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God and Religion in the Thought of Slavoj Žižek

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Abstract

This study examines Slavoj Žižek's understanding of God and religion within the frameworks of psychoanalytic theory, dialectical materialism, and the critique of ideology. Žižek's self-identification as a "militant communist atheist" renders his approach to God and religion particularly significant for scholarly inquiry. Although the existing literature on Žižek has predominantly focused on his views on politics, philosophy, art, and economics, relatively limited attention has been devoted to a systematic examination of his understanding of God and religion. This gap underscores the significance of the present study. In the existing literature, Žižek's approach is generally examined through the theoretical perspectives of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian dialectics, and Marxist ideology critique. Within this triadic framework, religion and the concept of God are reinterpreted in relation to subjectivity, negativity, desire, ideology, and social antagonism. Accordingly, this study aims to synthesize and critically analyze these three principal theoretical strands -Lacan, Hegel, and Marx- as they converge in Žižek's understanding of God and religion. The study adopts a qualitative research approach and employs document analysis as its primary method. The findings indicate that Žižek approaches the concept of God not merely as an object of metaphysical belief but also as a category that operates within ideological and symbolic structures. From Žižek's perspective, religion may shape individuals' fears, anxieties, and uncertainties while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism of social regulation and ideological mediation. At the same time, Žižek does not reduce religion to a merely ideological or repressive phenomenon. He also conceptualizes religion as a potentially traumatic and transformative experience through which the subject confronts existential truth, negativity, and the constitutive dimension of lack. By bringing Lacanian psychoanalysis into dialogue with Hegelian dialectics, Žižek interprets religion in terms of lack, desire, trauma, negativity, and the search for meaning.

Keywords: Philosophy of religion, Slavoj Žižek, God, religion, ideology.

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1. Introduction

Slavoj Žižek is one of the contemporary thinkers engaged with diverse fields such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics, theology, cinema, literature, and art. The formation of his thought reflects the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Jacques Lacan, as well as key representatives of German idealism such as Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. However, Žižek has not merely served as an interpreter who relays the ideas of these thinkers; rather, he has reinterpreted their thoughts to develop his own distinctive theoretical framework. In particular, the connections he establishes between dialectical philosophy, psychoanalysis, and Marxist critique define the fundamental character of his thought. In this context, Hegel's dialectic, Marx's critique of ideology and capitalism, and Lacan's psychoanalytic approach constitute the primary theoretical foundations of Žižek's thought (Alp, 2017, pp. 72-73).

Among these intellectual sources, Hegel stands out as the figure who had the deepest influence on Žižek. Unlike traditional interpretations, Žižek reexamines Hegel's philosophy from a Lacanian perspective and rethinks the fundamental issues of German idealism through Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Thus, rather than pitting Hegelian dialectics against Lacanian psychoanalysis, he develops an original model of thought based on the theoretical relationship he establishes between the two approaches. For this reason, Žižek's philosophy is regarded in the literature as a Hegelian-Lacanian approach. In his thought, Hegel's dialectic is not merely a method for explaining history and society, but also a fundamental philosophical framework for understanding the problems of the subject, lack, contradiction, and reality (Alp, 2017, p. 73).

Žižek has not written a standalone work that directly focuses on the themes of religion or God. However, it is evident that in his various books and articles, he offers insightful analyses of the concepts of religion, God, Christianity, and ideology. In particular, his commentary on the relationship between Christianity, self-sacrifice, salvation, nihilism, and ideology establishes him as an important thinker in the fields of the philosophy of religion and political theology. Žižek's approach to God is of particular importance in that it diverges significantly from the traditional theistic conception of God and reinterprets the idea of God in the context of the subject, lack, ideology, and social relations. Therefore, in order to elucidate Žižek's conception of God, it would be appropriate to first examine the meaning he ascribes to the concept of God and the philosophical and psychoanalytic framework within which he addresses this concept.

2. Žižek on God

Slavoj Žižek approaches the concept of God not merely as a metaphysical issue, but as a phenomenon linked to social, ideological, and psychoanalytic dynamics. According to him, the idea of God is closely connected to human unconscious desires, fears, and existential anxieties.

Žižek defines God as "a name given to that which is not human." This is because, according to him, if any human were asked, "Are you God?" the answer would be, "No, I am not God." This situation demonstrates that God is conceived as an ideal being that transcends humanity and is free from human imperfections (Žižek, 2001). According to Žižek's thinking, while God is a concept created by humans, it is also related to the dimension of "the Real," which humans cannot fully grasp (Žižek, 2001, 2019, p. 82). Feuerbach's critique of religion clearly influences his thinking. According to Feuerbach, people have conceived of God as an absolute and flawless being by projecting onto Him the qualities they lack or perceive as lacking in themselves (Feuerbach, 1957, p. 14). Žižek interprets this view differently, arguing that the perception of God as flawless is, in fact, the result of humanity's effort to conceal its own shortcomings and weaknesses. According to him, the notion of God as possessing absolute knowledge and power is an ideological defense mechanism that humans have developed in the face of uncertainty and helplessness (Žižek, 2024, p. 60). In this context, from Žižek's perspective, God is not so much an objective and transcendent reality as an ideological and symbolic structure shaped by fear, the unknown, and existential anxieties. People use the concept of God as a source of meaning and a point of reference in the face of life's uncertainties and the dilemmas of existence. However, according to him, this symbolic structure, rather than representing an absolute and ahistorical reality, constitutes a realm of reality shaped by subjective experiences and social and historical forms of belief-and is therefore open to criticism.

Žižek examines God through three fundamental figures. These are the figures of the "God who brings peace," the "God who causes evil," and the "God who suffers" (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 80). These figures reveal the different manifestations of God in the human experience and the contradictory nature of religious consciousness.

In his works, Žižek focuses most on the figure of the "suffering God" (Žižek, 2008a). Because, in his view, God is not a being of absolute power and perfection, as is accepted in classical theology. He views God not as a flawless authority, but as a problematic figure who is internally divided, subject to suffering, and embodying imperfection, conflict, and fragility. For this reason, God's creation of humanity is interpreted not merely as a result of His power, but also as a quest to compensate for His own imperfections

(Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 80). As can be seen, Žižek questions the classical theistic conception of an absolute, all-encompassing, and flawless God and significantly narrows the transcendent distance between God and humanity.

Žižek links the concept of an incomplete and flawed God to the "broken vessel" metaphor presented by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Task of the Translator*. According to this metaphor, the fragments of a broken vessel complement one another to achieve wholeness (Benjamin, 1991). Žižek has also attempted to adapt this idea to the relationship between God and humanity. According to him, humanity's fundamental purpose is not merely to worship, perform certain rituals, or show unconditional loyalty, as in the traditional understanding of religion. Humanity is the complementary part of the incomplete God. Just as the pieces of a broken vessel fit together to form a whole, humanity completes God's missing aspect (Žižek, 2020, p. 320). Thus, the relationship between God and humanity is reinterpreted as a dialectical relationship founded on mutual complementarity and shared inadequacy, rather than as a hierarchical relationship of servitude.

The motif of crucifixion in Christianity occupies a significant place in Žižek's conception of God. According to him, God's death on the cross should be understood not merely as a theological narrative of salvation, but as a radical event that calls into question the very conception of God as an absolute and transcendent being. In this sense, the cross represents a breaking point at which God reveals his own lack and inadequacy (Žižek, 2003, p. 170). God's suffering and death on the cross transform him from a transcendent being of absolute power standing above humanity into a figure who shares in humanity's tragedy and suffering.

Žižek's interpretation shows a certain affinity with Ludwig Feuerbach's analysis of Christianity. In his work *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach examines, from an anthropological perspective, how the relationship between God and humanity is established in Christian theology, and reveals the connection between certain attributes ascribed to God and determinations pertaining to human nature itself. Within this framework, the incarnation of God and the suffering of Jesus can be viewed as elements that demonstrate that the distinction between God and humanity is not absolute. Consequently, the motif of the cross carries a meaning that not only signifies God's suffering for humanity but also makes it possible to rethink the relationship between God and humanity (Feuerbach, 1957).

However, it is not correct to equate Žižek's interpretation of the cross entirely with Feuerbach's approach. While Feuerbach explains Christianity's conception of God largely through the alienation of humanity's own essential qualities, Žižek reinterprets this anthropological critique through Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. From Žižek's perspective, the radical nature of the crucifixion lies not only in humanity's projection of its own qualities onto God, but also in the fact that God himself is associated with lack and negativity. For this reason, the crucifixion becomes a fundamental motif in Žižek's thought that overturns the idea of God as a "complete," self-sufficient, and transcendent being.

Žižek takes this idea a step further by describing God as "the greatest rebel." According to him, God's creation of the spiritual realm and His aim for spiritual life also constitute a radical act that disrupts order and shakes existing structures (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 80).

Žižek's conception of love is also closely linked to this idea of lack. According to him, love can only be directed toward a being that is lacking and imperfect. A flawless and complete being cannot be the object of love in the true sense. Therefore, conceiving of God as a being that demands love demonstrates that God bears within himself a sense of lack and fragility. Žižek acknowledges that God can be loved only if He possesses a structure that is deficient and far from absolute perfection. Thus, love becomes a dialectical form of relationship founded on lack.

Furthermore, Žižek argues that the concept of God has not been sufficiently examined from a psychoanalytic perspective and, in this context, draws on Lacan's concept of "extimité". "Extimité" refers to that which belongs to an individual's innermost realm yet remains, at the same time, foreign to them (Žižek, 2005, p. 225). By adapting this concept to his understanding of God, Žižek interprets God not as a transcendent being entirely outside human essence, but as a reality that exists within the human inner structure yet remains alien to it. Therefore, God is not so much an absolute being existing outside human consciousness as a psychoanalytic phenomenon that emerges from within the human subject's own lack and division (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 314).

Žižek points out that Lacan's statement, "God is the unconscious" (Lacan, 2013, p. 59) and Carl Gustav Jung's statement, "God is outside of consciousness itself" (Jung, 2022) are very different from one another. According to Žižek, Jung transforms the issue into a metaphysical and closed structure by situating God in a transcendent realm of consciousness beyond consciousness itself. This conception turns God into a "black box" impervious to criticism, since it places God outside the realm of human experience. In contrast, Lacan's concept of the unconscious explains God in relation to the subject's position within language, desire, and the symbolic order. Building on this, Žižek finds the

approach expressed in the statement, "I don't believe in God, but my unconscious does," problematic. For him, what truly matters is not whether an individual believes in God at the level of consciousness, but rather that the idea of God continues to exert its influence at the unconscious level in everyday life practices, cultural habits, and social relationships. Therefore, even if a person identifies as an atheist, they may still act as if they believe through their behavior and social practices. Žižek brings ideology into play at this point: "People continue to unconsciously reproduce, within the symbolic order, the very things they reject on a conscious level. Thus, God ceases to be merely a matter of individual belief and transforms into an ideological figure operating within social structures, cultural codes, and unconscious mechanisms" (Žižek, 2019). Žižek's approach demonstrates that he does not view religion and faith merely as a theological problem, but rather as a multilayered phenomenon that shapes individuals' social practices, cultural structures, and unconscious processes (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, pp. 316-317).

Žižek also interprets Lacan's statement -"The madman is not merely a beggar who thinks he is a king, but a king who thinks he is a king" (Žižek, 2003b, p. 290) -by adapting it to his conception of God. This statement by Lacan demonstrates that the subject's relationship with the identity it possesses is always fragile and problematic. Building on this, Žižek argues that God is a figure who appears certain of his own absoluteness but is, in fact, internally divided and contradictory. God is a problematic subject who, alongside being a transcendent and absolute authority, is capable of doubting his own existence and power. According to Žižek, for God to be able to conceive of his own absence or lack, he must possess a deeper unconscious structure that lies beyond the level of consciousness. In other words, God's conscious doubt about himself implies that he already carries this lack and fracture within his unconscious. Žižek's primary aim here is to reinterpret God on a psychoanalytic foundation, distancing Him from the classical metaphysical conception of perfection and flawlessness. According to him, consciousness can establish its own integrity only through the cracks and deficiencies in the unconscious. Therefore, reflection, lack, and a state of self-division are fundamental characteristics of the unconscious. By applying this line of thought to God, Žižek treats the statement "God is the unconscious" not merely as a metaphorical expression, but as an ontological interpretation that describes God as possessing an internally divided, lacking, and contradictory structure. Accordingly, God ceases to be the immutable center of absolute truth and becomes a symbolic figure who confronts his own lack, experiences conflict, and embodies unconscious processes (Žižek, 2024, p. 66).

In articulating his understanding of God, Žižek also critically evaluates God's influence on morality. In this context, he examines Fyodor Dostoevsky's statement, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted" (Dostoyevski, 2020) alongside Lacan's remark, "If God does not exist, everything is forbidden" (Žižek & Gunjević, 2013a) According to Žižek, when these two statements are compared, it becomes apparent that God is not as successful as is commonly believed in upholding the moral order-and that He can even sometimes become the source of moral problems. Dostoevsky's argument generally implies that God is the source of morality and that, in His absence, people might view all kinds of behavior as legitimate. Accordingly, religious people are seen as moral individuals, while non-believers are regarded as people who possess unlimited freedom and lack moral rules (Žižek, 2013b). However, Žižek believes that Lacan's statement, "If there is no God, everything is forbidden," can turn this idea on its head. According to him, in modern society, people-though seemingly free-are constantly surrounded by prohibitions, pressures, and mechanisms of ideological control. The absence of God or a transcendent authority does not naturally imply freedom. On the contrary, it can lead to even more intense symbolic pressures on the individual (Žižek, 2020, p. 327).

Žižek's main criticism is directed at the idea of God's potential to legitimize evil. According to him, the concept of "divine providence" allows for the explanation of much of the evil committed by humans on the basis of a divine plan. Thus, wars, suffering, or social catastrophes can be removed from moral scrutiny by linking them to God's will or hidden wisdom (Žižek, 2020, p. 327). Certain actions carried out within the context of religious belief can be justified by the notion of a "sacred purpose" (Žižek, 2013b, p. 28). Žižek also draws attention to this point. People are sometimes able to carry out actions they could not do on their own when they believe them to be a divine command or a sacred duty. For this reason, the sacred can become a justification not only for goodness but also for violence and evil (Žižek & Gunjević, 2013a, pp. 37-41). The point Žižek criticizes is that actions carried out in the name of the sacred, in particular, become beyond question. According to him, such notions can lead to the normalization of violence in the name of a "higher purpose" by preventing the perpetrator from questioning their own actions. Thus, religious or ideological discourse becomes not only a framework for producing meaning but also a mechanism of legitimization capable of suspending moral judgment. Žižek's provocatively phrased idea-"In a world where the wicked do evil and the good do good, it is God who makes good people do evil"-also forms the core of this critique. The aim here is not so much to

directly declare God the source of evil, but rather to show how people acting in the name of sacred authority can view violence as a moral duty (Žižek & Gunjević, 2013a, pp. 37-41). In this way, Žižek seeks to demonstrate that religion can function not only as a source of comfort and morality, but also as a mechanism of ideological legitimization.

Taking this discussion a step further, Žižek provides some examples of how legitimization based on sacred authority can lead to ethical blindness. In this context, cases of abuse that arise within religious institutions-particularly attempts to cover up child abuse by certain clergy members using the rhetoric of institutional authority and sacredness-play a significant role in his analysis. According to Žižek, the problem here lies not only in individual immorality but also in the institutional structure's creation of an ideological foundation that allows responsibility to be suspended in the name of a sacred purpose. This situation can render the perpetrator's actions invisible or untouchable within a broader symbolic system (Žižek & Gunjević, 2013a, p. 41). Similarly, Žižek argues that totalitarian ideologies also operate according to this logic. In this context, references to the era of Joseph Stalin point to the legitimization of individual violence or oppression in the name of "historical necessity," "revolutionary purpose," or "a higher truth" (Žižek, 2008b; Dağaşan, 2024). In Žižek's analysis, what is decisive here is not the existence or nonexistence of God, but the capacity of any ideological structure that claims to act in the name of "absolute truth" to redefine violence as a moral duty.

Žižek also views the portrayal of God as a "puppeteer" who directs human beings in debates about morality and fate as problematic. In this context, he argues that the rewards and punishments promised by religion remove moral action from the realm of ethical responsibility and transform it into a calculative rationality. Accordingly, when an individual begins to do good not because it is good in itself, but because they will receive a reward in return, ethical action is reduced to a logic of self-interested exchange. Žižek's critique intersects significantly with Kant's critique of heteronomous ethics, developed within the framework of autonomy and the ethics of duty. Indeed, the idea that "if I do good, I will go to heaven" ties moral action to an external reward mechanism rather than to an internal and unconditional responsibility (Žižek, 2020, p. 75). In this case, morality becomes a kind of symbolic exchange established between God and humanity. At this point, Žižek views God not only as the guarantor of the moral order but also as a figure who operationalizes this order through a market-like exchange of rewards and punishments.

As can be seen, Žižek situates the relationship between God and morality on a different plane from the individual's secular understanding of ethics, which is based on the principle of "do no harm to others." While secular ethics evaluates an action directly in terms of preventing harm to others, within a theological framework, action is often governed by a logic of loyalty and accountability directed toward a transcendent authority. According to Žižek, this situation can transform the very essence of morality, turning it into a kind of ideological tool.

Žižek also views God as an externalized and exalted form of human communities' own processes of meaning-making. Therefore, God is both a figure produced by humans and, within this production, carries an effect of "alienation" that transcends humanity. This issue of alienation is considered by Žižek on two levels:

1. God's reduction to a mechanical or unknowable absoluteness, thereby becoming a foreign essence to humanity.

2. Within the context of Christian theology, the rupture experienced by the figure of Jesus on the cross with God and the revelation of God's own internal division.

These two planes allow Žižek to interpret God not as a static entity, but as a dynamic process that contains conflict, lack, and division within itself. From Žižek's perspective, this idea is based on interpreting the God-human relationship through mutual alienation and symmetrical rupture rather than through the classical metaphysical distinction. In this understanding, the distance between subject and object is not, in fact, unidirectional but rather has a bidirectional structure. In other words, humanity's estrangement from God is conceived as, at the same time, God's "estrangement from himself" in the form of humanity (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 84). According to this line of thought, the subject's transformation into a closed singularity in the form of "I=I" signifies the severing of the ontological bond. According to Žižek, this rupture is not merely the separation of humanity from God, but is simultaneous with God's own transformation into a limited, incomplete, and fragile existence in human form. Consequently, God ceases to be a fixed being within absolute transcendence; instead, God becomes a figure "alienated from itself" in human form. This interpretation is particularly concentrated in the Christian narrative of the crucifixion. The statement, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Žižek, 2001, p. 106) in Žižek's interpretation, is not merely humanity's complaint against God but also the revelation of God's own internal division. Here, abandonment is read not as a one-sided relationship, but as a dramatic expression of God's abandonment of himself. Thus, the distance between God and humanity expresses a symmetrical alienation. In this context, Žižek conceives of God not as a positive and complete metaphysical being, but

as a process with undefined boundaries, one that contains lack and void.

Feuerbach, Hegel, and Žižek's conceptions of alienation revolve around the question of how the relationship between human beings and God is formed. According to Feuerbach, human beings become alienated from their own essence by projecting their essential qualities onto God; overcoming this alienation is possible only by reclaiming the qualities they have attributed to God. In Hegel, however, alienation is a constitutive moment of the dialectical process through which consciousness constitutes itself in terms of difference and mediation. Žižek, by reinterpreting Hegel through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, approaches alienation not merely as the projection of one's own essence onto God, but through the subject's constitutive split, its lack, and its relationship to the symbolic order. In particular, by interpreting themes such as the Incarnation, the Cross, and the death of God in Christianity, he questions the notion of the God-human relationship as an absolute and complete unity (Kotsko, 2012). Žižek's original interpretation is that overcoming alienation is not a return to a lost, unified essence of the human being, but rather an understanding of one's own fragmentation and the mediated structure of the relationships that constitute the self.

Žižek's conception of God is atheistic in nature, in that it reinterprets the fundamental narratives of Christianity within the framework of Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this approach, God is not treated as a metaphysical absolute being in which humanity reflects its own essence, but rather in the context of the subject's fragmentation, unconscious processes, and relationship with the symbolic order. By questioning the idea of an absolute and transcendent authority-particularly through the themes of the death of God and the crucifixion-Žižek rethinks the God-human relationship through the lens of human processes of alienation and the transformation of these processes (Boscaljon, 2010). Thus, his atheistic interpretation of Christianity is based not simply on the rejection of God, but on a philosophical and psychoanalytic reevaluation of the traditional conception of God.

What conception of God does Žižek's social conception of God-which he believes arises in connection with human deficiencies and existential needs-correspond to?

Žižek tells a joke to turn the relationship between God and ideology on its head and to show that the idea of divine authority is a "human construct." The joke tells the story of a politician who goes to hell but uses his wits to manipulate the system and escape; the devil then wants him back, and he ends up appearing before God. "Seeing that the politician isn't in hell, the devil goes before God and demands that the politician be handed over to him. No sooner does the politician say, 'My Lord,' than God cuts him off and says, 'First, I am not your Lord but your comrade; second, are you crazy, making up stories like this?; and third, cut it short -don't drag it out- I'm running late for a party meeting'"(Žižek, 2011, p. 485).

First, in this passage, God's statement, "I am not a Lord but a comrade," signifies, according to Žižek, a reversal of the idea of an absolutely transcendent and hierarchical God. Here, God is not an authority that governs everything in the classical sense, but is instead made into a part of the ideological structure. Second, the emphasis on the story being a fabrication points to the fact that sacred narratives and ideological discourses are, in reality, fictional. Even God is placed in a position that questions the reality of these narratives. Third, arriving late to the party meeting signifies the replacement of the metaphysical order with a political and organizational structure. Thus, a historical and ideological process takes center stage in place of a transcendent divine order. Through this joke, Žižek strips God of the status of an absolute metaphysical being and reimagines him as a figure operating within ideology, language, and collective practices. For this reason, the joke is not merely a humorous narrative but also a political critique aimed at deconstructing the idea of sacred authority.

Žižek argues that we need the idea of a fully humanized God. Within this framework, he conceives of God as a companion who is not excluded from society-a figure aware of his own absence and lack, and even capable of confronting that absence. In this conception, God is treated not as an absolute and transcendent being, but as a figure situated on the same ontological plane as humanity, sharing its existential tensions. Žižek's treatment of God largely as an ideological, psychological, and cultural figure presents a perspective that entirely excludes metaphysical possibilities. Such a reduction implies a failure to adequately account for the existential experiences of believers, the inner bond they establish with God, and the multilayered nature of mystical experiences.

3. Žižek on Religion

Slavoj Žižek approaches the concept of religion as a multilayered phenomenon with social, political, cultural, and psychoanalytic dimensions. According to him, religion has served as a veil concealing events and phenomena that individuals have avoided confronting throughout human history (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 41).

Žižek argues that it is impossible to formulate a universal and objective definition of religion. This is because every

religion presents a unique definition of religion within its own understanding of truth and sacred framework. For this reason, he views religion as a structure with ideological, social, and psychological functions. He even states that religion sometimes imposes itself insistently, maintaining its influence through unconscious and social practices even when the individual consciously rejects it (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 83). Consequently, religion is not a closed concept that can be explained through a single essence or fixed definition. However, it does not accept that religion is a completely undefined or meaningless phenomenon; on the contrary, it emphasizes that religion must be understood within both a historical and an intellectual continuum.

While Žižek largely views religion as an ideological construct, he tends to reduce faith to a rational framework. Religious belief encompasses not only a process based on reasoning but also non-rational dimensions such as intuition, experience, transcendence, and emotional depth. For this reason, Žižek argues that the phenomenon of belief must be addressed both as a theological issue and within the framework of psychological and social norms (Fabiano, 2021; Mills, 2016).

According to Žižek, reason is a functional tool for explaining objects in the empirical realm; however, religion points to an internal and subjective realm of experience that transcends objective explanations. When this inner experience is projected onto external objects, the risk of fetishization often arises. For this reason, religion can also be defined as an inner emotional state independent of cognitive objects; however, this does not mean that it is entirely devoid of cognitive meaning. On the contrary, religion is the symbolic structuring of phenomena that are unknown and whose boundaries cannot be fully grasped (Johnston, 2004; Mills, 2016).

Žižek argues, in particular, that the capitalist system uses religion as a tool to legitimize the social order. The influence of Karl Marx's critique of ideology is clearly evident in this approach (Žižek, 2001; Fabiano, 2021). However, Žižek does not treat religion merely as a social illusion; he also discusses it from psychoanalytic and philosophical perspectives. As stated in the section where we addressed his view of God, Žižek does not regard God as an absolute, flawless, and transcendent being, but rather as a problematic figure embodying lack, fracture, and conflict. In this regard, his thinking differs from the classical theistic conception of God. According to him, the emergence of genuine faith depends on passing through the critical process of modern atheism. For this reason, he views atheism not merely as a rejection of religion, but as a necessary stage in overcoming false sanctities and ideological illusions (Žižek, 2024).

Žižek's critique of religion is directed primarily at religion's repressive and ideological functions. However, religion is a multidimensional phenomenon that, beyond this, contributes to the individual search for meaning, strengthens social solidarity, and can also serve as a source for discourses on freedom. For this reason, Žižek's approach can be viewed as a limited framework that highlights only the critical and problematic aspects of religion.

4. The Relationship Between Religion and Psychoanalysis

Religion is a concept that manifests itself in many areas and serves as a source of support to which society turns, especially in moments of psychological vulnerability. In situations of fear, uncertainty, and helplessness, people often turn to religion in search of meaning and security. In addition to viewing religion as the individual's psychological refuge, Žižek also treats it as an object of psychoanalytic analysis. In this context, religion can be understood not only as a system of belief but also as a traumatic structure that disrupts the subject's production of meaning (Mills, 2016). Religion is positioned as an element that disrupts the continuity between truth and meaning and prevents the subject from constructing a holistic world of meaning.

In Žižek's psychoanalytic approach, religion can be analyzed-in a manner parallel to Sigmund Freud's interpretations of religion-through the relationship between neurosis and perversion. When interpreted through their explicit and visible expressions, religious practices function as a mechanism that regulates both the individual's structure of desire and their unconscious conflicts (Žižek, 2001, pp. 87, 133). In this context, religion is viewed as a structure capable of fostering a commitment so strong that an individual might even sacrifice their own life for it. According to Žižek, this devotion points to a neurotic organization that manifests, from a psychoanalytic perspective, as "readiness" and "self-sacrifice." While the individual attempts to compensate for the Other's (God's) lack, ignorance, or flaw, they actually reproduce their own internal conflicts. In this context, the neurotic structure becomes sustainable through behaviors such as protecting God, suffering on His behalf, or carrying out His will. In this understanding, neurosis is not merely a pathology but also a way for the subject to fill a void of meaning. According to Žižek, the condition that emerges when this mechanism disappears is not atheism in the classical sense, but rather a neurotic atheism that still bears the traces of religious structures at the unconscious level. In other words, even if an individual does not believe in God at the conscious level, they cannot completely abandon the symbolic and psychological structures associated with Him (Žižek, 2024, pp. 59-60).

According to Žižek, understanding religion should not be limited to viewing it merely as a reflection of individual psychological disorders. In addition, broader universal structures must also be analyzed through the explicit and visible expressions of religious practices. In the Lacanian sense, the deviant subject is the person who devotes themselves to compensating for the lack of the Other (Žižek, 2012, p. 189). Accordingly, the heretic does not completely deny God's absence; rather, despite being aware of this absence, he functionalizes God as if He existed in a way that preserves the integrity of the system. For this reason, God occupies the role of a function that sustains social order rather than that of an ontological reality. Religion, too, serves as an institutional order that preserves this structure (Žižek, 2024, p. 61, 2008c, p. 660).

Drawing on Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, Žižek argues that religion is closely linked to neurotic structures. Lacan's statement that "God is the unconscious" (Lacan, 2013, p. 59) brings this deep connection between religion and psychoanalysis to light. According to Žižek, understanding God as the unconscious implies that religion is also intertwined with unconscious processes. For this reason, faith is not merely an idea accepted at the level of consciousness, but rather a part of deeper psychoanalytic mechanisms that determine the subject's behavior. Žižek tries to explain this situation with the following joke: "A man who believes he is a grain of wheat is admitted to a mental hospital. The doctors convince him that he is human, and eventually he is convinced that he is not a grain of wheat. However, after being discharged from the hospital, he returns out of fear that a chicken will eat him. When the doctors say, 'You know you're human,' the man replies, 'Yes, I know; but do the chickens know that?' This anecdote illustrates the difference between conscious persuasion and the persistence of unconscious anxieties. Žižek adapts this joke to the idea of God as follows: A person is punished for believing in God and is then convinced that God does not exist. However, he later returns out of fear that "God will punish me." When reminded that God does not exist, he asks, "Well, does God know about this?" (Žižek, 2014, pp. 65-66).

Even if people say they do not believe in God, they may continue to engage in certain rituals, fear responses, and cultural habits on an unconscious level. According to Žižek, this situation demonstrates that religion is not merely a conscious system of belief, but also a deep psychoanalytic structure that shapes the subject's behavior. In this context, religion can be understood as an order that persists even in non-believers in the form of cultural and symbolic remnants. Superstitions, ritualized behaviors, and cultural reflexes can be regarded as examples of this structure operating at the unconscious level. Thus, the idea of God transforms into a symbolic framework embedded in social life, in addition to being a theological belief.

Again, using this anecdote, Žižek highlights Lacan's claim that "even if we know God does not exist on the level of consciousness, this knowledge may not function in the same way on the unconscious level" (Žižek, 2021). For this reason, religion is not merely a conscious system of belief, but a phenomenon intertwined with the deep structures that determine the subject's behavior on a psychoanalytic level. According to him, psychoanalysis and religion are two distinct discourses that seek to understand human inner conflicts, desires, and fantasies. However, these two fields do not serve the same function; in some respects, they are positioned in opposition to one another. While psychoanalysis is grounded in a materialist framework, religion seeks to offer a more symbolic and intuitive wholeness. While psychoanalysis seeks to analyze and confront the individual, religion mostly attempts to fix meaning by repressing this conflict (Lacan, 2015, pp. 83-84). In the context of this discussion, Lacan's assertion that "Religion does not lose out to science" (Lacan, 2015) is also significant. According to this view, religion offers the individual a comforting framework in the face of the uncertainty and anxiety generated by scientific explanations.

In conclusion, Žižek's approach to the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis reveals that religion is not merely a conscious system of belief and meaning-making, but also functions as a symbolic structure intertwined with the subject's unconscious desires, fears, anxieties, and fantasies. Within this framework, while religion functions as a mechanism of assurance aimed at alleviating the individual's existential uncertainties and filling the void of meaning, psychoanalysis seeks to enable the subject to confront their own lack and desire by questioning this assurance. Although science develops natural and rational explanations in place of the transcendent explanations offered by religion, from Žižek's perspective, scientific explanation alone cannot eliminate humanity's need for security, meaning, and relief from anxiety. Consequently, the encounter between religion and science should be evaluated not merely as an epistemological conflict between two different systems of knowledge, but also as a clash between the different coping mechanisms the subject develops in the face of uncertainty and lack. However, Žižek's interpretation of religion-which largely reduces religion to the subject's psychological and symbolic structure-poses a significant problem when it comes to explaining religion's ontological and theological claims. At this point, his understanding of religion must be evaluated not only in terms of its psychoanalytic dimension

but also with regard to the ontological status of God and religion's claim to reality. Indeed, Žižek's treatment of God-not as a transcendent and independent being but rather within the functioning of the symbolic order-brings to the fore the anti-realist approach that forms the foundation of his understanding of God and religion.

5. The Relationship Between Religion and Society

Slavoj Žižek views religion not only as a realm of individual belief but also as a social and political phenomenon. According to him, religion is political by nature and is therefore directly linked to social solidarity, power relations, and ideological structures (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, pp. 87-88). Žižek views religious institutions as structures that shape people's ways of thinking, their critical consciousness, and their actions. For this reason, he argues that religions are open to criticism. According to him, all theologies are political to a certain extent, because ethical considerations are often set aside for theological and political reasons. In this context, every political structure contains a theological element.

Žižek's interpretation of religion as an ideological and political structure leads him to take a critical stance toward mystical and religious experiences as well. According to him, religious experiences often become tools of exploitation and manipulation. The fundamental reason for this is religion's close relationship with today's capitalist system. However, Žižek does not believe that religion should be completely excluded from radical politics. In his view, a new understanding of religion is possible through a conception of freedom that accepts the absence of the "Big Other" (Žižek, 2011, p. 485, 2012, pp. 230-231). According to this view, God is conceived not as an absolute master who directs human beings, but as a being who leaves the individual to face their own responsibilities. Thus, religion is reinterpreted in the context of the human process of emancipation, rather than being tied to a transcendent and unattainable authority (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 334; Kivinen, 2025).

Žižek, who analyzes religion within the context of capitalist society, notes that religion largely serves as an ideological veil that masks injustices. Religion confers symbolic value on the lower classes within the social hierarchy. According to him, the problem today is not that capitalism uses religion, but that capitalism has, in effect, transformed into a religious structure. Whereas in the past religious ideologies legitimized the capitalist system, today capitalist forms of belief render the essence of religion invisible (Žižek, 2003, p. 138). For this reason, Žižek emphasizes that as long as religions continue to exist in their current form, true social and economic peace cannot be fully achieved, and that this is possible only from an atheist perspective (Žižek & Milbank, 2016, p. 70).

In general, Žižek regards religion and the concept of God as human constructs. While he approaches religious devotion with a critical distance, he acknowledges that it is not easy for people to completely distance themselves from religious structures. He emphasizes that throughout history, religion has served as a cover for capitalism and various ideologies (Koçak, 2025, p. 86). However, rather than simply rejecting religion, he considers exposing its internal contradictions to be a more appropriate approach. In his view, statements such as "God is selfish" or "religion is an institutional construct" present a stronger critical position than outright denial.

Although Žižek acknowledges that religions are a construct, he adopts an ambivalent stance regarding whether a society in which spirituality is completely absent is even possible. While acknowledging that monotheistic religions faced serious criticism, particularly in the 19th century, he points out that superstitions and religious tendencies have not completely disappeared. According to him, the idea of God continues to persist in the human unconscious (Žižek, 2011, p. 347).

However, Žižek's interpretation of religion-which focuses primarily on its social and ideological dimensions-can be viewed as an important yet incomplete approach. This is because viewing religion solely as a tool of domination, exploitation, or ideological manipulation relegates its individual and existential aspects to the background. In reality, for many people, religion is not merely an institutional system but an inner experience directly linked to the search for meaning, a sense of belonging, the need for solace, and the experience of the transcendent. Since Žižek's approach does not sufficiently take this subjective and spiritual dimension of religion into account, it can be viewed as a reductive assessment.

Conclusion

Slavoj Žižek's understanding of God and religion diverges significantly from the classical theistic conception of God. Rather than conceiving God as a transcendent, absolute, self-sufficient, and perfect being, Žižek reinterprets the concept of God through the categories of lack, division, conflict, and the unconscious. Drawing on Feuerbach, Hegel, Marx, and, most significantly, Lacan, Žižek approaches God not primarily as an ontological reality existing independently of humanity, but as a figure that emerges within the field of human desire, fear, lack, social relations, and the symbolic order. Consequently, transcendence is largely reconfigured in immanent terms, while the classical ontological distinction between God and

humanity is replaced by a relation structured around mutual lack, division, and alienation.

Žižek's conception of God, shaped by Marxism, Hegelianism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, raises several philosophical and theological questions. His claim that the concept of God is produced within human symbolic and social structures challenges the traditional understanding of God as an absolute and transcendent reality. However, an account of the ways in which the concept of God functions within human desire, fear, lack, and the symbolic order does not, in itself, resolve the ontological question of whether God exists. In other words, explaining the psychological, social, or ideological origins and functions of a belief does not, by itself, establish the truth or falsity of that belief. Žižek's analysis is therefore useful for explaining how and under what psychological and social conditions belief in God may emerge and function, but it does not constitute a direct ontological argument concerning the existence or non-existence of God.

Furthermore, reducing the religious relation to ideological or psychological mechanisms risks overlooking the personal, experiential, and spiritual dimensions of faith. Religious believers may relate to God through love, devotion, trust, and hope rather than merely through fear, anxiety, or a need for ideological legitimation. From this perspective, an interpretation of religion primarily in terms of ideological legitimation and the problem of evil may inadequately account for the diversity of religious experience and for the moral and existential meanings that believers derive from their faith. Žižek's portrayal of God as a humanly constituted ideological construct consequently risks bracketing the possibility of God's independent existence as well as the diverse ways in which religious belief may shape individual and social life. Religious belief may arise not merely from fear or anxiety but also from a deeper existential quest for meaning, transcendence, purpose, and fulfillment. Accordingly, Žižek's account may not fully capture the conceptual richness of religious thought or the diverse forms of existential fulfillment associated with religious commitment.

Žižek's understanding of religion is likewise shaped by the same theoretical framework. For him, religion is not merely a set of propositions to which individuals assent; rather, it constitutes a multilayered structure that organizes unconscious desires, fears, and existential anxieties, shapes social relations, and contributes to the reproduction of ideological structures. The influence of religion, therefore, cannot be reduced to the question of whether an individual consciously believes in God. Religious symbols, rituals, cultural practices, and forms of social behavior may continue to operate at the level of the unconscious and symbolic order. Drawing on psychoanalytic categories, Žižek interprets religion in relation to neurosis and argues that religious practices and neurotic behavior may exhibit analogous unconscious structures. From this perspective, he suggests that overcoming the neurotic structure underlying religious belief may lead the subject toward atheism.

In explaining religion and God, Žižek consequently tends to privilege their psychoanalytic, ideological, and social functions over their putative ontological reality. Although he characterizes religion in terms of fiction and ideological illusion and emphasizes its capacity to serve ideological interests, he also recognizes that religion and religious belief perform important functions within social life. His approach thus contains a tension: religion is criticized as an ideological mechanism, yet its persistence and social efficacy are acknowledged. Nevertheless, interpreting religion primarily as a form of neurosis or ideological manipulation risks reducing a complex phenomenon to its pathological or functional dimensions. Religion may provide individuals not only with psychological consolation in situations of fear, suffering, and helplessness but also with frameworks through which they organize meaning, purpose, identity, moral commitments, and social relationships.

Žižek's analogy between religious and neurotic behavior therefore risks confining religious experience within a relatively narrow psychoanalytic framework. Such an approach may overlook the multilayered character of religious experience and the possibility that religious commitment can contribute positively to psychological well-being, existential resilience, moral development, and social solidarity. Even if religion can function as an ideological instrument under certain historical and social conditions, this does not exhaust its possible functions or meanings. Religious traditions can also foster communal belonging, social solidarity, ethical responsibility, and forms of personal transformation. Religion may therefore constitute an important source of existential and spiritual fulfillment as well as a significant factor in the formation and transmission of moral norms and values.

From this perspective, Žižek's analysis provides important insights into the psychoanalytic and ideological dimensions of religion, particularly by drawing attention to the roles of desire, lack, anxiety, fantasy, and ideology in the formation of religious subjectivity. Nevertheless, an adequate philosophical account of religion may require consideration of dimensions that cannot be fully captured through psychoanalytic, ideological, or sociological analysis alone. The existential, phenomenological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of religious experience also need to be taken into account. Žižek's approach is therefore valuable as

a critical account of certain functions and forms of religion, but it may remain insufficient as a comprehensive account of the full range of religious experience, belief, and meaning.

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