



Review: Failing to Fight for The Christian Legacy: Zizek!

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 **UCLPRESS**

Failing to Fight for the Christian Legacy

Review of *Žižek!*

by Charles Andrews

Dir. Astra Taylor
Zeitgeist Films, 2005

For anyone unfamiliar with the works and personality of Slavoj Žižek, the recent documentary directed by Astra Taylor about the Slovenian philosopher, critic, politician, and psychoanalyst might give a mistaken impression. The Christian element of Žižek's thought has all but vanished from the film, hanging about less tangibly than the spectre of capitalism or the insidious stain of Lacan's 'Real'.

In no way do I want to suggest that *Žižek!* is a bad film. It is an entertaining, if somewhat misleading, introduction to some heady philosophy and the personality behind it. So why might we be concerned about this omission? Naturally, not all of Žižek's ideas could be squeezed into the film's 71-minute running time. As the author of over 50 books, countless articles, and a lecture circuit that rivals those of Tony Robbins, Žižek threatens all strategies of containment. He describes this volubility and potential redundancy by calling himself 'over-prolific'. Taylor selects her material carefully, choosing to focus on human moments in the life of this veritable publishing house. We see Žižek playing with his son, typing with one finger, buying DVDs, receiving the awkward praise of graduate students, lying shirtless in bed, and ordering food. These mundane curiosities, coupled with his

incessant chatter in four languages, give us the portrait of a quaint, likeable, brilliant eccentric who might be your Eastern European uncle or the neighbour who buttonholes you to discuss Schelling while you get the mail.

This celluloid version of Žižek is a character, a lovably human cartoon far from the self-description he offers. 'I'm a monster!' he says, 'not a human'. He speaks with concern about the tendency for documentaries on intellectuals to humanise them by showing routine foibles we all share. One cannot help but think of the recent *Derrida*, which showed the Father of Deconstruction unable to locate his car keys. Instead, he argues, theorists should be pure theory and disavow the urge to be a warm human being like everyone else.

But his dismissal of humanity is countered by a sensitivity to effective communication. In one telling moment, we watch Žižek watching a video of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan introducing his theories for French television in 1974. Žižek studied psychoanalysis at the University of Paris with Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's student, and identifies himself as a 'card-carrying Lacanian'. During a deleted interview, he confesses an inability to explain, meta-critically, his attraction to Lacan: 'It is the Truth!' So it may seem strange to watch him exclaim that the style of the video is all wrong, that Lacan's didactic way is poor communication. The images of Lacan monotonously iterating his positions and striking the air with his palm is, according to Žižek, 'ridiculous emphasis', an 'empty gesture in a total fake style'. This criticism of his intellectual grandfather is a rarity and suggests Taylor's felicity in drawing out an element of her subject far less commonly seen than his own flamboyant gesticulation, nimble philosophising, and pop-cultural wit. And, it suggests that Žižek's approach to communication, with its abundance of personality, may be precisely his humanising gesture.

Taylor steers away from hagiography, largely by eschewing the self-important voice-over technique common in documentary film. And her refusal to sanctify her subject allows her to expose the ridiculousness of some of Žižek's fans. (One young fellow approaches the perspiration-drenched Žižek after a lecture and awkwardly hugs him. Žižek's wide eyes jittering say more than any voice-over could.) Yet, a touch of

hagiography might be what is needed in the film to provide Žižek a religiously-inflected context to strain against. At the offices of Verso, his publisher, he describes his new book, tentatively titled *The Parallax View*—unless, he notes, they look on Amazon and find too many books with that title. The first section of this work will be on philosophy and theology, one of the few references to Christian thought in the film. Being relegated to a passing fancy does more harm to Christianity than any amount of misrepresentation. It is repressed, and only in the most subtle moments does it threaten to return.

What Žižek has tried to do in several of his books is offer a materialist theology that takes Pauline Christianity as a pre-secular vehicle for social revolution.¹ In *The Fragile Absolute—Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* Žižek critiques both the ‘post-secular deconstructionist’ position that affirms a hazy pseudo-spirituality, as well as the ‘old liberal slander’ that Marxism is simply a ‘secularized-religious-sect’. Instead of denying the liberal charge, he follows Alain Badiou’s work in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* and wholeheartedly adopts the view that ‘Christianity and Marxism *should* fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms—the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks’.² By claiming a radical core for Christian social thought and asserting that Saint Paul may be profitably revitalised through Lacan, Žižek hopes to divest Christianity of its ‘religious’ trappings and utilise its energies for political ends. This is the necessary element lacking in Taylor’s presentation of Žižek as the roving wild-man of Theory and ‘academic rock-star’.

As an introduction to the philosopher’s personality, *Žižek!* succeeds admirably. But as a primer for his philosophy, the crucial absence of Žižek’s Christian thought suggests a failure to understand Žižek and the Christian legacy he believes is worth fighting for.

Endnotes

1. For other elaborations of his appropriated Christian thought, see *On Belief and The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute—Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), p. 2.