

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Christian Communists, Islamic Anarchists?

Nathan Coombs

Nathan Coombs  
Christian Communists, Islamic Anarchists?  
2009

<https://mronline.org/2009/12/09/christian-communists-islamic-a>  
<https://mronline.org/2009/12/10/christian-communists-islamic-a>

Nathan Coombs is a PhD candidate in political philosophy at Royal Holloway, University of London, co-editor of the *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, and co-convenor of the BISA working group: Global and Transnational Politics. His research project is entitled 'Evental Hermeneutics'. This article was first published by *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 3.3 (2009) under a Creative Commons license.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

2009



# Contents

Part 1 . . . . .	5
A Gesture for Insurrection . . . . .	12
Crucifixion and Resurrection . . . . .	17
The Universal and Violence . . . . .	21
An Incomplete Conclusion . . . . .	27
References . . . . .	28
Part 2 . . . . .	29
Hegel and Islam . . . . .	33
Žižek and Badiou on Islam . . . . .	38
Revolutionary Rivals: Motahhari and Shariati . . . . .	45
The Event of Shariati's Islam . . . . .	53
Conclusion (Religion at the Gates) . . . . .	57
References . . . . .	59



- Halm, Heinz. 1991. *Shiism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 2001. *The Philosophy of History*. [Online, Accessed 14/08/2008].
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1991. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huntington, Samuel. 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Schuster.
- Jayatilleka, Dayan. 2007. *Fidel's Ethics of Violence*. London: Pluto Press.
- Khomeini, Ruhollah. 1979. *Islamic Government*. New York: Manor Books.
- Martin, Vanessa. 2000. *Creating an Islamic State*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Marx, Karl. 1963. *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.
- Mottahari, Morteza. 2008. *Man and His Destiny*. [Online Accessed 5/09/2008].
- Mottahari, Morteza. 1986. *Spiritual Discourses*. Albany: Muslim Students' Association in The U.S. and Canada (PSG).
- Rahnema, Ali. 2000. *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- Sharma, Ash. 2007. "Materialism Today." *Dark Matter*. [Online, Accessed 01/09/2008].
- Shari'ati, Ali. 2003. *Religion vs. Religion*. Chicago: ABC International Group.
- Shari'ati, Ali. 1996. "Fatima is Fatima" in *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman*. Chicago: ABC International Group.
- Stace, W. T. 1955. *The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition*. Dover Publications.
- Toscano, Alberto. 2006. "The Bourgeois and the Islamist, or, the Other Subject of Politics." *Cosmos and History: A Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*. Vol. 2 (1-2).

## Part 1

The defeat of the Marxist emancipatory project has brought an end to radical secular universalism. The result has been twofold: identity politics and their post-modern ideologies of difference have become the legitimating motifs of Western democracies, whilst radical political Islam has taken the anti-systemic baton of secular Marxism, but subverted it with a brand of universalism with no respect for such niceties as co-existence with secular democracy, or even the nation-state.<sup>1</sup> This pincer movement of status quo, secular particularism (multicultural liberal 'tolerance') and radical religious universalism ('intolerant' Islamism, evangelical Christianity etc.), sets the context for recent Communist appropriations of Christianity as a paradoxical 'Third Way'.

'Communist appropriations of Christianity!' To the uninitiated, the initial reaction can only be shock. We might ask what happened to religion as the 'opiate of the people' and, not only that: haven't Marxists also long been arguing that Marxism is not just a religion by another name, but objective science free of illusions? The confusion would not be unwarranted, and relates directly to the semantic and historical umbilical cord between Marxism and Communism: a link in the process of being severed. That is to say, although most contemporary Communist theorists have roots in 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxist movements, many now aim to disassociate Marxism

---

<sup>1</sup> The transformation of the forces of the left into Islamists is a phenomenon that has been evident in many cases in the Middle East: from the Iranian Revolution — in regard to the Mujahideen and Tudeh Party — to the Islamisation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, to name just a few examples. It is commonly acknowledged that many Islamic movements grew out of dissatisfaction with the 'socialist' Arab nationalist regimes; that is, the loci of militancy shifted from previously secular ideologies to Islamic ideologies, even when they are fighting the same cause of oppression e.g. the PLO's secession of militancy to Hamas.

and Communism.<sup>2</sup> The belief is that if Marxism can be abandoned then the name of Communism can be saved. A forthcoming conference at Birkbeck College, *On the Idea of Communism* (March 2009), announces the terms of the shift: “In spite of their theoretical differences, the participants share the thesis that one should remain faithful to the name ‘Communism’: this name is potent to serve as the Idea which guides our activity, as well as the instrument which enables us to expose the catastrophes of the XXth century politics, those of the Left included.” Thus Communism is the name to be rescued, and as the theoretical and political chasms between speakers at the conference such as Michael Hardt and Slavoj Žižek indicates, this recast Communism, free from determinate Marxist content, can potentially subsume everything from the French Revolution to the waning anti-globalisation movement, or even, in a more controversial gesture, St. Paul’s brand of renegade Christianity.

If they stopped there, however, St. Paul’s story would be just one in a long line of dramatic ruptures from the status quo by a militant group of believers; a lineage that could include a multitude of religious figures from Moses to Mohammed to Thomas Muntzer. Communism, in this frame, would signify solely the violent outbreak of communal solidarity; distinguished from its reactionary forms by the fact that it carries a substantively *new* universal category that affects the split *within* an existing social formation. If this heavily subtracted Idea of Communism was all these theorists argued for then there would be a seductive parsimony with the entire programme of post-Marxism, and the awkward distinction between non-Marxist Communism and post-Marxist communism would be

---

<sup>2</sup> Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) is a very obvious example of this shift. Alain Badiou has made this shift implicit in all his most recent work since *Being and Event* (2005); first published in French in 1986. And you could even say that Michel Foucault’s enthusiasm for the Iranian Revolution arose from his belief that a new sort of communist subject was being born before his eyes: the ‘Collective Will’ as he put it.

specific historical and religious procedure) is what will allow us to realize this future.

## References

- Adib-Moghaddam, Arshin. 2008. *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic*. London: Hirst Publishers.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005b. *State of Exception*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Almond, Ian. 2007. *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Badiou, Alain. 2005. *Being and Event*. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, Alain. 2003. *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Behrooz, Maziar. 2000. *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Bin Laden, Osama. 2005. *Messages to the World*. London: Verso.
- Coombs, Nathan. 2009. “Christian Communists, Islamic Anarchists? – Part 1.” *International Journal of Žižek Studies*[Online, Accessed 30/03/2009] 3:1.
- Coombs, Nathan. 2008. “Ali Shariati: Between Marx and the Infinite.” *Culture Wars*. May 2008. [Online, Accessed 30/03/2009].
- Coombs, Nathan. 2008b. “The Excess of the Left in Iran.” *Culture Wars*. June 2008. [Online, Accessed 30/03/2009].
- Dabashi, Hamid. 2006. *Theology of Discontent*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Fakhry, Majid. 2004. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ed. *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Hallward, Peter. 2003. *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

We have pointed to the inconsistencies this gives rise to; inconsistencies that even Badiou (2003) alludes to in his conclusion, when after 107 pages of attempting to demonstrate Paul's foundation, he announces in his conclusion to *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* that the claim is "excessive," but only because it is "already present in this or that theorem of Archimedes" or "in certain political practices of the Greeks." Slavoj Žižek, however, fails at any point to deliver any caution against his own temerity and pushes not only the significance of Paul, but also the ontological significance of the Christ event; using it as a standard with which to negate all other religions.

The consequences of this theological turn are not necessarily disastrous. Still, the valorization of Paul and Christianity raises the possibility of a troubling culturalist hypothesis for the failure in the humanity of non-Catholic 'Third World' Communist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: an implication already picked up upon in Dayan Jayatilaka's (2007) explanation for the collapse of the global, revolutionary movement. Without substantive philosophical and historical engagement with Islam, which is after all setting the global scene of anti-systemic 'resistance' to Western hegemony, the exclusivist regard for Christian universalism ends up looking perilously close to a leftist variant of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of the Civilizations* (1997) thesis.

This considered, we might ask what purpose this theological turn serves? Why should Badiou, Žižek et al feel the need to be encumber themselves with theosophy? As an intellectual exercise revisiting the theological matter upon which ancient and modern civilization was born is undoubtedly part of coming to terms with the historicity of our politics and epistemology. But surely if Communism is to have any meaning in the future — if the global emancipatory struggle against capitalism is to be reborn — then the ability to act 'as if' we exist on a bedrock of absolute possibility and relate through a transcendent universalism (not one grounded in a

rendered unnecessary. Communism and the multicultural respect for the diversity of religions would both be saved and we could content ourselves at the impressively neat accommodation of the two. But here the problems begin, because many of the theorists do not stop there. It is not enough for Paul to be an example — just one in a long historical lineage — it is instead claimed that he in fact *founds* the originary categories of Communism. Alain Badiou (2003) even goes so far to claim Paul as *the* founder of universalism itself. Christianity and St. Paul become a demarcation for sorting out the right sort of Communist from the wrong sort.

All of which brings us back to where we came from: the umbilical cord between Marxism and Communism which is never cut with the intention of a final separation. As such, the place of universalism in this Paulian Communism should remind us of that nagging aporia at the heart of the Marxist 'faith': the fact that universalism never becomes identical with itself. Without the particular, the universal is meaningless; the establishment of the universal always presupposes the negation of its particularistic Other. For instance, in Marxism the bourgeoisie have an essential role in the realisation of working class universalism, yet the position of the bourgeois class *after* the revolution has always been ambiguous. The idea that it would just gradually disappear was undermined by the emergence of the state class in Russia, purges of the 'backward' bourgeois in Mao's Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot's absolutist logic that necessitated their complete annihilation. And just as Marxism never really came to terms with what to do with the bourgeoisie Other, anarchist universalism was its rival Other. It was a doctrine that took the spirit of Marxism too far; so far in fact that it frequently needed to be suppressed, as famously demonstrated by Marx's expulsion of Bakunin from the International Working

Men's Association<sup>3</sup> and the clear and present danger that Lenin perceived in the philosophy.

Even if the atrocities by Pol Pot et al. in the name of Marxist universalism must go a long way to explaining the collapse of the Marxist-Communist revolutionary movement (Jayatilleka 2007) and its practical abandonment by theorists such as Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri and, to a much more limited extent, Slavoj Žižek; the troubling question is whether this same tripartite structure of universalism repeats itself in the new Communist appropriation of Christianity. To make the parallel logic explicit: the Judaic particularism of faith (the Covenant was revealed solely to the Jews) was necessary for the universalism of St. Paul's message to have any meaning, but forevermore Judaic particularism became a justification for their persecution, which much like the bourgeoisie after Communist revolution just refused to fade away. It is therefore not surprising, as some have already pointed to (Depoortere 2008; Kirsch 2008), that there are potentially disturbing consequences for the status of the Judaic faith in this valorisation of the violent, intolerant universalism of Christianity. In this frame, the continuance of the Jews can begin to look like a stubborn refusal to secede to the emancipatory project Christianity inaugurated, and as such resembles an insurmountable barrier and tool of emotional blackmail against *any* universalist aspirations: the state of Israel being the emblematic example that the left is always quick to invoke.

And to follow the parallel further, if anarchism was Marxism's universal rival, then is Islam not also Christianity's rival: a universal monotheistic faith declaring a rupture with the past — in Islam's case negating the multitheistic tribes of the Arabian peninsular and in Christianity's case the negation of Judaic exclusivity? To drop

---

<sup>3</sup> Marx's expulsion of Bakunin is just one instance among many of the suppression of anarchism as both a formal manifesto and as a tendency within Communist organisations. See Robertson (2003) for an analysis of this specific incident.

specific historical foundation as such because it rather *is* the act of becoming.

## Conclusion (Religion at the Gates)

We have seen in this second part of the essay that the most strident Communist defences of the Christian legacy, by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, have a conception of Islam markedly similar to that of Hegel's. Their Islam fails the test of the universal: it fits neither into a teleological unfolding of world spirit (according to Žižek); nor, for Badiou scholar Peter Hallward, does it appropriately slot into the conception of a militant 'truth procedure' in the same way that Paul's production of the Christian faith can. However, by taking these overly abstract denunciations of Islam and grounding them in the concrete split of the Sunni and Shia, even if we have not conclusively managed to insert Islam into Hegelian teleology, or decisively proved it as a Badiouian event (if such a thing is even possible), we have at least dislodged some of the pre-suppositions which allows Christian essentialism to assert itself. Similarly, in our analysis of the philosophies of Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shariati, and their relationship to Shia Islam, we have seen how there was an originality in their utilisation of the religion for a radical, revolutionary programme that cannot be perceived through the usual lens of the obscurantism of such Islamists as Sayyid Qutb or Osama bin Laden. Both Motahhari and Shariati aimed at a universal, revolutionary event, forcing them to fundamentally reconstruct the meaning of Shia Islam from its tradition of *ressentiment*. Yet only Shariati's conception truly managed the radical rupture within the religion, unencumbered by Motahhari's need to maintain his break within the constraints of the Shia juridical hermeneutic circle.

Is it possible, then, in the light of the analysis we have conducted here, to maintain the thesis of Paul as the founder of universalism?



authority on Shiism when he stated: “As you see in physics, a scientist comes and introduces a new school. Then all others follow him. It is the same in jurisprudence. There are all these *ulama*, yet only one of them succeeds in producing a new school” (Motahhari cited in Dabashi 2006: 1999). Yet, remaining trapped in the discourse of jurisprudence, Motahhari cannot imagine the radical event Shariati is calling for. And is Shariati’s philosophy not an event in itself? For far from being a dialectical convergence of Islam and Marx within a juridical hermeneutic framework, Shariati is declaring a new guiding principle of Islam from ground zero, *tabula rasa*. As Dabashi argues: “He was convinced, like no one else in his historical vicinity, that he had, in fact and in the fullest extent possible, seen the light” (2006: 145). That Shariati relates back to the inspiration of the Prophet Mohammed and his daughter Fatima does not imply an invocation of eternal Law (on the basis of which Badiou excoriates political Islam), but instead emphasises the necessity of forgetting, how forgetting inevitably opens the possibility of the new.

Shariati’s programme is thus radically different to the invocation of the primordial ideal community by obscurantist political Islamists. For Shariati, Mohammed’s daughter Fatima is simply “a model, an ideal example, a heroine” (Shariati 1996: 79) because “in spite of the little Muslims know about her, they accept Fatima, her majesty and power, with their whole hearts” (ibid: 84). Shariati’s method is the same as he describes for the prophet himself, who “preserved the form, the container of a custom which had deep roots in society, one which people had gotten used to from generation to generation ... but he changed the contents, the spirit, the direction and the practical application of customs in a revolutionary, *decisive and immediatemanner*” (ibid: 104). In other words, like Paul he enacted a ‘universal singularity.’ But for Shariati the degeneration of monotheism (universalism) to polytheism is an experience iterated throughout history, preceding and following from Moses, Christ and Mohammed, among others. Universalism can have no

deeper than we might like into this rabbit hole: is there not a painful irony at the heart of non-Marxist Communism that it begins to look an awful lot like the anarchism Marxism spent over a century suppressing and that the new Communist subject (the emancipatory *Overman*) likewise begins to look a lot like an Islamist; that is, one marching under any banner *but* Islam? As Hardt and Negri admit, in regard to the Iranian Revolution “we might think of it as the first postmodernist revolution,” but only insofar as it represented “a powerful rejection of the world market” (2000: 149) i.e. only if we subtract its recognisable Marxist dimension and ignore the Islamic content. Like Marxism’s suppression of anarchism, the recent focus on the foundational break of St. Paul depends to a large extent upon the denial of Islam to maintain Christianity’s unique place in the history of universalism. As Ash Sharma described the mood at a recent conference of dialectical materialists: “It was only Ali Alizadeh’s attempt to formulate the Iranian revolution as an Event, that began to challenge the rather comfortable presumptions of a Christian hegemony... The underlying presumption remains that Christianity, and not Islam or any other religion, provides the basis for a true, modern universality” (2007: unpaginated). Thus, it is not just that Judaism emerges as negated for being *too far* from the universalism of Christianity, but Islam also ends up being ignored perhaps for being *too close* to the horizon of thought of the new Communism.

For now, though, even if it eventually proves vital to the argument, we stick with Christianity and Judaism and leave the discussion of Islam to Part 2 (forthcoming: *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, Vol 3.2). Although in recent decades there has been a great deal of interest in Paul – including from theorists such as: Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou – this piece will focus on Žižek and Badiou’s interventions: as both claim the closest proximity of Christianity to the foundational tenets of Communism. Despite sharing a common political project, their tacit alliance in resuscitating Pauline love to pride of

place in the Communist project looks unlikely at first glance. Žižek has always made it clear that he aims to re-establish German idealism, and particularly Hegel, at the heart of radical philosophy. On the other hand, for Badiou, Hegel represents something of an arch-rival and if there is an aim to his immense project from *Being and Event* to the *Logic of Worlds* it is to replace Hegel's entire system with his own: grounded on the non-same-identity of ontology (Being) with the ontic (Event), even if the short-circuit of Cohen's theorem of 'forcing' is meant to link the two.

However, despite this apparent incompatibility we must add two caveats to the dialectics/events dichotomy: firstly, that both systems share the concept of the universal, and secondly, that they arrive at the universal event of Christianity via two different paths. In keeping with his Hegelian loyalties, for Žižek it is the death of Christ (the moment of negativity) which is given priority; whereas, for Badiou, it is the resurrection of Christ as it effected the event of Paul's conversion (the pure positivity of the event) which is given almost exclusive focus. And perhaps we should add a third caveat, the fact that Žižek's Hegelianism is most unorthodox: an open formulation which is read through Freud and Lacan and *visa versa*. This openness, although not undermining the dialectics/event, crucifixion/resurrection dichotomy with Badiou, should in any case put rest to any overly determined historical-teleological readings. What we should expect to find in Žižek is that, rather like Badiou, the universal is not fixed, not a foundation; but rather a moment, an act of becoming; one that is not laid down in the heavy ink of history as a form of infinite determinism.

But as we have already discussed, this is what we *do not find* in these authors. Against expectations, Christianity does become *the foundation* of universalism. So rather than simply critique these authors for their Eurocentric-Christendom bias, or make wild and unlikely speculations about anti-semitism or Islamophobia, this essay instead attempts to show how the cleavage internal to any idea of a foundational universal is at the root of the problem; because

In *Religion vs. Religion* he identifies the only true religion as that of the becoming of universal monotheistic religions against the status quo, and conversely their petrification in tradition or Law is the loss of the ethical imperative of universal monotheism to a form of covert polytheism. In his own words: "If I talk about religion, I do not talk about a religion which had been realised and which ruled society. Rather, I speak about a religion whose goals are to do away with a religion which ruled over society throughout history" (Shariati 2003: 40). This division of the world into two states: polytheism and revolutionary universal monotheism, is clearly transcribable with Badiou's division of temporality around the event. And in *Fatima is Fatima* Shariati describes the truth procedure of a Badiouian event almost exactly:

In Islam the scholars are not wise people. They guarantee nothing. They do not have a handful of knowledge. Science does not consist of hundreds of pieces of information and knowledge. In their hearts is a ray of light, the light of God. It is not a question of divine science, illumination or Gnosticism. It is also not chemistry, physics, history, geography, jurisprudence, principles of jurisprudence or logic, which are all types of scientific knowledge. A science becomes illuminated with light when its knowledge brings about responsibility, guiding knowledge, and organization of ideas. (Shariati 1996: 98)

Here Shariati echoes Paul when he declared redundant both the Greek and Jew, meant not as nations, but as the subjective inclinations of wisdom and obscurantism. Shariati denounces the reduction of religion to a type of scientific knowledge, which is nothing but taxonomy, whereas science itself is the structure of subjective orientation to the opening of the new. For "responsibility" we could read 'fidelity' and the moment when "a science becomes illuminated by light," as 'event.' Motahhari also aimed at a 'sui generis'

behind the contradictions of the variety of sources he drew from, but significantly the structure of his argumentation at least aims towards that very purpose.

In his treatise on revolution, love, women, Islam, Marx and modernity Shariati's structure was to continually posit a dichotomy and explicitly not resolve it but render it deficient against the possibility of the new; satisfied by no synthesis or negation of the negation. Even the titles of Shariati's works express this anti-dialectical approach: *Religion vs. Religion*, *Fatima is Fatima* etc. In the latter work, regarded by many as his masterpiece, he successively looks at the dichotomies between Eastern women and Western women, and reveals their inadequacy. For example, the choice for Muslim women of traditionalism versus the role model of the liberated Western woman is revealed as an irresolvable choice of two evils.<sup>11</sup> His answer is to find both choices wanting and to propose a new revolutionary way of being for Western women to inhabit that rejects both these propositions, which equally resonates for Iranian women in their unique social situation. His unfolding structure is always to undermine the dichotomy of choices, and then undermine the choices contained within those choices themselves.

---

<sup>11</sup> Shariati first undermines the position of traditionalist notions of veiling and oppressing women as deficient and proceeds to also undermine the modernist, Europeanised female role model as equally deficient. He then argues that the image of Western women in the Muslim world stops very short of reality. Veering from the *ressentiment* and cultural essentialism of the standard portrayal of Western women in Muslim countries as hypersexual sirens, he argues there is a very real truth to the liberation of women in the West and extols the countless examples of women who have realised this freedom in intellectual and political pursuits. But he goes on to argue that within the Western tradition the dichotomy between freedom and societal belonging is also oppressive. The choice of freedom which creates these exemplary role models is also an oppressive freedom from the social point of view of a woman in society: premised on an individualistic breaking away from a hierarchical social bond which results in loneliness and women's objectification.

the foundation of a universal is it in fact its transcription into a fixed object, holding a fixed predicate: in this case Christian universalism. In *Theoretical Writings* Badiou notes: "nothing exists as universal if it takes the form of the object" (2006: 145). Nothing, that is, except for Paul's universalism; signalling a deep inconsistency between the ontological tenets of his system and this more direct politico-theological intervention. Even adopting such wildly differing ontological systems, by positing exclusive foundations I show how Žižek and Badiou appear to fail to escape the shadow of bad old closed Hegelianism<sup>4</sup> that has always told the same story of the role of Christianity in the unfolding of world history.

And finally, so as not to presume too much prior knowledge before we commence: to give a brief biographical sketch it should suffice to say that St. Paul was a citizen of Rome born between 2AD and 5AD. He was a Pharisaical Jew engaging in the persecution of the Christians who at roughly the age of 30 had a sudden conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus. From that point on he travelled across the known world spreading the message that Christ was resurrected and of the epochal significance of the act and the time in which they were living. He held the existing order defunct and declared an entirely new order founded solely upon subjective belief, with no need to recourse to miracle or Christ's

---

<sup>4</sup> It is Slavoj Žižek's unorthodox open Hegelianism that requires us to make the distinction. Where different interpretations of Hegel have had their various followers, such as Alexandre Kojève's influential reading upon the Anglo-American academy – most famously upon Francis Fukuyama – and Jean Hippolite's upon 20<sup>th</sup> century French thought, all have basically adhered to the fundamental Hegelian proposition that the Notion unfolds in history and that the Whole is a closed system, i.e. we can reach the 'end of history.' Žižek, on the other hand, has consistently propounded a variant of Hegelianism that remains open. No end can be reached and there is no resolution in the Absolute. Žižek has been criticised by many for his loose Lacanian interpretation of Hegel, for example see Widder (2002: 158), and has been defended by some based on the inadequacy of defences of the 'real Hegel', see Gunkel (2008), but there have been remarkably few attempts, to my knowledge, to deduce if Žižek's Hegelianism is an ontologically consistent rethink of the system.

teachings other than an unnegotiable belief in the event of the resurrection.

The appeal of this narrative to Communist theorists should be amply clear. However, it is in the method of transmission of Paul's act to the present day that the ambiguities start. This matters: because once the consequences of the appropriation of Paul become clear, how literally we should take Paul's acts as the foundation of Communist universalism, inspiring allegory, or dialectically subsumed part depends upon whether the relation of these philosophies to history escapes Hegel's philosophy of history. Or, in other words, do these secular appropriations avoid parroting the old Hegelian logic of Christianity as the 'Absolute religion?' And thus, as will become clearer in Part 2, do they also foreclose the emancipatory possibilities of Islam?

## A Gesture for Insurrection

It is an obvious point, but one worth repeating, that the theorists in question are not advocating anything like the liberation theology of the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez, who took Christ's words literally as socialism. The appeal to Paul would be much better described as an advocacy of a certain inclination; a defensive measure against the tendency in our liberal-multiculturalist orders to purge all belief in the act of the violent disruption of the status quo. The fact that Christianity is perceived today in such a different light, under the platitudinal everyday rubric of 'turning the other cheek,' 'goodwill to all mankind' etc.; or in the evangelical movement as: 'family values,' 'an old fashioned moral compass in a world that's lost its way'; or in the liberal-multiculturalist world as 'the root of all bigotry and misogyny,' 'the logic of colonial humanitarianism' (Douzinas 2007), makes the Communist defence of Paul a disruptive and intuitively appealing gesture.

ther fundamentalist, nor that of a dialectical convergence of Marx and Islam, but an Islam capable of generating the new itself entirely free of external determinations. Or, in other words: a political Islam bearing all the hallmarks of a Badiouian event.

## The Event of Shariati's Islam

As we have discussed, Shariati's political genesis was the dialectical relationship between Marx and Islam initiated in Iran, a theoretical conjuncture shared by Motahhari and his father Taqi-Shariati; i.e. attempting to negate Marxism for Islam by dialectically subsuming Marxism within Islam. But therein lies the problem. Although Motahhari's dialectical hermeneutics creates the new, it is a new internal to its precepts, it is not a radical rupture as such. On the other hand, Shariati's break from this tradition was most obviously manifest after studying in Paris in 1959, where he was exposed to the heady environment of social self-criticism and intellectualism. Studying under the French orientalist Louis Massignon Shariati learnt about aspects of his own Persian culture and Islam that he was unaware of himself. And from Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre he learned of the latest developments in the fusion of existentialism and 'Third World' revolutionary theory. Thus began the productive inter-pollination of theories that has typically been described as his eclecticism, or strategic Leninism. Ali Rahnama, for one, claims him as a "first class eclectic, he was part Muslim, part Christian, part Jew, part Buddhist, part Mazdaki, part Sufi, part heretic, part existentialist, part humanist and part sceptic" (2000: 370). But just as Motahhari's quasi-Hegelian interpretation of Shiism has gone unnoticed, there has conversely been a lack of theoretical exegesis of Shariati's method. Eclecticism implies that all ideas are held simultaneously regardless of their epistemological or ontological contradictions. We could not claim that Shariati altogether left

especially human will and actions cause changes in the celestial world and the angelic record. (Motahhari 2008: part 5)

In other words: humankind affects Allah's knowledge, it affects the internal orientation of the celestial world and it renders obsolete any conception of eternal Law. And all this is deduced explicitly not from Quranic exegesis but through the strictures of logic itself. Further, does not the *telos* of this argument also imply that with the culmination of humankind's will the celestial is subsumed entirely? If so, is this not something like the Hegelian subsumption of God by *Geist* from an Islamic perspective? Is this what allows Motahhari to claim: "The human being is the goal of the universe whether the earth is the centre of the universe or not. What does the phrase 'goal of the universe mean?' It means that nature moves in a certain direction in its evolutionary course whether we consider the human being a spontaneously created being or a continuation of other animal species" (Motahhari 1986: 20) Morteza Motahhari, Ayatollah Khomeini's right hand man in Iran, emerges as an ultra-humanist Islamic revisionist.

The Quran is negated as the eternal source of knowledge and humankind emerges as the end point of the evolution of thought and will in the world. Still, the path to this dialectical event, owing as it does from a series of dialectical inductions from hermeneutical juridical analysis, contains within it the necessity of the negated precepts. The event in Motahhari's thought, no matter the radicality of its deductions and propositions, is ultimately tied to the authority of the hermeneutic circle, even if he occasionally appears to cast aside exegesis in favour of rationality. This fundamental philosophical difference is what separates Motahhari from Ali Shariati. Although they collaborated for some time in Husainiyya Ishad, Motahhari withdrew prematurely in 1971, unable to rival Shariati's popularity and shocked by the unorthodoxy of his appropriation of Islam (Martin 2000: 79). Shariati proposed a political Islam nei-

Badiou and Žižek take a slightly different approach to this gesture, but one that, at this stage, we can at least say is united by a shared impulse. For Badiou, St. Paul is the archetype of the militant for us to draw inspiration from in the time of current political malaise, and for Žižek the same holds, in addition to his belief that monotheism provides an ethical imperative against the parlous influence of New Ageism and Buddhism in Western cultural trends. Where they are closely united is in regard to the act of belief. Just as Paul was not interested in persuading the philosopher Greeks of any rational basis for believing in Christ's resurrection, so too they imply, the contemporary leftist militant should not be suckered into the game of pondering the minutiae of policy choices and weighing up the economic pros and cons of their positions. In other words: believe in the act, believe that miracles do happen.

In the opening pages of *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* Badiou puts his cards openly on the table: "There is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure — even if it takes the form of denying its possibility — called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can said to have been that of the party militant" (2003: 2). It would not then be a stretch to say that Badiou's act of appropriating Paul arises from this very absence of a Communist, revolutionary subject today. And this absence has to be seen into relation to the contemporary predominance of identarian movements, from feminism to gay rights etc., that do not coalesce into a higher critique of capitalism and/or the greater social order that structures all these relations in respect to one another. Paul's story is thus a perfect case study of a universal break that arises from the particular, or as he puts it: "It is a question of knowing what identarian and communitarian categories have to do with truth procedures, with political procedures for example. We reply: these categories must be absented from the process, failing which no truth has the slightest chance of persistence and accruing its immanent infinity" (Ibid: 11).

His reading of Paul is a polemical engagement centred on the desire for the re-birth of the subject and an exposition as to how such a subject must operate according to a universal commitment if such a commitment is to ever solidify into a truth procedure. Similarly, this commitment, which Badiou renders as ‘fidelity,’ is also at stake in his analysis of Christianity. Throughout *Being and Event* the Christ-event plays a remarkable role as one of the few consistent concrete examples to which Badiou ellipses back to, particularly when his analysis reaches an aporia. On the subject and its relation to the event Badiou foreshadows his analysis in the *Logic of Worlds* by stating: “In truth, this is the problem which remains for philosophy...” in that “It is always a matter of knowing whether one can deduce, from the eventual *conversion*, the rules of infinite fidelity” (2006: 239). This unresolved question is exemplified in the question of Christianity and the “interminable debates over whether the Christ-event determined, and in what details, the organization of the Church” (Ibid: 238). Paul’s significance arises from a more generic philosophical identity in Badiou’s system, that if “we suppose that there is no relation between intervention and fidelity, we will have to admit that the operator of connection in fact *emerges as a second event*” (Ibid: 239).

To put it another way, what Badiou’s restless theoretical circling is getting at is that there is a gap in his system — at least at the time of *Being and Event* — between understanding the site of the event — the situation from which the event arises — and the structure of subjects’ fidelity. He therefore supposes that a ‘second event’ completely distinct from the first could resolve the problematic. Here we now see the significance of Paul: the only apostle from *outside* the circle of Jesus’ disciples, whose militant commitment can thus subtract more easily from the identarian and particularistic baggage of the situation (in this case: Jesus as a Jew) because, to describe it quite literally, Paul wasn’t even there. And on this issue of the close relation of separation with the universal, the parallel with Lenin also coincides; a man who never knew Marx but

argue that the fact that everything is within the Knowledge of Allah means that everything has been predetermined by Him... Now let us see if it is feasible to have a third view which may resolve the apparent conflict between the belief in fate and destiny on the one hand and Allah’s Omnipotence and His Omniscience on the other. If we can find such a proposition there will be no need of interpreting any set of the Qur’anic verses. (Motahhari 2008: part 1)

Motahhari proceeds by dividing the concept of destiny into two: “It appears that there are two kinds of fate and destiny, one inevitable and unalterable and the other non-inevitable and alterable” (ibid). The dialectical movement begins. Motahhari goes on to infer from this something remarkable: destiny cannot be changed except by a change in a destiny itself — it divides itself internally in a sequence of self-negations — and in that complex change in destiny human agency inserts itself. It is worth quoting again at length to make clear the profundity of Motahhari’s deduction:

Hence, a change of destiny in the sense that any factor can go against what has been divinely ordained or what the law of causation necessitates, is impossible... But a change in destiny in the sense that the factor bringing about the change should itself be a manifestation of what Allah has decreed, is possible. Though it may look rather queer, it is a fact that the destiny can be changed by another destiny... It may look more surprising if we think of the divine aspect of fate and destiny, for a change in this aspect implies a change in the celestial world, in the angelic tablets and books and in the Divine Knowledge. So can Allah’s Knowledge still undergo a change? The surprise reaches its height when we admit that certain terrestrial affairs,

a concomitant sympathy for the Asharite idea of predestination, which also became Sunni orthodoxy after the fall of the Mutazilites (Fakhry 2004). The Asharite doctrine, in contrast to the rationalist Mutazilite school of thought, curtails the possibility of human freedom because of “God’s absolute omnipotence and sovereignty in the world and the finality of his moral and religious decrees” in which “the human agent plays no part in the drama of choosing or doing and reaps none of the moral or religious fruits accruing from such initiative” (ibid: 210–211). The problematic of humankind’s free will and divine predestination, although seeming an interminable religious question, is not all that different from Marx’s famous difficulty with incorporating voluntarism in his otherwise teleological communist worldview.<sup>10</sup> Likewise for Motahhari, it is important from a revolutionary, ideological point of view to discredit divine predestination and create an active conception of Shiite doctrine. On this issue he takes a different position on the conventional dichotomy between destiny and free will; attempting a transcendental critique of the dichotomy in regard to conventional Qur’anic exegesis on the matter:

The reason why the two sets of these verses are considered to be conflicting is that the scholastic theologians and some commentators of the Qur’an think that destiny implies that man is not free. According to them destiny and liberty are mutually inconsistent. They ar-

---

<sup>10</sup> In the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Marx’s answer: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1963: 15) is a compromise of ideological significance. Of course, it is impossible for anyone to actually live their lives believing at every moment their choices are predestined. Even if the intellectual position of predestination is not strictly irrefutable, the fact that we need to operate ‘as if’ we have free will makes the question more significantly that of affecting a tendency amongst those who hold the opposing position: i.e. those that believe in predestination are more likely to be apathetic about changing the world.

nevertheless bore the burden of realising the event of his theoretical discovery and putting it into practice. In the loosest sense, if a moral emerges from Badiou’s analysis it is that if the subject is to re-emerge today it does not necessarily have to be in the context of an eventual-site he/she is personally engaged in, but one that simply provokes an unconditional fidelity to that event and its universal consequences. To dig around for a contemporary example: an activist campaigning against Israel’s late 2008/early 2009 siege of Gaza who then commits entirely to the cause of the One State Solution, but somehow universalises the consequences so that it affects a splitting across all political subjectivities. Paul’s story – of not even being there and going on to found the Church – shows that no matter how dire the political situation appears, miracles can literally emerge from the void.

Although Žižek shares many sympathies with Badiou’s reading, in his own writings it is not so much the subject that he is concerned with, but a more fundamental defence of the significance of Christ in philosophical-cultural terms. The status of Christianity is for Žižek a chess piece on the table of cultural warfare: one in which he perceives the all-embracing self-reflection of post-modern society as inculcating anxiety and a corresponding avoidance of the act. In this regard, we can also understand his persistent engagement with Kierkegaard, including the recurrent motifs of the ‘leap of faith’ and ‘the sacrifice’ in his work. If this at first seems out of sorts with his professed Hegelianism it is worth drawing on what he describes as “my Hegelianism: the motor of the historico-dialectical process is precisely the gap between acting and thinking” (2007: 88). I.e. the subject must be able to take unreflective acts for the ‘cunning of reason’ to progress the world in historical-dialectical terms. And according to Žižek: “The Religious is by no means the mediating ‘synthesis’ of the two, but, on the contrary, the radical assertion of the parallax gap...” (2006: 105).

Depoortere (2008) has also provided us with a remarkably systematic analysis of how Žižek draws his Lacanian analysis into the matrix of Hegel and Kierkegaard to defend the act from the temptation of withdrawal and anxious non-action. As Depoortere describes, Žižek's Lacanian interpretation of the Christ event revolves around the relation of the subject to 'the Thing.' Žižek's hypothesis is that Judaic Law, by throwing a barrier between the subject and 'the Thing,' circumvents the 'death drive' towards an endless loop of desire, which then defers the more fundamental human drive for 'the Thing' itself. This loop of desire he associates with Judaic Law finds a common identity with late capitalism and its proliferation of ephemeral desires to consume. We do not act on our drives, and defer them to our desires, quite simply because the Law prohibits drive; whilst at the same time, that same Law is what establishes us as human in the first place. For Žižek then, when God becomes Christ and is put up on the cross, the Law is thus annulled and the original 'Thing' effectively put beyond reach forever, releasing our drives, whilst also maintaining our humanity. Christianity releases the drive to act and finds its contemporary relevance today in opposition to the concomitant climate of non-action that Žižek associates with the rise of 'Oriental wisdom' in Western culture: "The target on which we should focus, therefore, is the very ideology which is then proposed as a potential solution – for example Oriental spirituality (Buddhism), with its more 'gentle,' balanced, holistic, ecological approach ... Western Buddhism, this pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner distance and indifference toward the frantic pace of market competition, is arguably the most efficient way for us fully to participate in market dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity" (2003: 26).

It quickly becomes clear that Žižek's contribution, like Badiou's, is an intervention and appropriation targeted at our specific time. However, they have two slightly different events of Christianity in mind. While Badiou is happy to maintain an almost exclusive focus

your dislike of their enemies, is not personal but general and universal. (Motahhari 1986: 22)

In this schema Motahhari argues that all positions are just relative, and thus incomplete, judgements except when viewed from the totality of the Whole. In referring to the Shiites, the substitution of religious sect, or faction, with 'class' is the curiosity of greatest interest. It is true as Dabashi (2006) claims that Motahhari's readings of Marx were limited by the range of Persian translations and the absence of a developed intellectual environment in the seminaries equipped to discuss such topics. Nevertheless, although his reading of class as a form of identity in opposition to totality is flawed according to a properly Marxist reading, the point is that he implicitly seeks to undermine Marxism here by equating class with exclusionary Shiite identitarianism. Therefore, Shiism as a singular perspective or force of *ressentiment* is also rendered inadequate; the only truth to Shiism becomes that which meets the standards of the universal. Motahhari's mission is thus to appropriate for Islam this rational, universal perspective and vice-versa. He asks for example: "why do we think of Hadrat Ali, peace be upon him, is a perfect human being? Because he felt society's pain, and his 'I' had become 'We'. He was a limb or organ of a whole body" (1986: 10). The twin necessities of revising Shiism to fit the standards of the universal and provide an ideologically adequate theology of revolution forces Motahhari to negate common Shiite precepts. The movement within Motahhari's hermeneutic reinscription of Shiism creates a dialectical event that opens the possibility of the new; a rupture impossible for functionalist fundamentalists like Khomeini to imagine.

To give another example of how he fundamentally questions received Islamic doctrine, in *Man and His Destiny* Motahhari turns to the ever-contentious issue of pre-destination (fate) in Islamic philosophy. The core problem is that owing to Shiism's belief in the destined return of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam there has always been



hideouts and continue to fight on a fistful of rice” (Motahhari cited in Dabashi 2006: 193). The hermeneutic challenge of attempting to square Shiism with the demands of modernist revolutionary discourse and practice made him go out of his way in the practice of hermeneutically revising Shia Islam. For instance, against the injunction that the Quran stipulates that only Muslims (in the masculine tense) should seek knowledge, “he then produces an extraordinary explanation in a footnote where he argues that the Arabic masculine noun “Muslim” stands for both the masculine and feminine genders” (ibid: 205). In other words, for all its radicality, his theoretical practice operated within the hermeneutic contours of Shiite juridical tenets and points of reference — stretching them as far as possible from traditional understandings to ones based on the primacy of rational deduction.

That is also not to say Motahhari’s discourse was a solely superficial exercise of the accommodation of two contradictory world-views. In attempting to undermine the Tudeh’s variety of scientific Marxism Motahhari also wittingly or not adopted what could be called a quasi-Hegelian Islamist perspective. For instance, in *Spiritual Discourses* Shiite mythology is represented according to a phenomenology and ethical schema recognisably Hegelian in its emphasis on the universal and the recognition of the self-same identity of difference:

Is it a class feeling which makes us think of ourselves as belonging to the group of martyrs of Kabala and dislike Yazid and Shimr as we dislike our enemies? Do we project our feelings of sympathy or hatred on to each group respectively, while in truth both are related to ourselves? ... On the contrary you may look at it from a different angle which is not personal and individual but is related to the whole of humanity in which there is no question of personal dislike but the truth. There your connection with the martyrs in your praise, and

on Paul, Žižek defends the significance of the crucifixion in a quite literal way.

## Crucifixion and Resurrection

The difference in their approaches shows itself clearly in the relation of the crucifixion to the resurrection, and it would not be unfair to say at least one element escapes both their analyses. Let us follow Badiou and describe the sequence in two parts: event one divided into crucifixion and resurrection and event two being Paul’s militant conversion. Žižek’s Hegelian-Lacanian reading primarily focuses on the crucifixion (the negative) and Paul’s conversion (the positive), whereas for Badiou the original Christ-event is left almost completely undiscussed, and where it is — via Paul — it focuses mostly on the resurrection (the positive). There is a certain inevitability about this parting of ways, when we see how the status of Hegelian dialectics divides the two.

For example, Badiou identifies Paul’s significance in the shattering of attempts by some in the Jewish establishment to subsume Christ’s message and resurrection under existing Law. He uses this distinction between Paul’s insistence upon the fundamental rupture in all existing social relations and thought (a properly Badiouian idea of the event) and the Judeo-Christian idea of the event as the perfection of existing Law as indicative of a dialectical approach: a fine distinction that he will reiterate again and again in the text. In regard to the Jewish establishment: “Its conception of the subject is dialectical. It is not a question of denying the power of the event. It is a question of asserting that its novelty conserves and sublates the traditional site of faith, that it incorporates it by exceeding it. The Christ-event accomplishes the Law; it does not terminate it. Thus the marks inherited from tradition (circumcision for example) are still necessary” (2003: 23).

Likewise, Badiou needles the Jerusalem Conference, where Paul is pleading for acceptance from the establishment, as an unhappy synthesis, but one that is “genuinely foundational, because it endows Christianity with a twofold principle of opening and historicity... Admittedly, the conference does not seem able to fix the content of this difficult match between eventality and immanence to a situation” (Ibid: 25). The conference nevertheless lays the basis for the truly disjunctive later event, such as the incident between Peter and Paul in Antioch. When Peter leaves the table of the ritual meal at the arrival of the non-Jews, for Paul: “The incident reveals to him that the Law, in its previous imperative, is not, is no longer, tenable, even for those who claim to follow it” (Ibid: 27). In these passages Badiou is attempting not only to make a point about the militancy and radicality of Paul in his time, but to also to limit the confusion related to his system, as it is commonly interpreted that events appear from nothing and are constitutively external to the situation of the subject. Obviously, this would be completely ontologically untenable; therefore, although Paul was external to the Christ-event itself, Badiou is trying to ground Paul’s actions in a concrete situation to prevent a sliding back to dialectical thinking, which has a more brute ontological-ontic relation.

In his discussion of Marcion’s *The Anti-theses* and the division Marcion erects between the God of the Old Testament and the New – that it is actually a different God – Badiou claims that: “The result is that the Christian News is, purely and simply, the true God’s mediating revelation, the event of the Father, which, at the same time, denounces the deception of that creator God whom the Old Testament tells us about” (Ibid: 35). The key word in Badiou’s account of Marcion is ‘mediating,’ signalling that in his view Marcion’s account, paradoxically, on account of the extreme radicality of the event, becomes *more* dialectical, not less. Contrasting Paul and Marcion: “That Paul emphasizes rupture rather than continuity with Judaism is not in doubt. But this is a militant, and not an ontological, thesis. Divine unicity [*unicite*] bridges the two situa-

Marxist, emancipatory alternative to traditional Shiite *ressentiment* amongst young urban intellectuals (Dabashi 2006; Rahnema 2000).<sup>9</sup>

Taqi-Shariati’s foundation of the God Worshipping Socialists was a direct reaction to the Tudeh’s propagation of Marxism, forcing the Islamic-left in Iran to engage with Marxism in order to adequately defend its positions against the ideologues of the Tudeh. From this first instance of negation, Islam and Marx in Iran were put into a dialectical relationship. Motahhari’s intellectual development can most productively be seen in the tradition this relationship gave rise to. By attempting to negate the disenchanting world of secular Marxism, Motahhari’s own discourse ended up sounding awfully similar to the objects of his consternation. This was not against his wishes, however, because this lexicographic transcription and smattering of sometimes critical, sometimes cooptive, references to Plato, Aquinas, Kant and Hegel served its ideological purpose to make political Islam resonate amongst modernist revolutionaries in the country. Foremost was his attempt to reconfigure Shiism from being a religion of *ressentiment* and weakness to one of strength and revolution; and in the process he had to challenge orthodox historical and religious doctrine. Dabashi tells us: “He had to rid Islam of all apparent signs of misery and passivity. For this reason, he severely admonished his audience for chanting, commiserating, and self-flagellating. He went as far as to challenge the authenticity of the canonical reports that Imam al-Husayn’s household actually came to Karbala on the occasion of his martyrdom” (2006: 176). And along these lines he redefined asceticism, as it ought to be: “The astonishing resistance of the Viet Kong is due to that which in Islam is called ‘the lightness of one’s necessities.’ A Viet Kong can go on for days in

---

<sup>9</sup> It is important to mention this relationship between Motahhari and Ali Shariati early on to make clear some of their similar allegiances and also the political significance of their later rivalry. This rivalry culminated in followers of Shariati, in the breakaway Mujahideen organisation, the *Furquan*, murdering Motahhari after the fall of the Shah.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared: “At present, a specific source of thoughts is manifested in Iran which is contributing to the development of all Muslim Nations. The secret behind our success and fulfilment of divine purposes is to continue the path of Ayatollah Motahhari.” (Notes on Iran 2007)

Although we could reduce these differences to one of Motahhari’s clerical authority chiming with the ideology of the grand jurist, it seems insufficient to account for the valorisation of Motahhari and the ambiguous mix of demonisation and cooption of Shariati by the Iranian establishment. Instead, it is their approach to Shiism and the clerical establishment which seems to orient the split. For whilst both were extremely critical of the state of Shiism and its inadequacy as a revolutionary ideology, Motahhari’s was a dialectical, revolutionary Shiism that preserved its juridical tenets; whereas Shariati’s Shia Islam was a heavily subtracted conception emphasising rebellion, equality and universality. As Dabashi puts it: “No one did more than Motahhari in legitimating this updated Shi’i juridical discourse. Shari’ati simply concocted his own modern discourse, totally outside of, and indeed antagonistic to, the Shi’i juridical hermeneutic circle” (2006: 201). The difference we should emphasise, then, is between the preservation of tradition in Mottahhari’s dialectical Shiism and the sheer invention of Shariati’s.

Taking Motahhari first, this difference is not surprising when we consider that he was Ayatollah Khomeini’s student, friend and later representative in Iran during exile. But he was not simply a mouthpiece. Motahhari’s philosophical output exceeds Khomeini’s by far, because it did not just engage in negating through *ressentiment* everything the West materially and philosophically stood for in his imagination (even if he did contribute he fair share to this discourse). He read Western philosophy, albeit imperfectly, and attempted to elevate theological scholastic discourse to equal academic philosophy. Both Motahhari and Ali Shari’ati’s father, Mohammed Taqi-Shariati, were primarily conditioned by the rise of the Communist Tudeh party in the 1940s and the appeal of its

tions separated by the Christ-event, and at no moment is it cast into doubt” (Ibid). For Badiou, the Christ-event has no theological-ontological dimension, and this is what precisely delimits his eventual interpretation from the dialectical one.

As we have already seen, however, for Žižek it is this ontological dimension which gives Christ’s crucifixion such importance. There is however an ambiguity: for Žižek the coming to earth of God in the body of Christ, and his crucifixion, necessarily ends in the secessionist theory of Christianity that signals: “The “Holy Spirit” is the community deprived of its support in the Big Other. The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the becoming-man-of-God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach et al.); rather, it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the “big Other” that decides on the “objective meaning” of our deeds (2003: 171). According to Žižek the significance of Christianity is not just secularism, but an even purer secularism that exceeds the imagination of Stalin and the scientific socialists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, what is ambiguous here, is that an ontological thesis of this type can either go two ways: (1) in a fudged Hegelian teleological sense of the ‘cunning of reason’ acting through subject’s illusions that Christ really is God, which through that mediation eventually reveals the God really is nothing but *Geist*, or (2) that if Žižek wishes to avoid the teleological implications of the thoroughly Hegelian reading he has to take quite literally the assertion that God actually did die on the Cross, which is a kind of secularism, but a peculiar one: God *really did exist*, but is no longer! Either way, Paul’s militant band of believers is seen to dialectically reverse the negativity of the crucifixion into the positivity of the secular, Holy Spirit. And in this narrative the resurrection needs to be short-circuited, lest it undermine the death of God thesis and the secular appropriation of the all too human image of a man dead on the cross.

There is another implication to Žižek's reading: that whatever ontological status we apply to the crucifixion, it takes on a determining role vis-à-vis all other religions. Clearly, if God died on the cross the continuance of Judaism begins to look like a farce: "So when the Jews are conceived as a remainder, we should be very precise in defining this with regard to what they are a remainder of: of themselves of course, *but also of humanity as such...*" (Ibid: 131), even if Žižek sometimes defends Judaism on account of his assertion that "Christianity needs Judaism to remind itself of the otherness of the Divine Thing" (Depoortere 2008: 140). But Islam, in this reading, looks equally as out of time as in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, where it is awkwardly filed under the 'Germanic World.' And the polytheistic and pantheistic religions fare even worse in the Hegelian schema Žižek enthusiastically adopts. Hegel posited three essential movements to the development of religion: the immediate religion, the religion of substance and the religion of spiritual individuality. Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism inhabit the second movement of the unfolding of religion to the spiritual individuality inhabited by Judaism and Christianity. To take Žižek's pet hate Buddhism, the fact that being is associated with nothing implies that the worship bridging the universal (the One) with humankind (the particular) takes the form of self-annihilation: which could either end up as an avoidance of the act (why act if all reality is just a dream?) or, alternatively, could end in unthinking violence and tyranny. Thus, just as for Hegel — "since here the finite mind, as being merely accidental, is wholly swallowed up in substance, is a nullity, has no reality, no right of independent existence as against substance, it is for that reason not free ... for the same reason, these religions go hand in hand with despotic government in the political sphere" (Stace 1955: 494) — for Žižek too, the Dalai Lama and his strategy of non-violence in Tibet goes hand in hand with the repressive theocracy his old-regime represents.

written out of Iran's official historiography. But for our purposes of examining the potentialities within Shia Islam it is the Islamic ideologues who help to best demonstrate — through their unrealised potentiality — the false exclusivity of Christian essentialism.

## Revolutionary Rivals: Motahhari and Shariati

Both Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (1920–1979) and Ali Shariati (1933–1977) used Shiism's motifs as a tool in their revolutionary ideologies; yet, for all their similarities, they were voracious rivals. Their rivalry culminated in Motahhari being assassinated by an obscure faction called the Furqan, loyal to Shariati's ideas, after the fall of Shah's government. Many have noted the similarity of their revolutionary appropriation of Shiism and have implicitly reduced their rivalry to one of the differing audiences: for Shariati, urban, secular intellectuals; and for Mottahari the seminaries and devout. Hamid Dabashi places particular emphasis on their ideological affinity: "Their ideas may have occasionally appeared as if issued from two diverse political worldviews. But in their respective contributions to the making of 'the Islamic Ideology' they are part and parcel of the same revolutionary enterprise" (2006: 157). However, there are reasons why Motahhari's ideological legacy has been etched into the legitimating discourse of the post-revolutionary state and Shariati's has not. As Ali Rahnama recounts in his biography of Ali Shariati, in discussions with a bookseller in Tehran, the seller admitted was not sure if Shariati was a "Saint, or the devil himself" (Rahnema 2000). Without telling us the political persuasion of the bookseller, it could easily be read either way: the seller could either have been a secular reformist, or a pious Muslim, such is the ambiguity surrounding Shariati's thought. On the other hand, Ayatollah Khomeini publicly wept at Motahhari's funeral, and on the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in 2007, Iranian

Much more interesting are two of the ‘vanishing mediators’ of Iran’s Islamic ideology: Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shariati. It is true that they are not the only mediators of the revolution to have vanished in the consolidation of the Islamic state: the Fidayeen and Mujahideen Marxist guerrilla groups were similarly purged and

---

currently is that consequence of that misleading propaganda whose perpetrators got what they wanted and which has required us to exert a large effort to prove that Islam contains principles and rules for the formation of government” (Khomeini: 1979: 14). Khomeini’s *ressentiment* follows a structure all too familiar to what Nietzsche neeled as the ‘slave mentality’ in the *Genealogy of Morality*. Unable to affect a positive, constitutive force in its own right the slave can only demonise the master and turn against the positive force of life itself. Yet, as a revolutionary leader Khomeini excelled in tapping into constitutive anomie in society and turning the slave mentality into an active political force. The orchestration of the 40-day cycles of mourning to rally protestors to was not just an effective mobilisation technique but also induced what Giorgio Agamben (2005) also describes as the structure of messianic time in Christian eschatology. As Dabashi puts it: “During such recollections of historical memories, there occurs, as it were, a contraction of time, a bridging of the chronological gap. Ahistoricity means nothing” (2006: 421). Without ever explicitly stating it, Khomeini drew upon a deeply messianic expectation of redemption expected to be brought about by the return of the twelfth Imam, who in contrast to earlier Imams who were passive and peaceful ... would be the one with the sword.” And furthermore: “The appearance of the Mahdi Qa’im will be preceded by terrible signs” giving way to a state in which “Under the Mahdi’s rule there will be paradise on earth.” And following the death of Mahdi: “Shiite authors speculate that the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgement will follow directly” (Halm 1991: 37–38). The forty-day cycles clearly anticipate and induce the experience of messianic time, with Khomeini’s absence in exile and his philosophy of the grand jurist (philosopher-king) clearly striking parallels with the occulted 12<sup>th</sup> Imam. The use of mourning cycles to induce a state of exception, where non-law and law are indistinguishable, has also been tracked back by Agamben to an institution of Roman law called the *iustium*. As he draws from the findings of a work by H.S.Versel, Agamben proposes “an analogy between the phenomenology of mourning — as attested to in the most diverse places by anthropological research — and periods of political crisis, in which social institutions and rules seems [sic] suddenly to dissolve” (2005b: 65). This is just one more example to help dissolve the sense of the absolute alterity of Shia Islam and its rituals, which Foucault, for one, seemingly fell under the spell of during his reportage for the *Corriera della Serra*.

## The Universal and Violence

We have already pointed towards the differences between Badiou and Zizek’s appropriation of Christianity: a difference that would be irreconcilable if it were not for the category of the universal they both share. For here Hegelian dialectics and Badiou’s theory of the event coincide. They both posit an event as constitutively defined by its enactment of a new universal; although Badiou’s event, unlike Hegel’s, to be ontologically consistent should not establish a foundation. And therein lays the ambiguity of his reading of Paul in relation to his greater system.

Badiou demonstrates Paul’s universalism from a line in Corinthians: ‘To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those under the law, I became as one under the law’ from which he extrapolates: “an instance of what Chinese communists will call the ‘mass line,’ pushed to its ultimate expression” (Ibid: 99). This is an unavoidably tenuous connection, even on its own terms. This is not to critique him stylistically, but rather to highlight the ambiguity that runs through the text. Are we to take his treatment of St. Paul as simply an allegory of the universal political subject — an example of his system in action — or is there an excess of affection for the specifically Christian religious conception? For if we were to boil down Badiou’s thesis to one single point it would be this: that St. Paul’s fidelity to the resurrection of Christ signals the singular event of the birth of a truly universal monotheistic faith. This universal faith becomes forever ingrained in humanity’s psyche and elides into the universalism of the ‘Marxist faith.’ For the sake of clarity, this is not the Marxist faith in objective historical processes which subsequently became the orthodoxy of the majority of Marxist movements. It is rather the faith in the universalism of the event of Marxism itself: the fact that Marx’s work revealed something entirely new: an orientation towards the working class within a society conceived as totality, which at its core is non-reducible to scientific analysis and cuts across all identarian particularities.

But the outstanding question is of the depth and nature of this connection between the universalism of Paul and latter-day universalist movements; of which first and foremost would have to be included the Marxist-Communist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we accept that this foundational break becomes carried (even if in a degraded institutionalised form) by the Catholic Church – a possibility that despite Badiou’s insinuation of the Church’s infidelity to Paul’s message is not totally placed off the table by him – then it is not a great leap to pointing to some essential philosophical connection between the de-universalised Russian Orthodox Church and Stalin’s gulags (increasingly recognised to have an ethnic component), Chinese Confucianism and Mao’s fatalistic disregard for human life, and conversely the relative humanity of the Latin American communists (existing within a historic Catholic legacy) in Cuba, Nicaragua and so forth. The problem is that the consequences of Badiou’s reading of Paul can result in the inscription of culturalism onto the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Communist movements – a move that Dayan Jayatilleka (2007) also pursues when he describes the success of the Cuban Revolution in terms of the moral inheritance Castro gained from his Jesuit upbringing and its significance in differentiating his guerrilla group from the ‘neo-barbarism’ of other groups in the global, revolutionary movement.

Badiou’s position is not even as far from Hegel as he would have us believe. For Hegel too Christianity was uniquely perfect, the ‘Absolute religion’ in his words, precisely because it universalised the previously Judaic exclusivity of faith. Monotheism only realised itself once: “...it was freed from the particularity by which the worship of Jehovah had been hampered. Jehovah was only the God of that one people – the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob: only with the Jews had this God made a covenant; only to this people had he revealed himself” (Hegel 2001: 373). The distinction between Badiou and Hegel comes down to the difference we ascribe between the dialectical event and the event of a Badiouian truth

the revolution should be seen as a culmination of that dialectic, as part the larger ‘effective history’ (to steal a piece of terminology from Gadamer) of the global revolutionary movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is another indication of the circularity of Christian hegemony in Western Communist theory that generally there is seen to be no contradiction in the Catholicisation of Latin American Marxism through liberation theology, yet the rare cases of the Islamisation of Marxist theory are treated with comparative suspicion and neglect.

Because some may think the analysis to come is overly abstract by not treating Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s central role in the revolution as our point of departure, it is worth observing that although he was the most important figure of the Iranian revolution – it’s guiding force from exile and the grand jurist of the state following the establishment of the Islamic Republic – his philosophical writings are substantially less interesting than his charisma which allowed him to lord over the post-revolutionary state. Despite the intellectual milieu preceding the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime in Iran, his doctrine of the supreme jurist, allied to his morally and politically conservative interpretation of Islam, collapsed all the novelties introduced by the pre-revolutionary Islamist ideologues into a ‘modernist-fundamentalist’ programme (the paradoxical conjugation is necessary to differentiate Khomeini from the medieval Islamism of the Afghan Taliban). Khomeini’s only novelty, excepting the idea of the grand jurist as one of only a quasi-original break from the state of the situation, was to re-orientate Iran from American puppet state to challenger for regional hegemony vis-à-vis the Western allied bloc. Khomeini’s ideology, in this sense and more, can be seen just as transference of traditional Shiite *ressentiment* against the Sunni majority to the West.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Khomeini frames all his writings as a reaction to the conspiring, omnipotent ‘West’; even the claim to the difference of Islamic jurisprudence from secular legal structures. In *Islamic Government* he argues: “What we are suffering from

and Badiou, it is not just that contemporary political Islamists are obscurantist; it is that the very foundations of their religion (respective to the possibilities Christianity opened up) forecloses the possibility for an emancipatory opening on its own terms.

In sum, what allows Hegel, Žižek and Badiou to see what they like in Christianity – Christ’s death and resurrection as the reversal of negativity into positivity for Hegel, or the pure positivity of Paul’s fidelity to Christ’s resurrection for Badiou – is the dualistic structure of Christianity that Islam does not share. But what exceeds both schemas and what renders these ever more obscene philosophical-theological abstractions redundant is change. Foundations only render themselves as foundations through dogmatism. It is not Christianity or Shiism that is foundationally positive or negative, but subjects’ willingness to declare radical ruptures within or from these frameworks. What unites a Christian fundamentalist and an Islamic fundamentalist is the denial of the possibility of this rupture. That said it is worth considering the Iranian revolution of 1979 as the exemplary case impossible to understand within the rubric of the foreclosure of Islam’s emancipatory potential proposed by Žižek, Badiou et al. Firstly, however, we need to forget those over-simplified narratives of the revolution popularised in the West; whereby either only a reactionary Islamic force was at work from the start, or where a pure left was crushed by an Islamic right in the revolution’s aftermath.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, there was an inter-pollination of Western philosophy, Marxism and Islamic ideology throughout 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, and

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on the falsity of these distinctions and ambiguous differentiation between the left and the Islamists in Iran see my review essays of Ali Rahnama’s biography of Ali Shariati (Coombs 2008) and of Maziar Behrooz’s history of the left in Iran (Coombs 2008). Hamid Dabshi also notes in a very interesting passage: “In the Kablistic tradition, the Tudeh Party had its share of sacred numbers, the first and most essential of which was “Fifty-Three,” the number of original Marxists who planted seeds that would later grow into the Tudeh Party” (2006: 15).

procedure. Badiou has never delineated an empirical philosophy of history to supplement his system; this work and *The Century* are as close as we get.<sup>5</sup> But the category of the universal, the appearance of the universal over time from human origins to the present day, marks a baseline of continuity with Hegel. As Badiou puts it: “We also share with Hegel the conviction of a universality of the True. But for us this universality is guaranteed by the singularity of truth-events, and not by the fact that the Whole is the history of its immanent reflection” (Badiou 2004: 230).

Even if Badiou’s ontology of infinite multiplicity deters the possibility of closure, of reaching Hegel’s ‘end of history,’ the ambiguity remains that Badiou does ascribe certain foundational universal events to specific historical moments. But unlike Hegel a universal does not arrive as an always-to-be unfolding, which is transcribed into Law, rather “That thought is the proper medium of the universal means that nothing exists as universal if it takes the form of the object or of objective legality.” Because, for example: “the universality of a mathematical proposition can only be experienced by inventing or effectively reproducing its proof” (Ibid: 145). The universal is an experienced becoming that can be infinitely iterated. Nevertheless the contours of thought to reproduce and re-experience the universal have to be at least somewhat differential from a new universal never before thought in history: which is the universal event Badiou implies as Paul’s ‘foundation’, or as Žižek describes it: “*the* example of a Truth-Event” (Žižek 2000: 130). The tension

---

<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking for Badiou the only history that exists is the truth procedure of events. There is no history beyond the event, or in-between events, yet not conditioned, by an event. As he describes it: “If one admits that for there to be historicity evental sites are necessary, then the following observation can be made: history can be naturalized, but nature cannot be historicized” (2005: 176). The key word is ‘if,’ because it is not clear at all that historicity is dependent on evental sites, or at least under any more generally functional definition or explanatory framework that can deduce historical causation (or meaning) in the absence of radical ruptures from the status quo. For instance, in the case of the arbitrary decision making of sovereign powers that can and has had epochal significance.

between the definitive and singular article gives the game away. If it is viable that there be an infinite production of new universals in history remains to be clarified. Are there in fact only a finite number of new universals that can be ‘discovered’ as opposed to the infinite process of experiencing a universal afresh? If so, it is not clear how finity in history can be accounted for in Badiou’s system or how foundational universals escape finity’s *telos*, i.e. some form of progressive, historical teleology.

Žižek, on the other hand, explicitly embraces the consequences of Badiou’s investment in Paul as the foundational universaliser of monotheism and what could be inferred for the fortunes of ‘Third World’ Marxist revolutions. Drawing a parallel with what I believe is a certain implication in Badiou – that peoples with Catholic philosophical underpinnings will be the only ones to successfully realise Marxist-Communism – Žižek has this to say about Che Guevara:

What, then, is the difference between this “warrior Zen” legitimization of violence and the long Western tradition, from Christ to Che Guevara ... it is not that, in contrast to Japanese military aggression, revolutionary violence “really” aims at establishing a non-violent harmony; on the contrary, authentic revolutionary liberation is much more directly identified with violence ... it is all too simple to say that this militaristic version of Zen is a perversion ... the truth is much more unbearable – what if, in its very kernel, Zen is ambivalent, or rather, utterly *indifferent*. (Žižek 2003: 30–31)

It is curious that Western military violence is given Che Guevara as an archetype and Eastern military violence with the imperial regime of Emperor Hirohito. A leftist guerrilla is compared to an imperial Emperor, a cop-out in taking on any argument over

like with Hegel and Žižek, historicity is absent from the monolithic name of Islam presented by Badiou in his considerations on contemporary political Islam. In his eagerly anticipated follow-up to *Being & Event* (2005), the *Logics of Worlds* (2009), he denies that a progressive revolutionary subjectivity can arise from political Islam:

... it is in vain that one tries to elucidate genealogically contemporary political Islamism, in particular its ultra-reactionary variants, which rival the Westerners for the fruits of the petrol cartel through unprecedented criminal means. This political Islamism is a new manipulation of religion – from which it does not derive by any natural (or ‘rational’) inheritance – with the purpose of occulting the post-socialist present and countering, by means of a full Tradition or Law, the fragmentary attempts through which some try to reinvent emancipation. From this point of view, political Islamism is absolutely contemporary, both to the faithful subjects that produce the present of political experimentation, and to the reactive subjects that busy themselves with denying that ruptures are necessary in order to invent humanity worthy of the name, and who moreover flaunt the established order as the miraculous bearer of a continuous emancipation. Political Islamism is nothing but one of the subjectivated names of today’s obscurantism. (cited in Toscano 2006: 29)

It is only an elementary exercise to join the dots between the hypothesis of the non-evental character of Islam and the obscurantism Badiou accuses political Islam of. Admittedly, the above characterisation does fit many, if not most, of the Islamist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century; but what is significant is the foreclosure of potentialities located in the foundations of the religion. For Žižek



lence of neo-Platonism in both the philosophies of Christian medieval thinkers and in Islamic philosophy; the hermeneutic splits in both religions regarding the literalism of interpreting the book (the Ismailis, for one, proposed an esoteric reading); and the split between Sunni/Shia and Catholic/Protestant as a broadly analogous divide over the correct political and doctrinal authority — all of which throw doubt on the relevance of philosophical issues being settled ‘in principle’. Rather, we could argue that the attachment of Muslims to factions of these splits indicates to us precisely that everything was not settled in advance; since if so the Quran as the uncontested, principal text should represent a clear guide. Concomitant to the closed space of Islam that Hallward supposes would be the absence of necessary ambiguities in order for subjects to articulate their fidelity to the event. Contra Hallward, though, the ex-post counter-propositional evidence shows us that once plugged into a Badiouian framework, the original event of Islam very much fit the categories.

Still, from the same Badiouian perspective — although not considered by either Badiou or scholars working with his ontology — Shiism looks to very much tarry with the negative. The demand for continuing leadership from the familial lineage of Mohammed appears to deny the demands of fidelity to an event by a free subject. Hussein’s ‘martyrdom’ was also only with a great retroactive lag transformed into a foundational myth of Shiism and the process of the occultation of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam did not unfold suddenly by the demands of an event, but as a dialectical reaction to both the oppression of the burgeoning Shiite faction and the degenerating logic of leadership by familial lineage over a long period of time (Halm 1991). From this perspective, it is not hard then to see Shiism as the ultimate religion of *ressentiment*. As Arshin Adib-Moghaddam observes: “Couldn’t we point to the nobility of failure so central to Shi’i Islam and its foundational legends? ... Is it a cultural coincidence that Iranians revere those members of the Prophet’s household who have ‘failed’ in their political mission?” (2007: 186). Yet

religion and revolution. He should have compared Che and Mao to truly mine this comparative vein of thought, but as we know from his introduction to Mao’s *Practice and Contradiction* (2008) he goes to great lengths to avoid any cultural- religious explanations and rather settles on Mao as a poor reader of Hegel. As we have seen, for Žižek the theological turn in Communist circles is justified to performatively negate the embrace of ‘Oriental wisdom’ in Western capitalist societies, but beyond that he never really offers a clear, positive reason for turning to Christ today. In perhaps an act of projection, he even levels this charge against Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) work on Paul: “What Agamben describes as a messianic experience is the pure formal structure of such an experience without any specific determinations that would elaborate the claim that Benjamin ‘repeats’ Paul: why is today’s moment a unique moment which renders Paul’s letters readable? Is it because the New World (Dis)Order is parallel to the Roman Empire (the thesis of Negri and Hardt)?” (Ibid: 108). And furthermore, without a clear-cut rationale of his own, it would be tempting to read a suspicious overinvestment in Christianity for its own sake in Žižek’s work too.

That is not to imply Žižek the Christian dogmatist reveals himself subconsciously through his argument. I would rather argue that his Lacanian-influenced open-Hegelianism inadvertently reveals its thinness of novelty. To clarify: against common misinterpretation Hegel’s theory of human progress from the master and slave right up to the ideal modern state is not supposed to be a pure historical abstraction from ancient Egypt to 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany in the same way that Marx’s transition from feudalism to capitalism to Communism has an undeniable temporal unfolding. Instead, Hegel’s ideal state is that form which always will have existed as the ideal form in the Notion and which is founded on its internal logical movement from the master and slave dialectic up to resolution in the modern state, and is explicitly opposed to solely contingent historical justifications. Yet the ahistorical realisation of dialectical self-consciousness is at times elided into a historical

dialectic. This point of elision is one of the most nagging aporias of the entire Hegelian edifice. As Adorno describes it: “The system has to acknowledge the conceptual irreducibility of the concept, which is inherently historical: in terms of logical-systematic criteria the historical, all else notwithstanding, is disturbing; it is a blind spot” (quoted in Widder 2002: 160). The contours of this aporia are revealing; Jean Hippolite, for one, claimed that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* “only in the chapters on spirit and religion is there a movement coinciding with actual historical development” (Ibid: 159).

Therefore, we should take Hegel’s world-historical theory of religion in the *Philosophy of History* as a limit case for Žižek’s open-Hegelianism. As Žižek admits: “The main way to assert the actuality of Hegel — that is, to save him from the accusation that his system is totally outdated metaphysical madness — is to read his thought as an attempt to establish the normative conditions and presuppositions of our cognitive and ethical claims” (2006: 28). This means primarily that the fundamental Hegelian insight that there is no Kantian thing-in-itself and the awareness that we ourselves posit the gap between appearance and essence coincides with the Lacanian Lack. Hegel is thus a framework for seeing how we arrive at our own philosophical, political and epistemological enigmas; it does not prescribe their closure in ideal forms. What matters is not that this epistemological-spatial openness Žižek perceives in Hegel is at best a partial reading, but rather that it circumvents through neglect the aporetic historicism of Hegel’s philosophy of world spirit and religion. It is therefore not surprising that Žižek’s philosophy of religion ends up following a remarkably similar schema.

Drawing from the *Bhagavad Gita* Žižek comes to the same conclusion as Hegel in regard to the primitive religions: “if external reality is ultimately just an ephemeral appearance, then even the most horrifying crimes do not matter... This means that Buddhist (or Hindu, for that matter) all encompassing Compassion has to be opposed to Christian intolerant, violent Love” (2003: 32–33).

were to be no priests, no privileged orders or castes or estates of any kind... In Islam, unlike the ancient world, a slave was no longer a chattel but a person, with a recognized legal and moral status. Women, although still subject to polygamy and concubinage, were accorded property rights not equalled in the West until modern times. (1995: 72)

However, despite this revolutionary change, according to prominent Badiou scholar, Peter Hallward, Islam is exempted from being an event on the grounds that:

Though Muhammed’s revelation certainly broke with the prevailing state of the situation, it was anything but an ephemeral anomaly whose very lack of definition would allow for the elaboration of open-ended fidelity. On the contrary, his words settled (in principle) every philosophical issue in advance. Islamic philosophy is generally not oriented toward the future composition of a still unknown truth, so much as “back-up” to an originally definitive (and subsequently obscured) sufficiency. (2003: 408)

Although we can agree with Hallward that the Quran is more mimetically prescriptive than the Bible, and particularly more so than the writings of Paul, it is nevertheless an exaggeration to draw a sharp contrast between an explorative, future-oriented Christian legacy and a backward-looking Islam; such extrapolations merely repeat the Hegelian line of Christianity as the ‘Absolute religion’ within a different philosophical framework. We might further ask, given the Badiouian ontology of inconsistent multiplicity how all issues can be settled in advance? If nothing else, the history of the religions shows that it is not difficult to perceive a multitude of factional splits in both Islam and Christianity, for example: the preva-

obscurantist, yet still bursting with the vitality that Christianity ceded to the Kingdom of Men.

## Žižek and Badiou on Islam

According to Frederiek Depoortere, for Žižek, like Hegel, Islam took the wrong path of dialectical mediation, which explains why Žižek's "most important reference to it is in a footnote of *On Belief*, in which he states that Islam, in its attempt to synthesise Judaism and Christianity, 'ends up with the worst of both worlds'" (2008: 140). It is true, as Almond (2007) notes, that for Žižek Islam possesses a vitality unable to be recuperated into global capitalism with the ease of other religions (Tibetan Buddhism for instance); but still Žižek follows Hegel's limited understanding of Islam as possessing a fundamental ontological mistake — a teleological anomaly in 'world spirit' — which prohibits its overcoming. It seems, then, that the Hegelian schema is unable to account for the event of Islam, or comprehend the anthropomorphic event foundational to Shiism.

Problematically, from a Badiouian perspective things are not much better. In theory, it should not be difficult to consider the event of Mohammed's prophecies and the 'truth procedure' of establishing the Islamic community as an equivalent to the militant universalism of St. Paul. Considering the confusion in Western culture as to the meaning of the advent of Islam it is worth quoting Bernard Lewis on the matter — a scholar who, considering his tacit promotion of the *Clash of Civilizations* (1997) thesis with Samuel Huntington, can hardly be accused of Islamophilia:

In a profound sense the advent of Islam had itself been a kind of revolution. The new faith overwhelmed existing doctrines and churches, bringing not a third testament to add to the previous two, but a new scripture to supercede them... In Islam, as ideally conceived, there

Žižek is careful not to invoke the religious historical-teleological unfolding of Hegel, but as his open epistemological appropriation reaches exactly the same conclusions we have to wonder if he really leaves it behind or merely covers his old Hegelian tracks. Moreover, the fact that although according to Žižek's emphasis on the universal, monotheistic event, Islam should fit the exact same criteria as Christianity — but that like Hegel, it is the one religion he stubbornly ignores — means that when we speak of Žižek's open Hegelianism and the 'real' bad old Hegelianism we might consider them functionally identical.

## An Incomplete Conclusion

We have seen how Badiou and Žižek approach the Christ event from very different perspectives. For Badiou all that matters is the subjective belief of Paul and the event of his conversion to Christianity, whereas for Žižek there is a deeper, dialectical — and hence ontological — significance to Christ's crucifixion. Both are however united in defense of the universalisation of monotheism Paul affected. Unfortunately, this disagreement in fact points to an inconsistency: neither Badiou's theory of the event, nor Žižek's open-Hegelianism — to be truly open that is — should posit historic foundations, yet they seem too quickly to leap to this conclusion. The claimed historical foundation to the universalism of Communism can easily start to have implications for the fortunes of Marxist-Communist movements in non-Catholic countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither Badiou nor Žižek has actually explored this consequence directly, and indeed it would even be counter-productive to their philosophical and political aims to do so; yet it seems an almost inevitable development of their work that Christian essentialism should creep into a retrospective assessment of the global, revolutionary movement — a task that at least Dayan Jayatilleka seems to already have picked up upon.

In Part 2 (forthcoming: *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, Vol 3.2) the Hegelian assumptions underwriting the religious teleology in Badiou and Žižek will become even clearer as the limit case of Islam befuddles both their systems and their privileging of Christian universalism. Since both philosophers, like Hegel, have very little to say about Islam — even considering its current predominance in key theatres of anti-systemic resistance — the analysis will move beyond these writers to examine the philosophies of two of the most influential ideologues of the Iranian Revolution: Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shari'ati. Through these philosophers, and the way they appropriate a modernist, revolutionary conception of Islam, we will see the limitations of any proposed foundation of universalism, sharpening the critique so far discussed.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Badiou, Alain. 2006. *Theoretical Writings*. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, Alain. 2005. *Being and Event*. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, Alain. 2003. *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Birckbeck College Conference. 2009. *On the Idea of Communism*. [online] Accessed 17/02/2009. <[www.bbk.ac.uk/bih/news/communism](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/bih/news/communism)>.
- Depoortere, Frederiek. 2008. *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, Rene Girard and Slavoj Žižek*. London: Continuum.
- Douzinas, Costas. 2007. "The Many Faces of Humanitarianism." *Parresia*. Number 2, 2007: 1–28.
- Gunkel, D. 2008 Jul 15. "Zizek and the Real Hegel." *International Journal of Zizek Studies* [Online] 2:2.

the 'first Islamic civil war' moved close to what Hegel describes as abstract self-consciousness of equality. They advocated tyrannicide and waged a brutal civil war against the Caliphate, advocating the complete equality of access to God and the destruction of institutions of power, and denounced their Muslim enemies in a similar way to how Sayyid Qutb in the 1960s would rationalise Islamist terror against the all-pervasive *jahiliya* (ignorance) amongst fellow Muslims. Even now, in a direct genealogical link, the name of the Kharijites continues to be evoked in Egyptian public discourse to warn against the temptation of 'Islamic anarchism,' and the abuse of the label is so widespread in the Middle East that it is even denounced by Osama Bin Laden (2005: 224). Arguably, the dichotomy between supporting the status quo and the bloodthirsty, literalist anarchism of the Kharijites was ended by the death of the son of Mohammed's daughter Fatima's son Hussain in Kabala in 671 AD. It is with Hussain that Islam experienced its 'Christ moment', with his 'martyrdom' on the Euphrates beginning the anthropomorphic bridge between humankind and the One. Shiism as the central Islamic theology of resistance to the status quo gained prominence over the Kharijites; now opposition was grounded in real social imbrications, i.e. in the support for the leadership of the familial lineage of the Prophet.

Does all this mean that from a Hegelian perspective we could consider Shia Islam in the same dialectical genus as Christianity? Does this mean that although Sunni Islam could be considered the foundational provocateur of arbitrary despotism (tyranny) or the pursuit of unmediated abstract equality (Anarchism), in Shiism we can find a more acceptable Christianity-lite and thus an analogous foundation for Communist universalism? Perhaps, but such nonsensical dialectical insights only highlight the inadequacy of Hegelian teleology. From a Hegelianistic perspective the fact that Shiism did not develop through a dialectical sequence towards secularism would show that the religion remains essentially inscribed in teleology as a dead-end and can only continue unchanging and

claimed to be a deity but solely a prophet. If we must speak in analogical terms – in a Badiouian phraseology for instance – we could say that Mohammed was both Christ *and* Paul, in that after the event of the prophecy he declared an internal fidelity to his own message and from that fidelity he himself established the protean Muslim community. But unlike Paul, Mohammed did not declare the rupture in the same sense. Islam, with Mohammed as its greatest prophet, was presented as the ‘perfection’ of the lineage of monotheistic faiths with its prophets including such Judeo-Christian familiars as Moses and Christ. Yet the dialectical language of ‘perfection,’ should not disguise the reality of rupture; the sudden revealed knowledge opening up the new and the militant truth procedure that concretised it.

After Mohammed’s death, the early Islamic community was divided by almost two centuries of internal civil war (Halm 1991). There was nothing overwhelmingly territorial about this cleavage, although it did at times become carried by certain tribal rivalries between Caliphs. In the most significant split between Sunni and Shia, adherents to both creeds frequently existed alongside each other, even in the same Caliphal courts. Although Heinz Halm notes that “the Arabic word shia just means ‘party’...” and that “Theological and dogmatic differences play a subordinate role in differentiating between Sunni and Shia” (ibid: 1–2), from a Hegelian perspective – Hegel beyond Hegel if you like – this is questionable. The unity of God, his Oneness eternally in opposition to the particularity of humanity, his ‘purely intellectual’ character as Hegel describes it, was undermined by the anthropomorphism of Shiism. Majid Fakhry argues: “we might safely assume that their anthropomorphism was dictated by the urge to ascribe a divine or semi divine status to the Imams, in whom according to the extreme Shiites God periodically became incarnate” (2004: 57–58). This ‘urge’ was perhaps historically determined.

The question of the succession of Mohammed was never adequately resolved in Islam. In response, the Kharijite movement of

- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 2001. *The Philosophy of History*. [online] Accessed 14/08/2008.
- Jayatileka, Dayan. 2007. *Fidel’s Ethics of Violence*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kirsch, Adam. 2008. “The Deadly Jester.” *The New Republic*. [online] Accessed 10/02/2009
- Mao Zedong. 2008. *On Practice and Contradiction*. London: Verso.
- Robertson, Ann. 2003. *The Philosophical Roots of the Marx-Bakunin Conflict*. [online] Accessed 14/02/2009.
- Sharma, Ash. 2007. “Materialism Today.” *Dark Matter*. [online] Accessed.01/09/2008.
- Stace, W. T. 1955. *The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition*. Dover Publications.
- Widder, Nathan. 2002. *Genealogies of Difference*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2007. “A Leninist Gesture Today: Against the Populist Temptation.” In: *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*. Eds. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2006. *The Parallax View*. London: MIT Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2003. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. London: MIT Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2000. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

## Part 2

In Part 1 of this article we argued that Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou’s account of the foundation of Communist universalism in the event of Christianity signals a number of inconsistencies immanent to their respective ontologies (Coombs 2009). For Slavoj

Žižek it appears difficult to reconcile his touted open interpretation of Hegel with the ontological significance he accords to Christianity; whereas for Badiou, the ‘foundation of universalism’ attributed to St. Paul’s militant ‘truth procedure’ of universalising the Christian faith and effecting a split with Judaism appears to contradict his ontology of inconsistent multiplicity, which denies historical or eventual foundations. Still, this critique only takes us so far in undermining the ‘Christian hegemony’ of a certain school of ‘post-modern’ Communist theory. Instead, if we can demonstrate that even the conditions by which they violate their own systems are present elsewhere, then the essentialist platform of ‘Paulian materialism’ and its exclusivist foundations come to look even more shaky — shaky to the point of collapse. These conditions we can also find in Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Firstly, however, it is important to differentiate our argument from Ian Almond’s *The New Orientalists* (2007) — the most prescient scholarship on the matter. Because although Almond manages to locate the spectre of Islam in post-modern philosophy from Nietzsche to Foucault, the pre-suppositions of his critique means it has the curious feature of bouncing back off his targets in the manner of an echo chamber. Unlike Edward Said’s polemic against the colonial representation and construction of the Orient in his canonical *Orientalism* (1979), there is a post-modern twist in Almond’s study

---

<sup>6</sup> A scholar of Islamic or Middle Eastern Studies will notice a rather erratic transliteration of Farsi and Arabic words and names into English in this article. This is because the sources cited in this piece use a multitude of different transliterations and owing to the fact that this author is not a scholar trained specifically within the field, adopting and rigorously following any one system would be needlessly time consuming and considered only of great consequence for a specialist. Since the aim of this article is to break down the barriers between contemporary continental philosophy and Islamic studies it is hoped that the arguments will suffice; even if technical conventions are sometimes flouted. This author has at least attempted to be consistent in his use of individual transliterated words and names throughout and for the sake of consistency has removed inter-syllabic marks, e.g. Shi’a becomes Shia etc.

leading features of Mahometanism involve this ... so that the worship of the One remains the only bond by which the whole is capable of uniting. In this expansion, this active energy, all limits, all national and caste distinctions vanish; no particular race, political claim of birth or possession is regarded — only *man* as *abeliever*. (Hegel 2001: 374)

Islam is correspondingly supposed to possess the same philosophical identity as the Terror in the French revolution. For Hegel, the dialectical necessity of the revolution — the replacement of the monarchy by bourgeois rulers — models a rational Christian ethos where the universal is concretised in the particular, or: “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (Hegel 1991: 20). However, Islam is foundationally closer to the quest for abstract unity in Jacobin Terror: “during which all differences of talents and authority were supposed to be cancelled out ... because all institutions are incompatible with the abstract self-consciousness of equality” (ibid: 39). Hegel draws the parallel in logics:

Mahometanism was, at the same time, capable of the greatest elevation — an elevation free from all petty interests, and united with all the virtues that appertain to magnanimity and valor. *La religion et la terreur* were the principles in this case, as with Robespierre *la liberté et la terreur*. But real life is nevertheless concrete, and introduces particular aims; conquest leads to sovereignty and wealth... (Hegel 2001: 375)

As Hegel dedicates only five pages to what he calls Mahometanism (Islam) it is clear that his empirical knowledge is limited, or deliberately delimited. As may be the case for some readers, more extensive empirical background and comparisons are necessary. Most obviously, Mohammed, unlike Christ, never

omission on Hegel's part that although he has numerous scattered references to the religion of Islam, he assigns it no place in his history of religion" (1955: 491). For Hegel Islam went further than any other religion in abstracting the unity of God into a universal One, the movement to which marks the increasing perfection of the world religions in the *Philosophy of History*. But whereas this process of extracting the divine into abstract universality has a dialectical necessity in the unfolding towards the Notion, Hegel claims that it is because of the extremity of the abstraction in Islam that particularity and the universal are unresolved into the higher individuality of Christian worship. In other words, without the recognition that the Son of God died on the cross, there remains an unresolved bridge between humanity and God that leaves the individual separated from divine unicity and mankind separated from realising that its destiny lies within itself. It is no wonder then that Islam is consigned to an awkward place under Part IV of his chronological world history, in the section on 'The German World', despite its origination in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. It represents what should have been a historical dead-end in the ascent towards the Notion, but its continuation can find no *telos* within itself — leading to its expected retreat in the twilight of history. Thus the excessive attachment of its believers to the faith acts as a roadblock to their development of the substantive basis of modern universality, requiring an anchor in individualism. This excess for Hegel has catastrophic consequences:

Subjectivity is here living and unlimited — an energy which enters into secular life with a purely negative purpose, and busies itself and interferes with the world, only in such a way as shall promote the pure adoration of the One. The object of Mahometan worship is purely intellectual; no image, no representation of Allah is tolerated. Mahomet is a prophet but still man — not elevated above human weaknesses. The

that even Alain Badiou might find satisfying. What Almond traces is not so much the brutal violence of representation, but a lineage of *absence*, or 'ghostly demarcations', by which Islam asserts itself in the interstices and footnotes of post-modern philosophy. None of the philosophers in his study (we except here the authors Orhan Pamuk, Salman Rushie and Jorge Luis Borges) have ever made explicit claims to scholarship on Islam and have only discussed the religion at those points where it has intersected with 'Western affairs.' That includes Michel Foucault's fascination with Shiism in his reportage on the Iranian revolution; the simulacrum of Islam Jean Baudrillard found refracted in the Gulf War; and Slavoj Žižek's passing remarks on the religion in connection with 9/11 and the Iraq War. In regard to his chapter on Žižek, Almond writes "Islam is conspicuous by its absence" (ibid: 177) as well as being a "casualty of this 'other' Eurocentrism of Žižek's — the semantic denial of any ontological depth or even tangibility to the marginalized subject" (ibid: 183).

Unfortunately, this tension in Almond's critique never allows it to penetrate deeper than a genealogy of marginality. For the absence of the representation of Islam in Slavoj Žižek's work cannot at the same time be a great violence against it. And furthermore, when Almond argues that "in Žižek's work, if we scratch the skin of a Muslim, sooner or later we find a socialist underneath" this is because of Žižek's "considerations on the Jamesonian concept of the 'vanishing mediator' — the mechanism by which a belief may facilitate the emergence of another belief-system, and render itself obsolete in the process" (ibid: 191) — to which Žižek might simply reply: 'exactly'! Almond thus excoriates Žižek on the basis of a series of a priori assertions — i.e. the Eurocentrism of Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis etc, and for the resulting lack of respect for the true Otherness of Islam; whilst at the same time bemoaning the absence of this Otherness in Žižek's representations of religions which are not Other to him. In other words, Almond's critique remains nested in the very ideology of multicul-

tural inclusion and non-judgemental tolerance that Žižek has spent so much theoretical energy attempting to combat.

To draw a sharp contrast, what we are aiming for here is a different critique to Almond's in that we share many of the same principles as Badiou and Žižek, but rather see their Christian essentialism as a deviation from the tenets of their own systems, not just as an expression of their hopelessly Eurocentric gaze on the world.

In Part 1 of the article we saw the close affiliation of Badiou and Žižek's valorisation of Christianity's universalism with Hegel's exaltation of the 'Absolute religion' and for our purpose here again Hegel will be an important touch-point. The problem with Hegel we will explore is not necessarily the provincialism of his positioning of Islam under the 'Germanic World'; but rather, like in Badiou and Žižek's fleeting representations of Islam, the problem lies in Hegel's inability to see beyond the abstract idea of Islam to its actual particularities. But it is only by taking Hegel at his word that we can see the immanent inadequacy of his schematisation of Islam as a religion of purely abstract universality. Not because it represents an unacceptably malign value judgement (such a criticism would remain within the realm of non-judgemental multiculturalism and respect for Otherness); rather because the particular details of Islam actually contradict Hegel's judgement, even if we were to accept the truth of his criteria of judgement. This particularity is most notably expressed in the split between Sunni and Shia and what these splits have meant *in practice* for the politics and historicity of the religion. Further, once we see that the fact of this split forecloses any essentialist philosophical identity to Islam we also have the material by which to undermine any essentialist reading of Christianity at the foundation of universalism.

To strengthen the case, in the second part of this article, we examine two of the key ideologues of the Iranian revolution: Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shariati. Their debate and rivalry on the pre-revolutionary scene in Iran we will argue focuses on their differing interpretations of revolutionary Shia Islam: Motahhari's

dialectical conception and Ali Shariati's militant, eventual conception — which echoes Badiou's emphasis on Paul's truth procedure. Although sensitive to the fact that some may see the reading of the Sunni/Shia split through Hegel and the Mottahari/Shariati debate through the dialectics/event split we have located in Badiou and Žižek as a form of transcription into 'Westernese'; in the spirit of Enlightenment and universality that this writer shares with the authors he is critiquing, this is considered not so important as highlighting some of the shared philosophical problems of two of the world's universal religions. And more, we hope to demonstrate the respect and awe in the face of the supposed Otherness of Islam is part and parcel of the problem of how Christianity becomes essentialised and posited as a foundation by the exclusion of its counterpart universal religion.

## Hegel and Islam

It is worth considering Hegel's reflections on Islam, not to snigger at their bold-faced Christian chauvinism, but to understand them as still implicit within the predominant understandings of Islam suppressed even within the non-judgemental, multiculturalist discursive framework: a framework forced to distinguish between 'moderates' and 'extremists', 'modernists' and 'fundamentalists' etc. For all the formal procedures of denouncing teleological thinking in contemporary culture, there is nevertheless the association of Christianity — or at least Protestantism — as possessing the *telos* of secularism; and Islam, lumped in with Judaism and Hinduism etc., as being somehow stuck in the past, unable to secede itself into a true modernity.

This perspective is reflected in Hegelian teleology, where Islam is neither consigned as a more primitive religion, nor dialectically incorporated into any part of the unfolding of the Notion towards Christian perfection. As W.T. Stace remarks: "It is a very curious