chicken know it?" (laughter)

This is incidentally the true sake of psychoanalytic treatment. It is not enough to convince the patient about the unconscious truth of his symptoms. The unconscious itself must be brought to assume this truth. We can imagine in a similar way a bourgeois subject visiting a course of Marxism where he is taught about commodity fetishism. After the finished course he comes back to his teacher, complaining that he is still the victim of commodity fetishism. The teacher tells him, "But you know now how things stand. Commodities are only expressions of social relations. There is nothing magic about them." To what the pupil replies, "Of course I know all that, but that commodities I'm

dealing with seem to not know it." This is why, incidentally, Marx has to invoke this fiction of "if commodities could speak" in *Kapital*.

So again the true task is not to convince the subject, but the chicken—commodities—and the same goes for God. Let me imagine an enlightened society of revolutionary terror where a man is put in prison because he believes in God. With different measures—mostly education—he is brought to the knowledge that God does not exist. When dismissed, the man comes running back and explains that how scared he is of being punished by God, but tells him, his terrorizing doctor or whatever, "Of course, but you know now that God doesn't exist." The man's reply, "Of course I know God doesn't exist, but does God know that he doesn't exist?" Far from being a joke, this is exactly I claim is what happens in Christianity. When dying on the cross Christ utters his "Father, Father, why did you forsake me?"

Here for a brief moment God himself does not believe in himself or again to quote a wonderful passage from Chesterton, quote, his Orthodoxy, "When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, the moment of Crucifixion, it was not at the Crucifixion but at the cry from the cross, the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God, and now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a God from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another God who has himself been in revolt. Nay, the matter grows too difficult for human speech, but lately atheists themselves choose a god. They

will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation, only one religion in which God seems for an instant to be an atheist."

It is in this precise sense I claim that today's era is perhaps less atheist than any prior one. We are all ready to indulge in utter skepticism, cynical distance, exploitation of others without any illusions, violation of all ethical constraints, extreme sexual practices, and so on and so on, protected by the silent awareness that the big Other, God, social space, whatever, doesn't know it. Like, I claim that after the seventies we got so-called sexual revolution, liberation. But I claim it's absolutely crucial to read this liberation together with its other side, which is a sudden disappearance of Freud's fundamental insights of child sexuality. Did you notice how today molesting children became the ultimate horror, as if, you know, we can engage in all our perversities, but there must be some innocent gaze for which we should maintain the appearance.

Here, incidentally, I claim that even such a nice film, although maybe not so nice, as *Life* is *Beautiful* of Benigni is a fake. Namely—you know the story, father, a Jew, is arrested with his son, taken to Auschwitz, and in order to render possible, easier for the son to survive he convinces the small boy that this is just really one great social game, they can leave any moment they want, it's just that if you insist freely to remain to the end there you will gain a big reward at the end and so on and so on, and only at the end, after the father dies, we are supposed not to laugh to cry at the end when the child learns of the father's sacrifice. But would you not agree that there would have been a simple way to render a film I claim much more appropriate and in a way tragic? Which is that, just prior

to his death, father were to learn that son the son also knew all the time that father's story is a fake, but that he just pretended to believe father to make it easier for the father. So that you have a fiction structuring that relationship which was operative although no one believes in it. That's how we believe today. We have fictions, we don't believe in them, but they function.

God, what does this mean? The point—the Lacanian point of this is that in a way the moment we speak we unconsciously believe in God. It is our speech which creates God. God is here the moment we talk. Or to quote Talmud, a passage, "You have made me into a single entity in this world, for it is written, here O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is one and I shall make you into a single entity in the world." This Talmud formula exemplifies the idea of God kept alive by subjects' incessant activity.

In his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan opposes to the thesis of the death of God the claim that God is dead from the very beginning, it is just that he just didn't know it. One should nonetheless take note of how this process unfolds in two stages. Jewish, Christian one. While in pagan religions gods are alive, Jewish believers are already taking into account his death. Indications of this awareness abound in Jewish sacred texts. Recall from Talmud the wonderful story about two rabbis who basically tell God to shut up. The two rabbis fight over a theological question and, unable to resolve it, one of them proposes, "Let Heaven itself testify that the law is according to my judgment," then a voice from Heaven agrees with the rabbi who appealed to it. However, the other rabbi then stands up and claims that even a voice from Heaven, God's voice,

was not to be regarded, "for thou, oh God, didst long ago write down in the law which thou gave us on Sinai thou shalt follow the multitude." So God himself had to agree, after saying, "My children have vanquished me. My children have vanquished me." And he runs away.

In short, after the end of creation is accomplished, God survives only as the dead letter of the law, without retaining even the right to intervene into how people interpret his law. God thus has to die two times—in itself and for itself. In Judaism it dies in itself by way of being reduced to the effect of the human speech. Such God, God nonetheless continues to function, so it has to die for itself, and this, I think, happens in Christianity. That is to say, why did Christ have to die? The paradox is that God is a fiction but a fiction which structures our reality. It's a symbolic fiction. It is efficient in its very inexistence. It doesn't exist but it nonetheless works.

It is thus not enough to destroy the fiction from outside, to reduce it to reality, to demonstrate how it emerged from reality. This is what vulgar atheists like Dawkins are doing. The fiction has to be destroyed from within. To put it in descriptive terms, it is not enough to prove that God doesn't exist. The formula of true atheism is that God himself must proclaim his inexistence, must stop believing in himself. Therein resides the paradox. If we destroy the fiction from outside, just reducing it to reality, the fiction continues to function, to exert its symbolic efficiency, as in the famous joke about the atheist Zionists who do not believe that God exists but nonetheless believe that somehow God gave them the land of Israel.

So what happens when God dies for himself? Imagine experiencing oneself as abandoned by God, left to one's own devices with no big Other secretly watching over my fate, guaranteeing the happy outcome. Is this abandonment not another name for the abyss of freedom? This abandonment to freedom causes anxiety. As Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud, not because the divine is far from us but because it gets all too close to us, since it is our freedom that is the divine part of ourselves. If freedom is the supreme gift of God to us, where we should restore to the word "gift" all its fundamental ambiguity, present and poison, a dangerous poisonous present, then being abandoned by God is the most God can give us, and the consequence of fully assuming this abandonment are immense.

Let me refer here to Chesterton for the last time. It goes to Chesterton's credit that he turned around the standard misperception according to which the ancient pagan attitude is that of a joyful assertion of life while Christianity imposes a somber order of guilt and reconciliation. For Chesterton, on the contrary, it is the pagan attitude which is deeply melancholic. Yes, enjoy it, but enjoy it while it lasts, because at the end there is always death and decay. The message of Christianity, according to Chesterton, is on the contrary that of infinite joy beneath the deceptive surface of guilt and renunciation.

Quote, again from Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*: "The outer ring of Christianity is the rigid guard of ethical obligations and professional priests. But inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children and drinking wine like men. For Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom." So is not Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

the ultimate proof of this paradox? Only a devout Christian, which Tolkien was, could have imagined such magnificent pagan universe, thereby confirming that paganism is the ultimate Christian dream. Which is why the conservative Christian critics who years—a couple of years ago expressed their concern at how books and movies like *Lord of the Rings* or the Harry Potter series undermine Christianity, miss the point. That is to say the perverse conclusion, which is unavoidable here, you want to enjoy the pagan dream of pleasurable life without paying the pagan price of melancholic sadness for it, choose Christianity.

We can discern the traces of this paradox up to the well-known Catholic figure of the priest or a nun as the ultimate bearer of the sexual wisdom. Recall what is arguably the most powerful scene of—horrible movie—*The Sound of Music*. Can you please just prepare the clip? I will show you. This is the only really hardcore scene you will see today. (laughter) Namely it's the scene when after Maria, Julie Andrews, to use the human terms, escapes from the von Trapp family back to the monastery, unable to deal with her sexual attraction towards Baron von Trapp, she cannot find peace there, since she still, well, has sexual longing for the Baron. Now, in a memorable scene, the Mother Superior summons her and advises her, what? Maria wants to be punished and so on. No, Mother Superior advises her to return to the von Trapp family and try to sort out her relationship with the Baron. She then, I will show it to you now, just while you are hearing the song think about the obscenity. Basically, the message is what sacrifice? Go back and—sorry for the expression—screw the guy's brains out.

Please, the clip.

(clip plays: "Climb Every Mountain . . .")

Can it be more obscene?

Okay. The uncanny power of this scene I think resides in its unexpected display of the spectacle of desire, which renders the scene literally embarrassing. (laughter) The very person whom one would expect to preach abstinence and renunciation turns out to be the agent of desire. Years ago a wonderful ironic review aptly characterized *The Sound of Music* as a movie about a stupid nun who would be allowed to lead her happy monastic life if her Mother Superior were not to invite her to her room and to start to shout at her hysterically about the need to climb every mountain. (laughter)

Significantly, when *The Sound of Music* was shown in the still-Communist Yugoslavia in the late '60s, this scene, the three-minute song, was the only part of the film which was censored, cut out. I think the anonymous communist censor displayed his profound sense here for the truly dangerous power of Catholic ideology. Far from being the religion of sacrifice, of renouncing the earthly pleasures in contrast to the pagan affirmation of the life of passion, Christianity offers—this perverted false Christianity—a devious stratagem to indulge in our desires without having to pay the price for them, to enjoy life without the fear of decay and debilitating pain awaiting us at the end of the day. If we go to the end in this direction it would even be possible to sustain that therein resided the ultimate

function of Christ's sacrifice. "You can indulge in your desires. You can enjoy. I took the price for it upon myself." There is thus an element of truth in a joke about what is the ideal prayer of a young Christian girl to the Virgin Mary? "Ought thou who conceived without having sin let me sin without having to conceive?" (laughter) In the perverse functioning of Christianity, religion is effectively evoked as a safeguard allowing us to enjoy life with impunity. This I think again is precisely to avoid the misunderstanding, the fake Christianity, the institutional one.

You know, I cannot but recall here, the wonderful moment, I don't know if it really happened, the legend says it did, when, you know, when Napoleon humiliated the pope, forcing him to crown him and then even taking the crown from him, and then pope told to Napoleon something very nice, he told him, pope told Napoleon, "I know what you are trying, you are trying to destroy Christianity, but sorry to tell you, you will fail. We, the Church are trying this for two thousand years and we failed." (laughter)

So this is the first step, this is ideology, this religion, bad, it would seem to be. So how to get out of this deadlock? First I want to test you, a clarification. One of the reliable ways to identify a half-educated pseudo-intellectual is his or her reaction to the well-known scene from Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* in which, in a country inn, the camera shows a blond young man's face in a close-up. He starts to sing about how nature is gradually awakening, how birds start to sing again, blah-blah, then the camera moves to two of his parties, a girl and a boy, joining him in singing, then most of the guests in the inn

join them, the singing becomes more and more passionate, the words describing how the Fatherland should also awakening, then of course we get the point, it's a Nazi song.

Please, the second clip.

(clip plays)

I hate him. Why? Because I think it contains a kind of a pseudo wisdom. Remember that the guy, the cabaret manager or whatever who appears at the end with this wry smile and so on, it's totally wrong. In what sense? The pseudo-intellectual's reaction to this scene, it's something like—I mean, I even have ex-friends, because, you know, following the joke of Lacan that I like, "My fiancée is never late for an appointment because the moment she's late she is no longer my fiancée." I would say that none of my friends like this scene because the moment they like this scene they are no longer my friends.

(laughter) Why? The idiot's reaction is the following one: "Oh my God, only now, after seeing this scene, do we understand what was Nazism, how it took possession of Germans."

The underlying idea is that the raw emotional impact of this song accounts for the force of attraction of Nazism, and thus that it tells us, more than any study of Nazi ideology, how Nazism effectively functions. This was *grosso modo* the point of Susan Sontag's famous analysis of Leni Riefenstahl's work; it is fascist not only when it explicitly celebrates the Nazi regime. The very texture of her entire work, her obsession with bodily

beauty, discipline, nature, mountain climbing, is protofascist. I totally reject this reading. Not that I have a special love for Leni Riefenstahl. But let's take the—I think it's *The Blue Mountain* or whatever, her last bad film, a mountain film just before. Proto-Nazi, well, there is one big problem. You know with whom she cowrote the scenario for that film? The guy who was her lover at that point in the early '30s, Béla Balázs, a Marxist and a Jew, and I think it's much more productive to read that movie as a kind of a condemnation of the Jewish outcast.

So, along the same lines, one likes to emphasize the allegedly proto-Fascist character of the mass choreography, where one displays disciplined movements of thousands of bodies, mass performances, parades, and so on. And if one finds this also in socialism one immediately draws the conclusion about the deep solidarity between the two totalitarianisms. But I again disagree here. Such a procedure, I think, misses the point. Not only are such mass performances not inherently fascist, they are not even neutral, waiting to be appropriated either by left or by right. It was Nazism which stole them and appropriated them from the workers' movement, their original site. None of the protofascist elements is per se fascist. What makes these elements fascist? It's their specific articulation, or to put it in Stephen Jay Gould's terms, all these elements are exopted by fascism.

So back to this song. I hate this scene because I shamelessly like the song. No, my point is not "shame on you if you secretly enjoy the song." My point is enjoy it but not secretly. In what sense? Imagine the same song with just slightly changed words, celebrating like

the nature is awakening, the awakening of the working class, as a communist battle cry, you know, not Fatherland awakened, but Communist Party awakened and so on and so on. It would have perfectly functioned. Why not? I think it's totally wrong to leave this to the enemies and to add insult to injury for those who like this film, do you know I love this detail that this song, many people thought, "Ooh, it was a well-selected old Nazi song." No, it was written by two Jewish composers specifically for the film. I don't read this in any potentially anti-Semitic way, I'm not saying, "ah, because the Jews are somehow—they can adopt to anything." No, this could have been also a positive, wonderful song.

But something more is needed. What? Ah, now comes a slightly more traumatic detail, with which I will conclude, don't be afraid. About one hour into Bernardo Bertolucci's *Novecento*, 1900, and I just like this scene, I hate Bertolucci otherwise. I mean, one of the most boring movies that I ever saw was *Last Tango in Paris*. You know, you had vulgar sex combined with long half an hour moments of pure boring nothing happening, which allegedly makes it all more deep and so on. (laughter) But there is a nice scene in *Novecento*. Something quite shocking happens during a confrontation between the poor farmers on strike and their landowner, who is explaining to them why, due to catastrophic weather which ruined the harvest, he has to cut by half their wages.

Please, the last clip.

(clip plays)

This scene, structurally very similar to the famous scene from David Fincher's *Fight Club*, where, during a confrontation with his boss Ed Norton starts to beat his own face with his fists, this scene with its logic of realized metaphor, it is the usual way to ask someone to listen carefully not to say, "lend me your ear," renders in a hard way the price—the proverbial Shylock's pound of meat—one has to pay for liberation, the defying offering of one's ear, "here you have it, what you wanted, my ear," with its implicit subversion. "Now I no longer have ears. I will not hear you. I am deaf for your arguments." Again, such a refusal, such a withdrawal, disconnection from the shared field of communication, is a condition of freedom. This happens with Spartacus, this happens with Jesus Christ, and so on and so on. Painful as it is, you cannot avoid it.

So, to conclude, what kind of God do you get after such a gesture? Let me nonetheless, after this depressing scene, conclude on a lighter tone. I think the God you get is a God from a wonderful old Bolshevik joke from early '20s when communist propagandists were still taken minimally seriously as the one who can really convince people. Such a joke wouldn't have been possible already in the late '20s in Soviet Union. About an able communist propagandist who after his death finds himself in Hell where he quickly, of course, being a good propagandist, convinces the guards to let him go out, and he escapes to Heaven.

When, after a week, the devil notices inspecting Hell, his absence he, devil also goes up quickly pays a visit to God demanding that God returns to Hell what belongs to the devil.

However, immediately after the devil starts to address God, "Oh, my Lord," God

interrupts him, because of course the communist propagandist has done his job also in

heaven. God interrupts him. "First, I am not your Lord, but a comrade. Second, are you

crazy talking to fictions? I don't exist. Third, be short, otherwise I will miss my Party cell

meeting. I am on the way to it." (laughter)

This is the God we need today. A God who fully, wholly becomes man, a comrade

among us, crucified together with two social outcasts and who not only doesn't exist but

himself knows this entirely passing over into the love that binds together members of the

Holy Ghost, which is the name of the emancipatory collective. Running to the party

meeting means, "sorry, I belong to the Holy Ghost, the community of believers, where I

am one of the equals." That's the God I am ready to die for. Thank you very much.

(applause)

If we still have some time we can maybe do some Q & A.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Slavoj Žižek is asking if we still have some time. I think

we still have some time.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: I mean, You are the master, not me here.

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I am the master.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Even if you are not my lord but comrade, but nonetheless, no?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: As a comrade in arms I would love to invite all of the

people who have real questions and only good questions and only short questions, and

only—

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: You are even a good communist Bolshevik, you want to censor

questions.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I absolutely want to censor—so anybody who has a good

question, a censored question, should come up to the mic and ask their question.

Q: I just want to know were you ever religious? Did you ever practice any religion?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: No No

Q: And why? In what circumstances?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Because, I mean, the circumstances were very easy. Unfortunately—I am saying this sincerely—in my country, ex-Yugoslavia—the church did not play such a role as, for example, exemplarily in Poland in the struggle for freedom and so on. They were more or less—more or less opportunistically silent. So, you know, they didn't have—they didn't enjoy this—how should I put it?—moral status. I'm not saying I was a megagreat dissident. I was a midlevel dissident, enough to be jobless, unemployed for a couple of years. We didn't look at the church as some kind of authority. And it's very interesting how I—it's only through this new readings of Paul from Taubes to Althusser, death of god, theology and so on, and through contacts with my Jewish friends who told me many wonderful things about Talmud and so on.

And also—sorry I didn't have time to go into this—Islam friends showed me all the ambiguity of Islam, how it's not just simple, you know, screw the women, and so on, I mean control them, it's much more ambiguous. Remember, for example—just one detail—so that I don't lose time that in Islam women are not only simply subordinated. Remember if you know a little bit of Islam just one detail. How does Muhammad become a prophet? Through the woman. First he is when he hears the voices of the Archangel Gabriel who give him messages, he thinks this most be devil. It is his wife Khadija who renders clear to him no it's divine voice, so it's as if men are confused, the ultimate ethical agent is the woman.

You know where you find this? Now I will shock you. The lowest moment, and I'm totally opposed to it, I don't have any sympathy for oooh, it's a different culture here, of

Islamic fundamentalism—do you remember this scandal, some four, five—not you, I see the worry in your look, I will cut it short.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm not worried, I'm not worried.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: You are now like that wounded cat that I mentioned. (laughter) I don't know what to read into you. Sorry. You remember in Australia that scandal when a woman was raped, and the highest Islam authority there, a priest, said, blamed the woman using the pretty disgusting metaphor saying "what about if somebody leaves a piece of unwrapped meat on the street, and if dogs come by and eat it, whom would you blame? The dogs or the idiot who left the meat there?" The idea was the woman is to blame, it's disgusting. But on the other hand—no, on the other hand that doesn't mean I have some sympathy for it. (laughter) I just want to draw attention to a very strange fact. In this story the woman is the only ethically autonomous agent. We men are idiots, like dogs—you see it, you grab it. The only one who is supposed to have the minimal ethical firmness to oppose temptation, which is why she is blamed, is the woman. I mean, it's—okay, I stop here.

Q: Here and there in your works you talk about the Holy Trinity, and I wonder if you could pull together some of your ideas on the Trinity.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: No, the way I read it, I think I tried to develop in my very limited way this in my debate with John Milbank, who is much more a member of what he calls

himself, as you probably know better than me, radical orthodoxy. You know why I liked to do that book with him, incidentally? Because we—opposite as we are—we both reject a certain theological orientation which I don't like, this kind of a deconstructionist, postsecular, postmodern theology. Well the story goes like this: Of course there is no God as a good uncle up there, the God is dead, but out of the void of this absence a certain undeconstructible voice is addressing us and so on and so on. This kind of reduction of God through some kind purely ethical beyond-being agency, the abyss of address, and so on.

My Jewish friends gave me a wonderful argument against Levinas here. They told me, "No wonder Levinas is so popular. He is already secretly Christianizing Judaism." What totally disappears in Levinas is precisely what I like in Judaism, this spirit of—as a communist I like it—spirit of collective, no. In Levinas all of a sudden it's me and that stupid face addressing me, and then it's only when there are other Others and so on that collective appears. So going back to a point my reading of it is simply brutal, literal reading, two premises: (a) As Hegel puts it, what dies on the cross is not son but father himself. I think it's correct speculative reading. Otherwise we are in some pagan stupidity where you have God up there, God sends a messenger, "oh, sorry, crucified this time, it failed, come back my son, we'll try it later two thousand years," or whatever. (laughter)

This is obscenity. The whole point is that it's not that if we do this we are back at this boring pagan topic of phoenix—you know, you die, but out of the ashes you, like that stupid bird, whatever, you come back. No no no, what comes after crucifixion is not

Christ back to Daddy. It's Holy Ghost. What is Holy Ghost? Read it literally. When Christ is asked by his followers, "How will we know that you come?" You know this famous passage, "Whenever there is love between two of you I will be there." I take this absolutely literally. Holy Ghost is what remains of God, and it's our freedom. There is no higher guarantee and so on.

Even here some intelligent conservative Catholics got the point, like I like the passage in Paul Claudel where he says the true mystery of Christianity is God can't do anything without us. It's not trust God, it's God trusted us, this, as it were, thrown into freedom, condemned to freedom, so it's against this background again that I read trinity. Trinity is precisely a break with any of these boring pagan notions—God appears, disappears, maybe he will come again, or whatever, all this cyclic view. And, again, I think I this is something so tremendous that agreeing with what the pope says to Napoleon, that one can almost read entire or most of, at least, Christianity as—if I may put it in this way—a struggle against its own subversive core.

And I think that today politically even this is very important where even Christianity is being more and more reinterpreted with some kind of a—what is today the predominant spiritual attitude? Let's be frank. It's no longer Christianity, even if it's called Christianity. It's some kind of a—I like to call it a spiritualized pseudo-Western Buddhist hedonism, you know, realize yourself, a little bit of spiritual exercise and so on and so on and even Christianity is secretly if you look at it reformulated in these terms. This is why with all my appreciation of Dalai Lama, read his books. I checked in a bookstore. Three

of them on the first page they always begin in the same way, "All living beings want to avoid pain and live happily, enjoy it," and basically the message is a little bit of meditation will help you, even better sex, and so on.

I think that first this is blatantly false, if there is anything to learn from psychoanalysis is that it's at least one human being, sorry, at least one living being, humans, who puts all its energy to screw things up for itself as far as possible—as much as possible. This is what Freud called "death drive" and so on. We are not hedonist animals and especially I think this is important. I wonder if you would agree with me. The pope, Ratzinger, said as usual something pretty stupid, that, you know, that "greed, utilitarian greed and so on, we have to overcome it," in this apparent anticapitalism.

Totally wrong. Capitalism as Benjamin knew, has a much more religious structure, a true capitalist is not a utilitarian hedonist. You are willing to starve, to risk everything, just so that capital reproduces itself and so on. You are even ready, ready to whatever, to endanger the earth, whatever, just that it goes on. Capitalism, again, is not the structure of personal egotism and greed. Every intelligent ideologist knows this. I talk too much. I hope I gave you at least some orientation of a possible answer. At least, let's have at least another one to make it a good try.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: At least a trinity, yes, another question, and then there's a question that came to us through the Web. Go ahead.

Q: Can you clarify what you make of the resurrection of the dead, God dies on the cross as a literal death?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Not only this. My idea is again that resurrection is the Holy Spirit, which is the community of believers. I here read God through—I tried to, and I was even tempted, but it would have taken too much time to play it here but I didn't find Paul Robeson version, I don't like Joan Baez version, you know that legendary American trade union song, "Joe Hill," where a friend asks Joe Hill, who appears to a sleeping working-class trade unionist, Joe Hill, who was killed by the—appears, and the dreamer asks, "but you are dead, I saw you dying, how can you be here?" And then the guy says, "No, whenever workers organize I am there," and so on and so on. That's the only resurrection.

If you ask me, okay, what about all that bullshit, here I am a little bit of a Stalinist censor, what about that John's apocalypse and so on. I'm against, I think, first, all bad things in Christianity, including the first traces of anti-Semitism, they start in gospel of John. I'm totally against John. I think the other three are the true ones. And I think this is why John's apocalypse is bullshit. I think it's already a regression—this ethical thrust of early Christianity is already lost. That would have been my reading. None of this Armageddon and so on, all that. I think Paul is my hero. You know, just community, what I like about Paul is again this, disregard of—disregard of—of not fetishizing the person of Jesus Christ. Paul is even often criticized for this. Paul basically almost doesn't quote Jesus

Christ's sayings and so on. What interests him is that Christ died and is resurrected. All other things, who cares about them?

And essentially the same point was made already by Kierkegaard, or later, who says, openly, as to what he says, Christ is saying mostly banalities. Kierkegaard puts it acidly, "Every student of theology today is able to put it better than Jesus Christ." If you look for something in Jesus Christ it's not wisdom, but a wonderful—here we have some subversiveness of Christ—a wonderful sense of maybe humor, sarcasm. You know, what's the usual story? Christ says something nobody understands, then Christ says, "Okay, I will give you a parable," then you understand even less, did you notice this?

(laughter) Like, what is the point of this parable and so on? This is a wonderful strategy to shake people. Sorry, I talk too much.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There is one question that came to us online.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: You organized it? Okay.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I organized it. Let me see if I can read it, though. You have claimed that environmentalism is the new opium of the masses. Václav Klaus has said that ecology and global warming alarmism is a new ideology. How would you respond to his notion of environmentalism as a new ideology? And furthermore, what is your impression of leaders such as Klaus who dogmatically advocate market liberalization in the face of global financial crisis and new ecological catastrophes?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Wonderful question. I am very grateful to it, you know why? Because first I want to clarify a misunderstanding here, not in the question but with some leftists today. My—what really depresses me more and more, today's Left. You know, this will shock. I totally accept this description of Václav Klaus, no, for him already Václav Havel is a communist and so on, no? Why—you know what is going on now? Leftist logic is this one. You appear unionism organizing the International Monetary Fund and so on the liberal agent, so the only thing that can save welfare state in Europe is giving in. Going out of European Union, back European Union, more autonomy, state sovereignty where you are not constrained by any rules and so on and so on.

So there are serious friends of mine, among them my very good friend, personally, Fred Jameson, who are pro–Václav Klaus. They told me, "Oh forget about this right wing and so on, this is the way for him to pass this basic message, 'out of European Union,' and this is important for the Left today. It's the only way." I think this strategy is madness. So but just to clarify this, so I am totally opposed to Václav Klaus, and this is why I appreciate this question to avoid the interpretation. My God, if you read the book which I have just published, one book too many, maybe, *Living at the End Times*. I have a whole chapter on it, my God, ecology. I am fanatically pro-ecology.

But one should distinguish—and I emphasize this—ecology as dealing with problems of ecology from its ideological use. The real tragedy of ecology of how this field, which is extremely serious. Remember, I mentioned oil spill where President Obama was even too

short for me and so on, I mean, not radical enough. You know, this is the problem today with ecology and even with general critiques of capitalism. I always repeat it. Today we have even—some of the leftists wanted to shoot at me when I mentioned this—we have maybe even an overload, too much of critique of capitalism. But what kind of critique? This Hollywood Left moralistic critique. We are all the time bombarded by you know, "Oh my God, that company is polluting the environment, another company is exploiting children, the banker is speculating," but the premise is always this moralizing legal premise—the culprits, let's punish them, and so on and so on. This excessive anticapitlaism is just a way for me to avoid deeper systemic questions.

Back to ecology. Where I am critical towards ecology is this easy way of culpabilizing us. Aren't we—let's be frank—often when dealing with ecology aren't we acting a little bit—that would be my ultimate brutal irony, the way soccer fans do when they watch TV, you know? You are at home in front of TV but you nonetheless shout and stand as if in a magic way you can influence—help your team. Isn't there a little bit of this in—I'm very evil now—in recycling and so on, basically we know larger, systemic changes are necessary, but, you know, it makes you feel good. You know, like, "oh, the bottle," I have friends who if I don't put aside one can of Coke, "Oh my God, how can you do it?" and so on. It is pseudo activity, I claim. This is ecology as ideology. We are ready to follow all these small rituals not to confront the real problems, which are very real, I claim.

I now did a text which maybe will appear in some kind of stupid thing, I appreciate it

nonetheless, new year volume magazine of *International Herald Tribune*, where I go

precisely into this. Are people aware what is awaiting us? Like that probably imagine

Iceland volcanic ash, imagine the same thing which could happen, now again we have in

Indonesia, it can happen, it probably will, some five, ten times stronger. Imagine the

whole of Iceland, Iceland becoming uninhabitable. How will we deal with these

problems? Where will the people from Iceland move, who will, or now that sub-Saharan

Africa is getting more and more desert, on the other hand, so we are told, parts of Siberia

because of global warming and so on. Who will even organize the population exchange

and so on? All these calls for unheard-of new forms of cooperation and so on and so on.

So, again, my point is not "ecology is ideology," but the predominant functioning of

ecology is ideological, which makes it all the more dangerous because it makes us avoid

confronting the more radical issues. So, no, no, I'm totally pro-green here.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If you had to in a few words say what is *the* radical issue?

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: Today?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: This is the reason why, and I'm well aware of the risk sticking to this

name, I remain some kind of a communist. Not in any sense of oh, another Leninist party

and so on, my God. I said it on BBC that *HARDtalk*, and you know that some people

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even attacked me on the streets of London, I had to run. Ohh, you dirty— I said the twentieth-century communism was the greatest ethical, political failure in the history of humanity. My God, what do people want me more to say to convince them that I'm not some kind of a Stalinist or whatever? But I claim the problem is this one. Problems which gave birth to communism remain. What I already mentioned this large probably movement of population. They happened in the past—the decline of the Roman Empire—and it was done chaotically, with terrible destruction. Today, we cannot afford it, with weapons of mass destruction and so on, that's the end.

So I would say all these problems that I see as fundamental, ecology, biogenetics, and so on are the problems of commons. Commons in the sense of something that is our shared substance, substance of our life, like nature, genetic base, intellectual property, and so on and so on. These are all fundamentally problems of commons. For me these are all different versions of the same problem. So for me ultimately the problem is capitalism but not in this simple, moralistic sense and my God I'm the first one to admit that capitalism is obviously the most revolutionary dynamic system in the history of humanity. My God, let's be frank, I'm the first to say this, let's be really frank, and some leftists will now maybe shout at me.

Can you imagine in the entire history of humanity a time where a large majority at least of the people were living in relatively safe, free, high-standard conditions, then at least Western Europe in the last fifty years. The point is that this cannot last, I claim. The point is that, you know, when people tell me, "You are a utopian," my answer is, "No, the true

utopia is to think that where we are now this can go on." Here you have ideology, sorry to repeat an old point, at the everyday level. I think if you want to detect ideology today, think about impossibility. What we consider possible, what impossible. Did you notice how on the one hand, impossibility, sorry, possibilities are exploding, we are—especially in private lives and in technology, practically everything is or will be possible. You can download anything, you can do all the sex operations—split your penis, you can do it with two women, whatever you want, maybe we will become a software eternally living. Everything is possible with money, you can, everyone—if you have money—everyone can become an astronaut visiting space and so on. Here, everything is more and more possible. At the same time did you notice how in the last decades, the moment you touch economy and social order, we are told, "Oh the utopian era is over, almost everything is impossible. Like, do you want more health care? Oh, sorry, it renders us uncompetitive, it's impossible," and so on and so on. (laughter)

We are living in—this is pure ideology in a crazy time where on the one hand, you can, sorry to return to this tasteless example—you can have your penis cut in two, do it with two women, you can become a virtual entity, all that is possible, but to give a little bit more for health care is impossible, no, (laughter) maybe we have to change the priorities here a little bit, you know, (applause) just be more modest, here. So again, in this sense in a very modest way, I don't have solutions, I just think we are confronting serious problems. Let's start thinking.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: As usual, I would like to, before we thank Slavoj Žižek I

would like to thank—

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: You are brutally interrupting the spontaneous applause of people.

(applause) Sorry, no, no please stop.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would like to—brutally interrupted—I'd like to thank 192

Books, our independent bookstore that will be selling your book, which you will sign,

and thanks Slavoj Žižek for this performance. Thank you.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK: I want to thank you all of you and especially to my good friend Paul,

I warn you, now comes the ultimate insult if you know how the Stalinist communists

used this term, you are not one of us, communist, but you are a good progressive

bourgeois intellectual.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you.

(applause)