

Post-secular Thought? God, No! Slavoj Žižek, the Lacanian Real and the Swerve of Symbolic Space¹

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Introduction

‘[A] surprising thing happened on the way to the death of God: Enlightenment secularism **also** got crucified on the same Cross, and that spelled the death of the death of God;’² ‘Today, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are all dead but God is doing just fine, thank you very much.’³ So cheers John D Caputo—along, no doubt, with a heavenly host of ‘postmodern’ theologians and philosophers of religion—in the service of ‘rethinking’ religion in terms of a ‘post-secular’ interpretation of the world, wherein ‘postmodern’ theory is said to open the space for the return of ‘the religious’ and for the repositioning of religion in the third millennium CE.⁴ But before we join the choir, it will be advantageous to critically examine the idea of post-secularity, particularly as such a notion emerges from contemporary religious theory that draws heavily on the later thought of Jacques Derrida. For if, as Caputo lauds, ‘the flower of religion is one of the blossoms in our postmodern anthology,’⁵ then perhaps we ought to discover how ‘postmodernism’—or, more precisely, Derridean deconstruction(ism)—is understood to create a post-

¹This article draws heavily on Master of Arts research undertaken at the Melbourne College of Divinity under the supervision of Dr Robyn Horner who is duly noted and gratefully acknowledged.

² John D Caputo, *On Religion*, London, 2001, 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴ For two robust accounts of how Derrida’s thought might be understood as opening a space for the religious, see Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1985, and John D Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Indiana, 1997.

⁵ Caputo, *On Religion*, op cit, 66.

secular space for religion and whether there is anything problematic about the Derridean deconstructive gesture when it is placed into the service of religious theory and (primarily Christian) theology.

There are at least two lines of argument that might be employed here. On the one hand, it could be argued that theologians and religious theorists have co-opted and 'gentrified' the radicality of *différance* (even if this 'gentrification' can perhaps be traced to Derrida's own later 'turn to the religious') and that post-secularity is not an inevitable product of the original deconstructive impetus but the 'domestication' of *différance* subsisting within a practice of deconstructionism. The 'answer' or 'corrective' to post-secularity would then be a return to the earlier Derrida of *différance* against the contemporary 'Derrida' of post-secularity.⁶ On the other hand, it could be argued that the fundamental idea of *différance* is itself not radical enough, particularly in terms of the 'minimal difference' or parallax gap⁷ that separates the One from itself, which is mishandled in Derrida's work on the Other (*tout autre*) and language (*'il n'y a pas de hors-texte'*).⁸ The

⁶ Several theorists have argued in this vein. See, for example, Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London, 1995; and Christopher Norris' recent interview on music, religion and art in Michael Payne and John Schad, editors, *life.after.theory*, London, 2003, 115-32.

⁷ Space constraints forbid a detailed explication of Žižek's 'parallax gap' here but the basic idea is that of the insurmountable and irreducible gap which posits a limit to the field of reality and which is perceptible in the shift between two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral ground is possible. More accurately, it is not two perspectives as much as a perspective and that which eludes it, with the other perspective 'filling out' the void which the first perspective obscured. In other words, it is the gap, or non-coincidence, between the One and itself. For a comprehensive defence of this idea, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, 2006.

⁸ It could also be added here that part of the Lacanian approach entails moving from the level of meaning to the level of *jouissance*, a move which Derrida does not make due to his inscribing of everything within the level of meaning (as there is nothing *hors-texte*). Žižek argues that a crucial weakness of post-structuralist critiques of ideology is the failure to engage the second level of Lacan's graph of desire (see his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London,

'answer' or 'corrective' to post-secularity would then be to submit it to psychoanalytical 'treatment' and to undercut its basis by demonstrating the way in which Derrida *misreads* Lacan.⁹

This second approach requires a reading of Lacan that is explicitly anti-post-structuralist, demonstrating the distance between Lacan and Derrida and between psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, even if both sets of discourse employ similar motifs. In fact, the utilisation of similar motifs may provide a key to understanding why post-secularity emerges from the marriage of religion and deconstructionism and what the fundamental

1989, 87-129). Both levels work together as complementary procedures whereby (1) the 'meaning' vector entails a deconstructive reading of ideology in terms of identifying the montage of heterogeneous 'floating signifiers' and the hegemonic 'quilting' of the master signifier, and (2) the 'fantasy' vector entails an articulation of the surplus enjoyment (*jouissance*) that is beyond and internal to the field of meaning (a monstrous excess within the system) which is the final support for ideology. If this is extended to the matter under investigation here, it can be said that Derrida collapses everything into one vector (meaning), which opens a space for the post-secular in the play of signifiers rather than understanding that space as itself caught in the 'swerve of the Real' (which would be 'discovered' if he proceeded to the level of desire).

⁹ There are, of course, other 'answers' to post-secular thought, such as the so-called 'radical orthodoxy' of Milbank, where Jesus Christ takes the place of the 'theological sublime' which fills all 'space' and where the theological is absolutely primary, mediating all other forms of knowledge (see John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*, Oxford, 1997) and the 'post-metaphysical'/'post-phenomenological' approach of Jean-Luc Marion, where the name of God is saved by crossing it out (see his *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte*, 2ème edition, Paris, 2002) and where (at least in his earlier work) revelation 'overcomes' metaphysics. Both approaches draw on Derrida and explore the question of the destitution of metaphysics. However, both begin from the standpoint of a *theo*-logic, where God 'grounds' the system, even if this grounding is explicitly not metaphysical. In the final analysis, God functions as a centre of gravity for both approaches. And it is exactly this centre of gravity that will be displaced by means of a psychoanalytical critique of post-secularity, particularly in terms of the Lacanian 'swerve of the Real'. There is a sense then, that the psychoanalytical 'answer' to post-secularity is also an answer to 'radical orthodoxy' and 'post-metaphysical theory of religion.' In other words, they are not really 'answers' to post-secularity as much as fundamentally caught within the same gravitational pull.

problematic is, namely, a stopping-short of the full significance of Lacan's thought in its difference (no pun intended) from Derrida's (of which several motifs share the same 'name') and, more pointedly, a misconstrual of the Other and the void around which symbolic space revolves (a misconstrual which permits the emergence of the 'post-secular').

This paper is offered as an explication of this second approach, not in terms of a comprehensive examination of post-secularity or Derrida's 'turn to the religious' but in terms of the post-secular problematic identified above and the psychoanalytical 'overcoming' of it. In order to provide a succinct explication of (and potential 'corrective' for) this problematic, I will utilise the Lacanian notion of the 'swerve of the Real' as it has been articulated by Slavoj Žižek throughout his recent work. For, as I hope to show, the swerve of symbolic space in reference to the Real provides a perfect counterpoint to the opening of post-secular space in reference to the Derridean *tout autre*, thus problematising the very notion of the 'post-secular.'

The Post-secular Problematic and its Psychoanalytical Treatment

'Religion' and 'deconstruction' have been paired over the past twenty-five years as a strategy for 'saving' the name (*sauf le nom*) of God and providing a 'space' for religious believers to inhabit. Caputo's 'post-secular' theory, as a premier example, draws from Blanchot's *sans* and Derrida's *différance* to offer a 'religion *sans* religion' that explicitly 'put[s] deconstruction to work in the service of religious faith' and provides the logic for a 'post-secular' analysis of contemporary life.¹⁰ The idea of 'post-

¹⁰ B Keith Putt, 'What do I love when I love my God? An Interview with John D Caputo' in James H Olthuis, editor, *Religion With/without Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D Caputo*, London, 2002, 157. For a presentation of how Caputo explicitly connects deconstruction and religion or, more properly, conceives of deconstruction as religion, that is, the 'repetition' of the religious edge to experience without institutional or onto-theological accretions, see my 'The

secularity' rests on the judgement that Derridean deconstruction clears the way for the 'return of the religious' by means of critiquing onto-theology and critiquing the judgements of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, whose respective critiques of religion have become 'unstuck' in the postmodern age. But does deconstruction open a space for this return or rather signal a malady in terms of the Real?¹¹

The matter under investigation here is more than that of differing interpretations of the return of the religious. The point of this critique is that deconstruction when applied to religion is itself caught in the 'swerve of the Real,' a point that will be explicated fully below. So while there is no debate here over the dissolution of onto-theology (and the rise of the secular), there is debate over whether deconstruction has opened a space for 'God' and the return of the religious (so-called post-secularisation). The first step is not contentious, namely, that the critique of metaphysics entails the 'dissolution' of onto-theology, mind-body dualism, detached universal ahistorical rationality, and so on. But what follows from this critique is contentious, namely, that, by means of postmodern critique, the secular age is over and the repressed voice of the religious gains a space and achieves new legitimacy. Put in blunt terms, the postmodern critique of modernity is said to 'produce' post-secularity (in the sense of its inescapable outcome). What then is the inherent problematic? It is three-fold: first, the 'post-secular' position is wedded to a particular interpretation of the return of the religious (in fact it **is** this interpretation) that celebrates a certain deconstructive process whereby the religious (and the name of God) is saved by

Religious 'a-Dieu': John Caputo's Post-structuralist Religious Theory and the Repositioning of Religion in the Third Millennium' in the forthcoming issue of *Australian Religious Studies Review*, Vol 19, No 2, 2006.

¹¹ I will be utilising several Lacanian terms (such as the 'Real') throughout this paper without explicitly unpacking the particular nuances that Žižek places upon them. However, I will briefly explicate the basic tenor of such terms as necessary during the final sections, which carry the most analytical weight.

opening it to the 'Other';¹² second, the deconstructive gesture (read in a Lacanian manner) removes the materiality of particular religions in order to retain the matrix in which religion subsists but deprived of its vital content;¹³ and third, there is a reliance on

¹² This relies upon the validity of a particular reading of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, whereby each thinker is portrayed as *mis*interpreting religion due to a lack of appreciation for the choreography of the pre-modern religious scene (particularly in the sense of pre-moderns **responding** to an excess in their experience of God) rather than attempting to provide a then-contemporary choreography of the then-contemporary world (that is, attending to the 'cultural politics' of their own time).

¹³ Although I will not pursue this point in the body of this paper, it is fecund to ask whether the creation of a post-secular space contributes to the destitution of that which it sought to save (namely 'God' and religion) by making a 'false move' that psychoanalytical thought might correct. By submitting religion to the double logic of the *sans* and locating the 'religious' that gives rise to particular religions, has not deconstruction inadvertently signalled the final theoretical 'gasp' of religion prior to its inevitable demise? This is one of Žižek's major lines of argument in reference to the religious sensitivity in deconstructionism. For according to a Lacanian reading of contemporary culture (as expounded by Žižek) deconstructionism, rather than 'clearing' the way for 'God,' actually sets up the final dissolution of religion by removing that which really matters. By applying the *sans* to religion (in an attempt to open it to the *tout autre*) the materiality of particular religions are removed in order to retain the matrix in which religion subsists but deprived of its vital content: 'What if the fundamental experience of human subjects is not that of self-presence, or the force of dialectical mediation-appropriation of all Otherness, but of a primordial passivity, sentiency, or responding, of being infinitely indebted to and responsible for the call of an Otherness that never acquires positive features but always remains withdrawn, the trace of its own absence? One is tempted to evoke here Marx's famous quip about Proudhon's *Poverty of Philosophy* (instead of actual people in their actual circumstances, Proudhon's pseudo-Hegelian social theory gives these circumstances themselves, deprived of the people who bring them to life): instead of the religious matrix with God at its heart, post-secular deconstruction gives us the matrix itself, deprived of the positive figure of God that sustains it (Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, op cit, 340-1).' So, whereas a post-secular interpretation sees the result of deconstruction in reference to religion as a 'clearing' of the way for 'God,' it actually sets up its final dissolution by removing that which really matters. Appropriating Hegel, Žižek notes that 'Whenever I resort to the strategy of renouncing the Inessential in order to save the Essential, sooner or later (but always when it is already too late) I'm bound to discover that I made a fatal mistake as to what is essential, and that the essential dimension has already slipped through my fingers' (Ibid,

the validity of the deconstructive understanding of the Other (*tout autre*) and a particular view of language wherein there is nothing apart from signifiers (there is no 'metalanguage' in the Derridean rather than Lacanian sense).¹⁴

Thus, post-secularity's reliance on the deconstructive gesture (in a sense it **is** this gesture) to open a space for the return of the religious falters if the validity of that gesture is shown to be untenable. While each aspect of the abovementioned problematic could be explicated here, I will restrict my analysis to the third, focusing on the way that a Lacanian understanding of the Real and language recasts the post-secular space. This will allow an exploration of how the pairing of religion and deconstruction might be understood to betray a malady in reference to the Lacanian Real, revealing a 'bone in the throat' of religion that is 'gentrified' in terms of the *tout autre* by the deconstructive gesture.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, at least as read by Žižek, the treatment is said to be over when the patient is able to accept the non-existence of the big 'Other.'¹⁵ The patient, finally dropping the 'name' of that which bound her, is delivered from her malady in order to live in a space that is no longer drawn into the event horizon of that 'name.' Put in slightly different language, the force of that name, now that the name is shown to be illusory, no longer provokes a certain mental 'swerve of the Real' but is shown to be the product rather than the cause of the process whereby the symbolic order arose.¹⁶ In other words, the patient

216). The essential dimension that has slipped through the fingers of post-secular interpretation is the very materiality and particularity of religion, not its 'religious' core. For the 'religious,' rather than being the core of the religions, turns out to be the surplus Thing, the religious Real of the symbolic order.

¹⁴ For an explication of this difference, including an explanation of how Derrida misreads Lacan (in reference to *le titre de la lettre*), see Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, op cit, 153-99.

¹⁵ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge, 2003, 169-70.

¹⁶ Žižek utilises these notions in connection with Einstein's theories of relativity

(through her relationship with the analyst) locates the Real 'Thing' to which she was responding and which had been producing her illness. Once this 'Real' ceases to function as an essentialised part of the patient's interpretive framework (it is seen to be the 'nonexistent' void which curves symbolic space) the patient is 'healed' and the particular 'Thing' that had functioned as the Real no longer binds the patient and is cursorily discarded. When this 'treatment' is applied to the question of post-secularity, the following can be asked: what if the patient in question is 'religion,' or more properly, human beings inhabiting a post-secular 'space' and adhering to a post-secular religious centre of gravity? Can the Lacanian 'treatment' be utilised here as a heuristic device in order to reveal the 'truth' that post-secularity represses and to 'save' human beings from the swerve of this Real? It is the wager of this paper that it can. But in order to make my case, I will need to briefly explicate the Lacanian psychoanalytical framework that provides a basis for understanding how the 'post-secular' space is caught in the 'swerve of the Real.'

The Lacanian Real and the Derridean *tout autre*

There is a world of difference between Lacan's understanding of the Real (and the 'Thing' and the big 'Other') and Derrida's understanding of the *tout autre*. This difference provides the basis for understanding how the post-secular space can be understood as caught in the swerve of the Real. In what follows, I will briefly explicate Lacan's understanding of the Real (as read by Žižek), including its place in his overall framework, and indicate how his understanding undermines the Derridean 'take' on the *tout autre* and language.

(both general and special) in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, *ibid*, 59-91, hence the above allusion to spatio-temporal laws. Note here that while the force of the name is the product of the symbolic order, the Real is both that which forbids access to this order and the forbidding of access itself. It is that which resists symbolisation and that which is left over in the process by which the symbolic order is established. More will be made of this point below.

In Lacanian terms, the Real is the parallax gap that separates the One from itself, the shifting perspective that distorts reality and rises from the symbolic order that human beings inhabit. But this statement requires further explication, especially the term 'Real' which operates in Lacan according to three modalities, sometimes expressed as Lacan's ISR triad of the Real: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. In simple terms, the Imaginary is the Order of the ego, particularly the way in which the ego is formed in early childhood (the 'mirror' stage), which continues to influence adults in their struggle for wholeness and unity; the Symbolic is the Order of society, the framework in which human beings construct their world (reality as always already symbolised), a framework which is bound together by the signifying chain wherein language is said to 'carve up the world;' and the Real is the Order that cannot be directly known, the world before it is 'carved up by language.'

However, to complicate matters, the Real functions in two ways, as that which precedes the Symbolic and as that which remains after the Symbolic framework is established. It is this second sense of the Real that is primarily being utilised by Žižek to critique Derrida's *tout autre* because the Real (in this sense) is the excess that resists symbolisation and appears as a void in the Symbolic Order. But even in this usage, the other sense and modalities of the Real remain present because of the parallax status of the Real. So the Real must be understood as both the 'impossible' hard core that cannot be confronted directly and the 'nonexistent' void reconstructed retroactively in terms of the symbolic formations that point to it. It is purely non-substantial and is best described as the gap between two perspectives (the One and itself). The deconstructive gesture when applied to religion, then, on this reading, does not open religion to the *tout autre* (and provide a 'post-secular' space) but to the gaps in the symbolic order that relate to an excess that resisted symbolisation when the symbolic framework was being constructed.

This 'reading' can be heightened by recourse to the Freudian / Lacanian 'Thing' (*das Ding*), which sounds like a synonym for Derrida's *tout autre* but is not equivalent to the Derridean 'Other' because rather than being seen as that which functions as an unattainable 'impossibility,' the Thing is that which gives rise to the symbolic order itself, that which **drives** the symbolic order. This raises what Žižek refers to as the 'paradoxical' status of the Real in relation to the impossible. For rather than the impossible functioning as a horizon that structurally never arrives (which would require an ethics in terms of the Lévinasian call of the Other), the impossible actually happens, intruding into the Real:

The deconstructionist ethical edifice is based on the IMPOSSIBILITY of the act: the act never happens, it is impossible for it to occur, it is always deferred, about to come ... The task of the deconstructionist analysis is then to demonstrate how what appears (and is misrepresented) as a contingent empirical obstacle actually gives body to a proto-transcendental a priori ... the impossibility is structural, not empirical-contingent. ... The Lacanian lesson here [is] not that one should accept this obstacle as structurally necessary ... [but that] the 'Real as impossible' means here that THE IMPOSSIBLE DOES HAPPEN ... – this, and not the structural obstacle forever deferring the final resolution, is the most difficult thing to accept.¹⁷

And yet, when this is accepted, particularly when the big 'Other' is suspended (that is, acknowledged as non-existent, as the surplus left behind during the symbolisation process) the truly ethical act can transpire not by recourse to respect for the Other but by recourse to the truly free choice of refusing a pre-given set of co-ordinates in order to change the co-ordinates themselves.¹⁸ The post-secular gesture of opening religion to its other through

¹⁷ Žižek, *On Belief*, op cit, 83-4.

¹⁸ For a brief discussion of the Lacanian 'truly free choice,' see *ibid*, 112-27. In terms of the Lacanian 'ethics of the Real' see Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, op cit, 152-60; 345-48.

a 'religion without religion' actually opens it to the surplus/remainder (excess) which resisted symbolisation so that the gesture does not open the way for a return of the religious or a saving of the name of God but for an acknowledgment of the illusory nature of the big 'Other' itself.

The problematic of the deconstructive gesture can be further borne out (and clarified) by considering the place of language and by contrasting two of Derrida's couplets ('supplement/centre' and 'voice/writing') with Lacan's psychoanalytical perspective. Taking the couplets first, in the 'supplement/centre' couplet, Derrida, as read by Žižek, desires to deconstruct the centre by an analysis of the supplement (or, in literary terms, the 'margin'). But while Derrida focuses on the way that the supplement constitutes the Centre so that there is no Centre without the supplement (which must remain supplement, or, in other terms, remain at the margin) Lacan argues that the centre itself is nothing but the supplement perceived from a certain perspective, so that a shift from the centre to the supplement is not about the 'thing' itself but a particular point of view:

the Centre which Derrida endeavours to 'deconstruct' is ultimately the very supplement which threatens to disrupt its totalizing power, or, to put it in Kierkegaardese, the supplement is the Centre itself 'in its becoming'. In this precise sense, supplement is the condition of the possibility **and** the condition of the impossibility of the Centre.¹⁹

In other words, the supplement is not identified by deconstructing the Centre because the entire symbolic network that gives rise to the Centre produces an excess which the supplement 'stands in for.' This point can be strengthened by considering the 'voice/writing' couplet. Derrida (again, as read by Žižek) argues that the 'metaphysics of presence' arises from an illusion, namely the illusion of 'hearing-oneself-speaking [*s'entendre-parler*].'²⁰

¹⁹ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, op cit, 210.

²⁰ Ibid.

Deconstruction, through the employment of *différance*, operates by pointing to a 'constant and constitutive deferral of impossible self-identity' with the voice functioning as the 'medium of illusory self-transparency.'²¹ But for Lacan, the voice is not the medium of transparent self-presence but the 'dark spot of non-subjectivisable remainder, the point of the eclipse of meaning, the point at which meaning slides into *jouis-sense* [enjoyment in meaning].'²² In other words, for Derrida, the voice is 'always-already tainted with writing, that [is] it always-already contains the minimum of the materiality of a trace which introduces an interspace, a gap, into the voice's pure self-presence,'²³ whereas for Lacan, voice is the

remainder of the signifying operation, *ie* the meaningless piece of the real which stays behind once the operation of 'quilting' [*capitonnage*] responsible for the stabilization of meaning is performed – in short, **voice is that which, in the signifier, resists meaning**: it stands for the opaque inertia which cannot be recuperated by meaning.²⁴

This also applies to language itself, which is a central subject for both Derrida and Lacan, particularly the status of the 'unnameable,' a point that concerns the matter under investigation in this paper because motifs such as 'excess' and the '*tout autre*' are linked to the saving of the name of God in post-secular thought. But rather than conceiving of this excess or Other as that which lies *hors-texte* (outside the text), or outside the chain of signifiers, in Lacan, this excess or Other is a product of symbolisation itself. Language, in this reading, 'digs a hole' in reality so that the unnameable is understood as an effect of language and not an 'other' to it. The modality of the Symbolic

²¹ *Ibid*, 211.

²² *Ibid*, 213. Note that Derrida's failure to make this move is understood as one of the major problems with Derrida's approach from the Lacanian perspective. See footnote 7.

²³ *Ibid*, 211.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 211-12.

indicates an Order that consists of a chain of signifiers but this does not mean that the modality of the Real is engaged by dropping language. On the contrary, it is in the very act of dropping the allusion to an external referent that the Real is understood:

. . . the Real is not external to the Symbolic: the Real is the Symbolic itself in the modality of the non-All, lacking an external Limit/Exception. In this precise sense, the line of separation between the Symbolic and the Real is not only a symbolic gesture *par excellence*, but the very founding gesture of the Symbolic and to step into the Real does not entail abandoning language . . . but, on the contrary, dropping the very allusion to some external point of reference which eludes the Symbolic. . . In short, the unnameable is strictly inherent to language. . . It is not that we need words to designate objects, to symbolise reality, and that then, in surplus, there is some excess of reality, a traumatic core that resists symbolization—this obscurantist theme of the unnameable Core of Higher Reality that eludes the grasp of language is to be thoroughly rejected; not because of a naïve belief that everything can be nominated, grasped by our reason, but because of the fact that the Unnameable is an effect of language. We have reality before our eyes well before language, and what language does, in its most fundamental gesture, is—as Lacan put it—the very opposite of designating reality: it **digs a hole in it**, it opens up visible/present reality toward the dimension of the immaterial/unseen.²⁵

The Swerve of the Real

Now that the post-secular problematic has been explicated, the Lacanian/Derridean difference has been noted, and the primary

²⁵ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, op cit, 69-70. This is Žižek's answer to critics who would claim that there is really little difference between the Real and the Symbolic, particularly in terms of the distinction being itself inscribed within the Symbolic (this could, perhaps, also be applied to a critique on the Lacanian Real based on Derrida's notion of the effect of the 'trace'). See the full discussion in *ibid*, 67-73.

Lacanian motifs have been introduced, it is possible to bring the notion of post-secularity into contact with the primary motif suggested in the introduction to this paper, namely the **swerve** of the Real, a motif that builds upon the Lacanian material that has just been presented. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek devotes a chapter to the way that religion operates according to the Real, which he entitles 'The Swerve of the Real.'²⁶ Beginning with 'subtraction' (establishing the minimal difference between the Void and that which stands in for it in the symbolic order) rather than 'purification' (the attempt to isolate the kernel of the Real through 'peeling off' – that is via a deconstructive X *sans* X gesture) Žižek suggests a reversal in the way that the Real is usually approached, a reversal that echoes Hegel's reversal of Kant over the 'Thing' (*das Ding*). For whereas Kant posits the realm of Things-in-Themselves because of the tension between the phenomena and the Thing, Hegel points to this tension as evidence of an inconsistency between phenomena themselves:

And is not this shift from purification to subtraction also the shift from Kant to Hegel? From tension between phenomena and Thing to an inconsistency/gap between phenomena themselves? The standard notion of reality is that of a hard kernel that resists the conceptual grasp—what Hegel does is simply to take this notion of reality more literally: nonconceptual reality is something that emerges when notional self-development gets caught in an inconsistency, and becomes nontransparent to itself. In short, the limit is transposed from exterior to interior: there is Reality because and insofar as the notion is inconsistent, doesn't coincide with itself. The multiple perspectival inconsistencies between phenomena are not an effect of the impact of the transcendent Thing—on the contrary, this Thing is nothing but the ontologization of the inconsistency between phenomena.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid, 58-91.

²⁷ Ibid, 66.

This reversal indicates the way in which Žižek ‘reads’ reality and sets up the **shift** in perspective which is analogous to the shift from Einstein’s special to general theory of relativity, a shift that indicates how the Real effects the mind, an effect that Žižek labels as a ‘swerve of the Real’ and which indicates why human beings defer to an Other. As Einstein’s passage from special to general relativity is central to this shift, it is important to specify exactly how this passage transforms the way reality is understood and how this connects with the Lacanian Real. The following passage follows from the one quoted above and indicates the way that the Hegelian reversal is homologous to Einstein’s passage from special to general relativity and the way that both illustrate Lacan’s Real:

The logic of this [Hegelian] reversal is ultimately the same as the passage from the special to the general theory of relativity in Einstein. While the special theory already introduces the notion of curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter . . . With the passage to the general theory, the causality is reversed: far from **causing** the curvature of space, matter is the **effect**. In the same way the Lacanian Real—the Thing—is not so much the inert presence that “curves” the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, the effect of these gaps and inconsistencies.²⁸

The Real, then, is not ‘another Centre, a “deeper,” “truer” focal point or “black hole” around which symbolic formations fluctuate; rather, it is the obstacle on account of which every Centre is always displaced.’²⁹ So just as the curvature of space-time is not caused by matter, matter being the effect of the curvature itself, the ‘Other’ does not lie outside of our symbolic network but is an effect of the very process by which symbolisation transpires. It is here, at this very point, that the notion of a ‘swerve’ operates. Because just as the existence of black holes are detected by the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 67.

way in which light swerves around them, the existence of the big 'Other' is detected by the way that the mind is caught in the swerve of the Real. Once the Real is acknowledged as that which distorts reality, it can be seen not as that which causes the curve of mental space but as the effect of the breaks in symbolic space itself.

Once we shift our perspective in an analogous move to Einstein, the Other can be seen for what it is, the effect of symbolisation. Once this is accepted, the big 'Other' can be acknowledged as such (as an effect, that is as ontologically 'non-existent') and human beings are released from the swerve of the Real that binds them. This shift of perspective indicates the importance of parallax and helps to explain the Derridean 'Other' in terms of failing to proceed to the noncoincidence of the One with itself (a step which indicates how Lacan avoids dualism and any sense of binary logic by noting that the original gap is inherent to the One). From a Derridean perspective (a post-structuralist reading of Lacan) the Real is understood in an analogous manner to special relativity (as somewhat equivalent to the *tout autre*). But what we need is a parallax view in which the Real is understood in an analogous manner to general relativity (or more precisely the move from special to general relativity) which allows for a move beyond 'meaning' to '*jouissance*' (surplus enjoyment/fantasy) and to a focus on the 'void' around which symbolic space swerves.

Conclusion

On this Žižekian reading of reality, post-secular thought, bound as it is to the Derridean deconstructive gesture, fails to deliver the 'religious' because the 'religious' is itself an effect of the swerve of the Real. The 'religious,' then, does not 'tap into' the realm of the 'impossible' or evince human *response* to the *tout autre* and to a justice which is structurally always to come but indicates one of many ways in which human beings become caught in an illusory Real, reifying an excess in the symbolic

order. Post-secularity (including the framework in which it is set and the motifs that rise from it) can be understood according to an alternative reading of the 'return of the religious,' a reading that does not attempt to save the name of God (and reposition religion in the process) but to continue the process of secularisation as that process is reframed (in terms of overcoming any binary opposition between secular and sacred) and enriched through a Hegelian-Marxist-Lacanian critique of contemporary culture.

Rather than imagining a post-secular space that opens religion to the *tout autre*, that space can be better understood as evidence of a swerve in symbolic space (in this case in reference to a religious Real: for 'God' belongs to the Lacanian Real), which in turn identifies a big 'Other' that must be understood as non-existent if the patient is to be healed. So rather than joining the post-secular choir, we might ask instead whether there really is any Thing (*das Ding*) there to receive our praise, whether, after the collapse of metaphysics, the impossible Thing must be thought as preceding ontology and coming 'after' metaphysics (rather than functioning as a void and phantasmatic spectral kernel in the symbolic order), whether the Other (*tout autre*) that opens the space for the post-secular and becomes a centre around which the religious might be said to orbit (and to grant access) might be better understood according to the logic of *jouissance*, and whether an undeconstructable form of spirituality which rejoices in the play of *différance* would not be better understood in terms of a malady of the Real in response to a swerve in symbolic space requiring the acknowledgement of the nonexistence of the big 'Other.'