

The Mystical and the Material: Slavoj Žižek and the French Reception of Mysticism

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Abstract This paper will argue that the work of Slavoj Žižek can be fruitfully understood as a response to mystical theology as it has been received in two strands of 20th century French thought—psychoanalysis and phenomenology—and that Žižek's work in turn offers intriguing possibilities for the re-figuring of mystical theology by feminist philosophy of religion. Twentieth century French psychoanalysis is dominated by the work of Jacques Lacan and by his students Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. All three of these figures engage in significant ways with mystical theology—particularly with the works and figures of female mystics—as a crucial resource for theorising gender and subjectivity. A second strand of the 20th century French reception of mystical theology is the phenomenological tradition, specifically the work of Jacques Derrida. This paper will argue that, drawing on and challenging both of these elements of recent French engagement with mystical theology, Žižek's work offers a materialist ontology which seeks to locate transcendence within immanence and materiality, offering to feminist philosophy of religion the resources for re-thinking the relationship of the mystical to the material.

Keywords Žižek · Kristeva · Irigaray · Mysticism · Lacan · Derrida · Materialism · Sexual difference

Very little has been written about Žižek and his relationship to mystical theology, and of course, there is always the danger that there is a good reason for this omission. But the wager of this paper is threefold: first, that the contours of Žižek's thought are very deeply shaped by the 20th century French reception of mysticism; second, that reading Žižek in this light illuminates crucial contours of his work; and third, that as a result of these first two claims, Žižek's work in turn offers intriguing possibilities for a feminist philosophy of religion which seeks to engage with the question of mysticism.

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Christian mystical theology came into being through the conjunction of still-emergent doctrinal orthodoxy with Neoplatonism.¹ The synthesis which emerged, figuring creation and redemption as a process of emanation and return, has been both enormously fruitful and hugely problematic for the Christian culture to which it gave birth. Amongst other issues, this model has tended to see progress towards God as progress *away from* the body and has therefore lent itself to deeply patriarchal forms of religious thought.² Feminist philosophy of religion has had to grapple with this legacy. Žižek's work does not obviously or straightforwardly belong with that of feminist philosophers of religion. Yet the defining feature of his philosophical system is his attempt to draw together Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian dialectics and contemporary quantum physics into a materialist ontology which repeats differently the Neoplatonic attempt to depict the structures of language, desire and the material world as fundamentally connected to one another. As such, Žižek's work offers to feminist philosophy of religion the possibility of rethinking the relationship between the mystical and the material. Here, I will trace Žižek's engagement with recent continental philosophical discussions of the relationship of mystical theology, language and desire in order to demonstrate this claim.

Mystical theology is so common as to sometimes appear inescapable in recent continental philosophy.³ As a result, it is in some ways inevitable that Žižek, located firmly within this tradition, should be shaped to some extent by the French engagement with mysticism.⁴ However, there are two main ways in which the French reception of mysticism shapes Žižek's work: firstly, through the theological turn associated with phenomenology and with Derrida in particular, and secondly, through the French psychoanalytic tradition, particularly Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. I will suggest, roughly, that Derrida represents for Žižek the problem he is attempting to solve and Lacan the figure to whom he turns to solve this problem, engaging as he does

¹ See, for example, Denys Turner's discussion of the development of the Christian mystical tradition in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–5; or Grace Jantzen's summary of the same process in Grace, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty: Volume One: Foundations of Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 357.

² For a more detailed discussion of how these issues play out in subsequent Christian theology, see my article 'The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' in *New Blackfriars* 94.1053 (2013), 540–551.

³ The relationship of negative or mystical theology to continental philosophy has proved a fertile theme for recent works in theology and philosophy of religion. Examples include Amy Hollywood's 'Beauvoir, Irigaray and the Mystical' in *Hypatia* 9.4 (1994), 158–185 and 'Mysticism, Death and Desire in the Work of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément' in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 145–161, and *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); Arthur Bradley's *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Jeffrey L. Kosky, 'Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology: The Case of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1.3 (2000), <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.3/kosky.shtml>; Harold Coward and Toby Foshay's edited volume, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992); and William Franke (ed.) *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature and the Arts. Volume 1: Classic Formulations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

⁴ This article originated as a paper delivered at the 2013 conference 'Mystical Theology: Eruptions from France' and so focuses on Žižek's work in relation to French thought specifically (with a brief foray into the work of the Belgian philosopher Julia Kristeva. There is also much to be said about Žižek's relationship to mysticism in Western thought more generally and particularly to the trajectory of mystical theology in Germany, a line of descent by which mystical ideas made their way via Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme into the work of Hegel and Heidegger.

so with questions of gender, sexuality and embodiment which are central to feminist philosophy of religion.

Ontotheology and Desire in Derrida and Žižek

Derrida's first discussion of mystical theology came during his 1968 lecture, 'Différance'.⁵ For Derrida, *différance* names the impossibility of closure, mastery or totality; it is the gap between the sign and the thing signified. In this earlier essay, Derrida says that, although the denials and refusals of *différance* may sound like negative theology, they are not. Negative theology names a superabundance, a hyperessence, a transcendent anchor for language; while *différance* 'is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological—ontotheological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history; it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.'⁶ Yet Derrida repeatedly returns to this question of negative theology and comes in time to acknowledge that it is not, after all, so easy to distinguish from his own project. Negative theology and deconstruction have in common, the later Derrida acknowledges, a relationship to the question of how to avoid speaking about that which cannot be spoken about; both are concerned with the establishment and the undoing of boundaries, of identity, of desire.⁷

For Derrida, negative theology is riven by the contradictory desire to establish borders and to transgress them; it is both absolutely faithful to theological dogma and also that which absolutely unsettles and undoes all theological propositions; it is torn between negation as the hyper-affirmation of a good beyond being and negation as the acknowledgement of an impossibility, an absence, at the heart of all identity.⁸ As such, negative theology is the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of the theological speech, and it therefore shares the structure of other key notions within Derrida's thought: death, *pharmakon*, the gift, *différance*,⁹ and also of Derrida's key ethical notions which require both identity and its disruption, such as hospitality, which requires the host to freely give that which yet remains her own.¹⁰

⁵ Published in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–28. David Newheiser points out, however, that Derrida was engaging with the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite as early as 1952 (*Unforeseeable God* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2012), 59).

⁶ 'Différance', 6.

⁷ For example, in 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices' (translated by John P. Leavey Jr. in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992)), Derrida acknowledges the multiplicity of apophatic theology (283), its transgression of boundaries (284), its disruption of identity (311), and its relationship to both death and desire (285, 291).

⁸ In 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' (translated by Ken Frieden in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992)), Derrida divides negative theology into that which proceeds according to the logic of the *agathon*, the Platonic idea of the Good as the source and goal of being, and the *khora*, the ungraspable opening which is neither being nor non-being (101, 104).

⁹ Hugh Rayment-Pickard points out that many of Derrida's key notions share the structure of the chiasmus, 'the "other" of the circle' which resists and disrupts economy and closure, yet which offered not *instead* of the circle but as *internal* to it (*Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 159).

¹⁰ Derrida describes the paradoxical nature of hospitality, the way in which 'one can become virtually xenophobic in order to protect or claim to protect one's own hospitality, the own home that makes possible one's own hospitality' ('Foreigner Question' in *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 53).

Although Žižek is often dismissive of ‘the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects’, he repeatedly acknowledges the proximity of Derrida's thought to his own.¹¹ Though he critiques Derrida on numerous occasions, most of these critiques are attempts to demonstrate how Derrida misreads Hegel or Lacan in such a way as to miss the parallels between their thought and his own.¹² Žižek's recent work, *Less Than Nothing*, contains several passages in which Žižek explicitly appropriates Derridean language to articulate his own ideas, speaking about his ontology and politics in terms of *l'avenir*,¹³ *différance*¹⁴ and *pharmakon*.¹⁵

And yet, for all this proximity, there remains a crucial difference between the two thinkers. This difference takes the form of what Žižek calls the parallax gap, where what changes is not the basic configuration of thought but the perspective from which that basic configuration is seen, a subtle shift in register which is sometimes so small as to seem almost imperceptible but which, nonetheless, changes everything.¹⁶ For example, Žižek says that Derrida unearths the impossibility of identity and yet cannot make the Hegelian move of recognising that impossibility is, precisely, *constitutive* of identity; Derrida speaks about a central signifier which imposes stability on meaning and also about an excessive element within the system which functions simultaneously as lack and as surplus; but he cannot recognise that the supplement and the master signifier are one and the same.¹⁷

Žižek fully endorses Derrida's notion that any identity is always already ruptured, impossible, but for Žižek, he and Derrida are distinguished according to the different ways in which they *relate* to this impossibility. He describes this difference in terms of the Lacanian distinction between desire and drive, which are the two ways of relating to the lost object, the impossibility at the heart of identity. For Žižek, Derrida relates to impossibility according to the logic of desire, which both knows that identity is impossible and yet will not give up hope in the possibility of wholeness; whereas Žižek seeks to relate to impossibility according to the Lacanian logic of drive which, realising that no object can ever satisfy it, instead begins to derive its satisfaction precisely from repeatedly missing the object of desire.¹⁸ So desire aims for wholeness and repeatedly fails; drive does the same thing but failure is precisely its aim.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 11.

¹² For example: ‘the problem with the Derridean approach is that it systematically overlooks the Hegelian character of its own basic operation’ (*For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 32); ‘Derrida's criticism of Lacan is a case of prodigious misreading [but if we] tackle the problematic nature of their relationship *en détail* ... a series of unexpected connections open up’ (*The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005).

¹³ *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 264.

¹⁴ *Less than Nothing*, 377.

¹⁵ *Less than Nothing*, 342.

¹⁶ *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 167.

¹⁷ *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 195–196.

¹⁸ So, for example, in *Less than Nothing* Žižek criticises Derrida because he ‘has privileged the side of desire/lack, conceiving the process of *différance* as always failed and lacking with regard to the goal of Messianic Justice’ (377), whereas his own work privileges the drive which ‘turns failure into triumph – in it, the very failure to reach its goal ... generates a satisfaction of its own’ (498).

This difference between Derrida and Žižek is also a specifically *gendered* difference. The configuration of desire, language and being which is present in negative theology from its inception has always been gendered.¹⁹ Yet, while Derrida's work seeks to unsettle both the ground of being and the gendering of philosophy, he also insists on an 'irreducible gap' between 'ontological difference and gender difference'.²⁰ By contrast, Žižek's reliance on the Lacanian account of subjectivity, sexuality and mysticism means that the question of gender becomes central to the question of human identity and transformation.

Lacan, Sexuation, and Feminist Philosophy

While Derrida's discussions of mysticism tend to focus on the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, whose 'mysticism of the intellect' is primarily philosophical and abstract rather than affective,²¹ Lacan appeals instead to much later forms of mysticism in which individual experience is foregrounded. Yet, the central themes of Dionysius' work remain present, particularly in Lacan's *Seminar XX*, which deal not only with gender, sexuality and mysticism, but also with ontology, God and Neoplatonism.²²

For Lacan, the subject is brought into being by the creation of a boundary, a cut which is both an internal fissure and a division between the self and others. This cut is to do with the way that the subject is, from the very beginning, caught up in the economy of the desire and the language of others, and also to do with the gap between the human child's ability to conceive of herself as a particular individual and her ability to control the boundaries of her own identity. The cut is also the cut of what Lacan calls 'castration' and at the core of Lacan's account of sexuation is his thesis that the masculine and feminine subjective positions are two ways of relating to this essential incompleteness of the subject.

Central to Lacan's account is his notorious claim that 'there's no such thing as a sexual relationship'. This is the dual claim that, on the one hand, the sexual relationship does not do what it ostensibly sets out to do and, on the other hand, that this failure is precisely its real aim.²³ The sexual relationship is, in Lacanian terminology, essentially about the relationship to the phallus, which represents for the subject that which was lost as they came into being. It stands for sexuality insofar as it relies on the fantasy of wholeness, of the subject's completion, the Aristophanic fantasy that there is some

¹⁹ As Grace Jantzen discusses at length in *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰ Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge and Maldon: Polity, 2011), 21.

²¹ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 108. Whilst it is possible to argue, as Andrew Louth does in his *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Chapman, 1989), that Dionysius' work ought to be situated in his liturgical and ecclesial context, his negative theology relies primarily on theological and philosophical arguments rather than the appeal to individual experience which came, over time, to be seen as characteristic of mystical theology (a process which, again, Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian mysticism* traces).

²² *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Encore 1972–1973*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1998).

²³ *Seminar XX*, 34.

person out there who will complete me. For Lacan, the sexual relationship is doomed to fail because it is never really about two people becoming one but about the clash of two individuals' narcissistic attempts to reduce the other person to that which is required to make each of them a harmonious whole. This impossibility of the sexual relationship, of being completed by another person is, for Lacan, precisely the point: since it is only my incompleteness which brings me into being in the first place, completion represents not happiness or dissatisfaction but the dissolution of the subject, psychosis or death.²⁴

For Lacan, there are two ways of relating to this inevitable failure of the sexual relationship, the 'male' way or the 'female' way (although Lacan does sometimes attempt to distinguish between men and masculinity and women and femininity, he does not do so consistently).²⁵ The male way is the logic of desire, which relies on the fantasy of the possibility of attaining wholeness by re-integrating the lost object, yet which must constantly and unconsciously sabotage itself in order to prevent the dissolution of the subject; this is the logic, says Lacan, of courtly love, of the deliberate choice of an unattainable beloved. But to explicate this logic of femininity, Lacan turns to mysticism, citing in particular the writings of Hadewijch, of St John of the Cross, and Bernini's statue of Theresa of Avila. There are some obvious problems here, as Lacan seeks to explicate feminine subjectivity via a woman, one man and a man's depiction of a woman in ecstasy (he goes on, modestly, to include his own *Écrits* in the canon of mystical writing).²⁶

The contrast between masculinity and femininity, says Lacan, is the contrast between *eros* and love. Where masculine *eros* seeks to make two into one, to gather the multiplicity of the world into a single unity, a Neoplatonic One, feminine love relates to the other as a singular individual.²⁷ Instead of *eros*, the gathering of everything into union, Lacan says that analysis seeks to assert the existence of the One as a singular individual, and to explore not desire but love. In some ways, this is an attempt to reinstate Anders Nygren's distinction between *eros* and *agape*, but unlike Nygren, Lacan ranges mysticism on the side of *agape* rather than *eros*, despite its associations with Neoplatonism and erotic union with God.²⁸]

This account of 'feminine', mystical *jouissance* is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, because for Lacan there is no subject prior to castration, he rejects any attempt to reify the figure of the woman as the maternal ground of being, the promise of

²⁴ In contrast to the Neoplatonism which sees everything which exists as emerging from the simplicity of the One, ultimately to return to it, Lacan rejects the notion of 'a closed one' as 'a mirage', a 'false unity' (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1998), 26. This represents a double transformation of the basic model which underlies much Christian theology in general and mystical theology in particular. First, rather than seeing God as the One from whose desire the world emerges, it is the subject, the desire of the individual which is given priority. Second, the longing for union which is characteristic of so much mystical theology is taken not as the deepest longing of the human heart but as a false hope, a fantasy, which prevents the subject from confronting the fact that insofar as she is one at all this one is 'the one of the split, of the stroke, of rupture' (*Seminar XI*, 26).

²⁵ *Seminar XX*, 57.

²⁶ *Seminar XX*, 76.

²⁷ This process of gathering the many into one is, Lacan argues, a fantasy, it is simply not possible, and it was precisely to explain this impossibility that Freud introduced the notion of the death drive (*Seminar XX*, 66–67).

²⁸ Lacan does in fact mention Nygren in passing, describing him as 'no stupider than anyone else' (*Seminar XX*, 75).

wholeness or a lost edenic state, just as Derrida rejects the notion of the God of ontotheology as the ground of language.²⁹ But it is precisely Lacan's troubling gender politics which problematise this attempt to assign women to the side of love. While he valorises women's mystical experience he associates this mystical experience with a 'jouissance of the body' which women can experience but cannot speak about, which is somehow present in women's mystical texts and yet can only be articulated by a man, by Jacques Lacan.³⁰ This ambiguity over the relationship of women to language, the body and mystical experience leaves a complicated legacy with which Lacan's successors wrestle.

Particularly important in the reception of these elements of Lacan's work are Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who pick up Lacan's problema of sexual difference and grapple with it in different ways. Whilst the two have significant differences with one another as well as with Lacan, they have one crucial commonality. Where, for Lacan, the cut that brings the subject into being is both internal to the subject *and also* a cut between the subject and the other, both Irigaray and Kristeva focus on the distinction between the subject and the other rather than on the distinction internal to the subject. Irigaray's work prioritises distinction, focusing her attention on the question of how to establish men and women as sufficiently separate beings that they are able to relate to one another as other.³¹ She values mysticism because it gives women a distinctive voice: the mystical writings are, she says, 'the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly.'³² By contrast, Kristeva's work seeks to trouble distinction, exploring, through her key notions of the semiotic and the abject, the blurring of the boundaries between the self and the other. The semiotic in particular is associated with mysticism, which Kristeva values insofar as it unsettles settled identities.³³

²⁹ 'Mother' is the role that women play in the sexual relationship within which they are positioned as objet petit a (35); the figure of the woman is the fantasy of a 'prediscursive reality' which does not exist (32).

³⁰ Although Lacan acknowledges that there is such a thing as a 'lady analysts' he does not, apparently consider it worth his while to name any of them, let alone cite them (*Seminar XX*, 57).

³¹ In a 1995 interview, Irigaray suggests that her work can be understood to consist of three stages: first, a critique of the masculine subject as all-encompassing, refusing to make space for the feminine other; second, an attempt to articulate subjectivity from the perspective of this feminine other; and third, an attempt to understand subjectivity in terms of intersubjectivity and a dialectic of self and other, subjectivity and objectivity (Elizabeth Hirsh, Gary A. Olson, and Gaëton Brulotte, "'Je-Luce Irigaray': A Meeting with Luce Irigaray," *Hypatia* 10, no. 2 (1995), 96–97). As Elizabeth Grosz argues, fundamental to all of these stages is the assertion that 'sexual difference is the engine or force involved in the production of all other differences and thus has an ontological status that is radically different from... other differences' (Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Nature of Sexual Difference: Irigaray and Darwin' in *Angelaki* 17.2 (2012), 73).

³² *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 191.

³³ So, for example, for Kristeva, 'feminine faith' can be said to identify 'more with the crucible of mysticism than with a dogma, whatever it may be'; when Eckhart asks God to rid him of God, he is envisioning 'that nonplace, that unthinkable outside' which belongs to the 'feminine or the maternal', where the feminine is not the opposite of the masculine but something which precedes it, which comes "'before the beginning'", before the creation which 'comes out of a cut', out of *separation* (in Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 60, 73, 152). Similarly, elsewhere, Kristeva argues that 'mysticism... is vouchsafed only to those who take the "maternal" upon themselves', the maternal being 'the ambivalent principle that derives on the one hand from the species and on the other hand from a catastrophe of identity...that somehow involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language, or the body' ('Stabat Mater' ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *Poetics Today* 6.1 (1985), 134).

Žižek: the Mystical as Material

By contrast, Žižek's response to the Lacanian account of sexualisation is to propose an ontology of the subject in which the crucial distinction is not between subjects but is *internal* to the subject. In doing so, he draws together Lacanian psychoanalysis with Hegelian dialectics and contemporary science. This idiosyncratic synthesis enables him, effectively, to repeat the original move of mystical theology, the connection that thinkers like Dionysius the Areopagite make between the subject's desire, the structure of language and subsequently the structure of being itself.

While, for Lacan, the cut which brings the subject into being is both an internal fissure and a division between the subject and the Other; Žižek's Hegelian reading of Lacan is absolutely clear that the rupture internal to the subject has priority over the rupture between the subject and others. 'Man' and 'woman' together do not form a Whole, he argues 'since *each of them is already in itself a failed Whole*.'³⁴ Žižek argues that for Lacan, it is the grafting of the subject's inherent incompleteness onto the act of sex, the attempt to find an impossible completeness via sexuality, which results in the necessary failure, the impossibility of the sexual relationship. 'What we experience as sexuality', Žižek says, 'is precisely the effect of the contingent act of "grafting" the fundamental deadlock of symbolization on to the biological opposition of male and female'.³⁵ The biological act of intercourse is treated as a means to resolve a symbolic deadlock, and so, it inevitably fails.

This means that, for Žižek, the difference between men and women is not a difference of essence or even of relation to one another per se, but a difference between ways of relating to the universal structure of human subjectivity. Men and women are related as desire is related to drive and so are separated only by a parallax shift, this shift between two perspectives on the same basic structure. For this reason, Žižek strenuously resists any appeal to a 'feminine essence' or any suggestion that it is possible to understand women outside of the phallic symbolic order.³⁶ For him, the feminine subjective position fully acknowledges the gap which exists at the heart of all subjectivity, whereas the masculine subjective position seeks to deny and externalise this gap. Because, for Žižek, the subject is brought into being by the symbolic order (which cannot be disentangled from the body or materiality more generally), it is not possible to appeal, as Kristeva does, to a pre-linguistic semiotic, or to suggest, as Irigaray does, that it is possible to create a feminine form of subjectivity which escapes the positioning of women by masculine discourse.³⁷ Women belong to the symbolic order; they are, if anything, *more* fully incorporated into it than men. To suggest that there is some element of feminine subjectivity which escapes the symbolic order is, precisely, to

³⁴ *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 159–160.

³⁵ *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 155.

³⁶ Žižek argues that even in their attempts to reject male clichés about the feminine 'in itself', Kristeva and Irigaray account for femininity, nonetheless, in terms of male clichés, precisely because 'the male representation of woman is *the same* as woman in herself; the difference concerns only the place, the purely formal modality of the comprehension of the same content' (*The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 160.

³⁷ For Žižek it is both the case that the body is formed by language, that it is 'enmeshed in the signifier's network' and 'survives as dismembered, mortified' by language (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 136), and also that language is that which 'sticks out from the (human) body, disfiguring its unity' (*Parallax View*, 84).

repeat a masculine fantasy.³⁸ To posit a ‘feminine essence’ is to locate feminine resistance to the symbolic order, to continue to posit women as the inert, resistant material upon which the symbolic order builds; to see femininity as intrinsic to the symbolic order is, for Žižek, to open up the possibility of transforming the symbolic order by exposing its inherent excess, its internal contradictions.³⁹

For Žižek, then, Kristeva and Irigaray are almost right to appeal to the outside of language or the other of subjectivity, except that this otherness, this semiotic, this body, is not really outside of the subject but is internal to the subject. That which transcends the subject is the subject itself; transcendence is not the external intervention of another being but the crack within immanence, which constitutes immanence.⁴⁰ For Žižek, the mystical experience proper is not the confrontation with a transcendent other but the confrontation with the subject's own inherent limitation.

But Žižek's reworking of mysticism and gender does not stop here. Žižek's earlier work brings together this structure of ‘the *one* of the split’ with both Hegelian dialectics and Marxist ideology critique in order to suggest that society too is internally ruptured, generating its own excess. Just as gender is the attempt of individual subjects to externalise their constitutive antagonism, so too with class struggle: the one of society is “‘held together” by the very antagonism, split, that forever prevents its closure in a harmonious, transparent, rational Whole.’⁴¹ After a crucial engagement with both Schelling and quantum physics, Žižek further extends this basic model of identity to material reality itself.⁴² The material world is constituted by ‘a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive’.⁴³ This is, effectively, a repetition of the move which constituted the birth of mystical theology, when thinkers including Dionysius and Augustine drew on Plato and Plotinus to articulate an account of theological speech which was essentially bound up both with the individual's desire and with the structure of the created world as a whole. Neoplatonism positions the goal of human life as the return to the One from which it came, an absorption into an originary state of harmony which cannot, ultimately, be separated from death, the undoing of the process by which individual beings and bodies came into existence. By contrast, Žižek's account of material, individual and social identity as all alike structured as internally inconsistent, ruptured wholes positions this very inconsistency, the impossibility of completion, as *generative*.

³⁸ Again, specifically in contrast to Irigaray and Kristeva's attempts to traverse the ‘frontier’ which separates feminine enjoyment from ‘(the male) discourse’, femininity is not that which lies beyond the limit but ‘this structure of the limit as such’, so that ‘all we perceive in this Beyond (the Eternal Feminine, for example) are our own fantasy projections’ (*Metastases of Enjoyment*, 151).

³⁹ *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 254; see also *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 66 where Žižek compares his account of gendered subjectivity to Christian monotheism in contrast to the dualistic ‘New Age’ notion of the necessity of balancing cosmic masculine and feminine principles.

⁴⁰ Insofar as there is any justification in Žižek's work for this association of masculinity with desire and femininity with drive it functions according to the logic of the preferential option for the poor in liberation theology: that the fact of patriarchy means that women are so often forced to perform a particular function in the narcissistic economy of men that it is harder for them to entertain narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence.

⁴¹ *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 100.

⁴² This shift took place around 1994 and is discussed both by Adam Kotsko in *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 6–7 and by Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher in *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 111.

⁴³ *Less than Nothing*, 6–7.

This broadening of the structure of the Lacanian subject to encompass the whole of material reality allows Žižek to take the basic gesture of transposing the opposition between the subject and the other into a rupture within the subject and to repeat it at a number of different levels: so, for example, the gendered opposition between the body and language becomes a rupture *within* language, as does the opposition between mystical experience or apophasis and language; the opposition between immanence and transcendence becomes a rupture *within* immanence, and the opposition between nature and grace becomes a rupture *within* nature.

What Žižek offers to feminist philosophy of religion is the possibility of thinking Christian mystical discourse according to the logic of drive rather than desire; a model of theological speech which sees mystical language delighting in perpetually circling around the point of its failure, as the attempt to speak of God which succeeds precisely by failing, over and over again. The logic of drive would be one which delights in materiality as one manifestation of creation *ex nihilo*, which sees the act of creation, of division, as a good in itself, not merely something to be undone in order to return to union with God. Materiality is not something to be surpassed, but the very condition of our existence; the imperfection, incompleteness and multiplicity of the material world is not a problem to be solved but the generative possibility of life, difference and newness. Žižek offers to feminist philosophy of religion resources for imagining an alternative to the ‘deathly symbolic’ of Western philosophical thought and a model for what Marcella Althaus Reid calls a ‘materialist theology’⁴⁴ and Grace Jantzen ‘a poetics of natality’.⁴⁵ Just as for Žižek, femininity is the inherent excess which represents the possibility for the transformation of the masculine symbolic order, so too from Žižek’s work can be brought forth new possibilities for feminist philosophy of religion.

⁴⁴ *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

⁴⁵ *Foundations of Violence*, 35.