

# Sweet Taste of (Western) Religion: Confectionery Metaphors, Buddhism and Christianity in Slavoj Žižek and Steve Bruce

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## ABSTRACT

In his reflection on the declining importance of religion in the modern world, Max Weber - a late nineteenth century German political economist and sociologist - observed that people in the West are growing religiously "unmusical." A twentieth century inheritor of Weber's ideas, Steve Bruce, expands on Weber's metaphorical observations in two ways. On the one hand, he develops Weber's music metaphor, and compares the contemporary character of religiosity in the West to the aborted attempts of tonedeaf and atomised players to produced melodies:

Like the truly tonedeaf, we know about music, we know that many people feel strongly about it, we might even be persuaded that, in some social sense, it is a good thing, but still it means nothing to us. [...] The orchestras and mass bands with their thunderous symphonies have gone. Handfuls of us will be enthusiastic music-makers but, because we no longer follow one score, we cannot produce the melodies to rouse the masses. (Bruce 234)

On the other hand, Bruce offers a different image of contemporary religiosity - a confectionery metaphor in the context of which religion in the West loses its acoustic quality and acquires sweet taste. In the present article, I read Bruce's sweet metaphor together with another confectionery image related to Western spirituality - Slavoj Žižek's the Kinder Surprise egg - and focus on the status and implications of Asian religions and their relationship with Christianity in the two thinkers' chocolate metaphors. The section titles in my article allude to Bruce's and Žižek's sweet metaphors.

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## 1. The chocolate shell

Towards the end of his book *Religion in The Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*, Steve Bruce offers an image of the pick-and-mix sweet counter as a metaphor of the form of religion characteristic for the late modern period. Customers at the pick-and-mix sweet counter are not choosing from the array of the variously priced, already packed and earlier weighed products; rather, they are picking and putting into their small, plastic bags random quantities of sweets that vary in kind but not in price. Customers, in other words, are expected to create their own assortment of chocolates, the one that best suits their individual preferences.

For Bruce, such customers have a lot in common with a large group of contemporary followers of religion. Today, believers are no longer confronted with distinctly separated religions that can be either accepted or rejected wholesale. Rather, people pursue religion understood as an eclectic mixture of beliefs adopted from a variety of sources and thrown into a bag of idiosyncratic religiosity. As Bruce maintains, customers at the pick-and-mix counter, constructing "precisely their own desired mix of sweets," (233) resemble late capitalist believers who assort elements of divergent religions into "their own pockets of culture," (200) and align religiosity with their world-affirming profile. Thus, in the late capitalist society, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity can be brought together in a New Age melange, and "an industrialized version of Eastern mysticism" can coexist with "a mysticized version of industrial therapy" (Bruce 180). Religion - very often a cocktail of various religious traditions - is believed to not only restore the flavour to the over-rationalised West but also to "provide the recipe" (Bruce 183) for the celebration of one's unique capacities.

Interestingly, the sweet counter image reinforces the secularisation thesis strongly advocated by Bruce. The thesis holds that even though highly consumerist and diffuse forms of religion are still available nowadays, even though "social circumstances can provide religion with roles other than bridging the natural and supernatural worlds," (Bruce 233) religion's popularity and significance are declining. Thus, the sweet counter metaphor illustrates both the transience and negligibility of contemporary religious appetite, and the fringe, insubstantial status of religion in the Western world. Religion is no longer the bread and butter of the Western culture; it is, instead, the inessential (albeit still desirable) item in the late capitalist diet.

Bruce's choice of the metaphor describing religion is telling in at least two respects: first, it emphasises the "picky" attitude to religion. As Bruce puts it,



The small numbers of people who get involved do so in a highly selective and picky way. Like the sovereign consumers they believe themselves to be in other spheres of their lives, they feel able to decide what works for them and how involved they will become. This is not the religion of necessity [...]. This is [...] "the religion of your preference," and it is relativistic. (5)

Second, the pick-and-mix *sweet* counter draws attention to the non-nutritional, pleasure-oriented character of belief. As "there is a certain perversity that means that improvement in our standards of living and an increase in consumption seem to fuel rather than satisfy desires" (Bruce 187), contemporary religious forms (not unlike new brands of chocolate) offer new and enticing tastes of the supernatural. Finally, Bruce's metaphor pictures Western religiosity as space for the coexistence of the disparate and for the undoing of rigid differences, i.e., as a space enveloping the so-far impossible mixtures like the coupling of the re-creations of pre-Christian religion with imports from the East and with quasi-scientific psychotherapies.

Steve Bruce's diagnosis of the Western religious condition as representing "the dominant ethos of late capitalism: the world of options, lifestyles, and preferences" (Bruce 233) has something in common with what Slavoj Žižek - a Lacanian psychoanalyst and a philosopher - writes *a propos* spirituality in the West. For Žižek, the Western capitalist dynamic remains tightly related to the type of spirituality that is triumphing nowadays in Europe. Not unlike Bruce and Bruce's intellectual parent, Max Weber, Žižek affirms a fundamental interdependence between the spirit of capitalism and the currently dominant spirituality. While for Bruce "the emblem of religion for the twenty-first century is the cult," (Bruce 4) which he associates with the New Age pick-and-mix counter eclecticism, for Žižek, the dominant spirituality in the "post-Christian" (*On Belief* 64) West is the imported and appropriated form of Buddhism and Taoism. Reflecting on the "onslaught of the New Age 'Asiatic' thought," (*On Belief* 12) discernible in the contemporary Europe, Žižek claims that Buddhist spirituality has become "the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity." (13)

No longer psychologically able to cope with the demands of global capitalism, people of the West appropriate Buddhism and Taoism to their own needs, creating something Žižek labels "Western Buddhism" (*On Belief* 12). In Žižek's account, Western Buddhism is a lie in that it embodies the belief which we officially renounce: the idea of the need to renounce the control



over events and to maintain an inner distance towards the ever accelerating pace of technological progress is actually a way to exercise control over what happens with the self. The inability to control the capitalist game is here replaced with the thoroughly controlled gesture of the self-induced rejection of domination. Thus, Western Buddhism comes to function in Žižek as the necessary supplement and propeller of late modern capitalism; it is the post-Christian replacement for what Weber identified as the capitalism growth-inducer - Protestant ethics. Actually, "If Max Weber were alive today," Žižek speculates, "he would definitely write a second, supplementary volume to his *Protestant Ethics*, entitled *The Taoist Ethics and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*" (*On Belief* 13).

It is striking that though both Bruce and Žižek emphasise the conjunction between capitalism and the Western spiritual disposition, they assess that conjunction in quite different ways. Bruce openly renounces judging whether or not late modern spirituality and its Asian bent are false, superstition-free and deception-proof. (Bruce 234) Žižek does not hesitate to describe the status of Western Buddhism in terms of cunning and cynical falsehood. Differences in metaphors Bruce and Žižek choose to illustrate their opinions are also noteworthy. Bruce returns to Max Weber's metaphor of people being religiously "unmusical" (234); Žižek "is almost tempted to resuscitate [...] the old infamous Marxist cliché of religion as the 'opium of the people,' as the imaginary supplement of the terrestrial misery" (*On Belief* 13). While being tonedeaf connotes the condition of being irreparably shut from certain reality, being drugged inevitably evokes the less benign meanings of lie and deception.

Admittedly, as Žižek is only "almost" tempted to reinvest the Marxist cliché, the opium metaphor figures as a playful provocation of a philosopher dedicated to the rethinking of the affinity between Marxism and religion. The religion-as-opium image is not developed into a fully-fledged philosophical analysis since not every provocation, Žižek contends, must be followed by a response. We should not overlook, however, that what seems to be most provocative about the resurrected metaphor is the possibility of reading it as indicating not so much an unquestionable falsehood residing in Western Buddhism, but its ambiguous tension between semblance and reality, surface and depth. In other words, the provocation of Western Buddhism as opium would consist in its ability to undo distinctions and to trouble neat differentiations.

Though Žižek quickly abandons the opium metaphor, its provocation is never lost and becomes transferred into another metaphorical image, one of

an interestingly confectionery character. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Žižek observes,

Repulsive anti-intellectual relatives, whom one cannot always avoid during holidays, often attack me with common provocations like "What can you, as a philosopher, tell me about the cup of coffee I'm drinking?" Once, however, when a thrifty relative of mine gave my son a Kinder Surprise egg and then asked me, with an ironic, patronising smile: "So what would be your philosophical comment on this egg?" he got the surprise of his life - a long, detailed answer. (145)

The last chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* is devoted to the exhaustive interpretation of symbolic aspects of the provocative Kinder Surprise egg. Kinder Surprise - one of the most recognisable European confectionery products - are empty chocolate eggshells containing a small plastic toy or parts from which a toy can be built. When a child receives Kinder Surprise, he/she immediately removes its shiny wrapping, cracks the chocolate and focuses on the toy, usually completely forgetting about the edible part of the Surprise. In Žižek's analysis, this consumerist detail and the chocolate-cum-toy structure of the Kinder Surprise are revealed to hold a complex network of meanings - the excessive character of which seems to overflow the edges of the chocolate metaphor and the provocation of which hovers over the problem of Western spirituality, be it Western Buddhism or Christianity.

According to Žižek, Kinder Surprise illustrates the fact that products we are offered cannot meet our expectations, that no matter what we purchase, it is never the thing we are really after. Seen from that perspective, the plastic toy and the chocolate make a continuum in which the toy materialises the lack in chocolate and makes *empty* promises to compensate for the unsatisfactory character of the sweet shell. Structured around its central emptiness, a Kinder egg is one of many commodities that offer us the surface deprived of the core. Like decaffeinated coffee or sugar-free sweetener, or even like marijuana as a kind of "opium without opium" (*Puppet* 97), Kinder Surprise is food deprived of substance, a "pure appearance" (146), a void consumed by Elizabethans in the form of empty, sugar cakes, and by the French in the form of "*la tête du nègre*" dessert. The void at the centre of the Kinder egg is seen by Žižek as the undoing of the humanist belief in the mysterious core of human identity, the hidden treasure of individuality. As an image of subjectivity, Kinder Surprise shows that there is no kernel of identity,



that "the core of our subjectivity is a void filled with appearances" (154). On the more general level, Kinder Surprise figures as the abolition of the rigid separation between the inside and the outside, the surface and the kernel.

Kinder Surprise triggers off yet another reflection concerning the subject, one which will provoke this excess of confectionery-dependent meanings to translate into the issue of (Western) spirituality. In the course of his analysis, Žižek suggests that the toy hidden inside the Kinder egg has anal associations. Revamping the Freudian idea about excrement as "the primordial form of gift of an innermost object" offered by the self, (150) Žižek argues that the toy of the Kinder Surprise corresponds with the innermost intimacy of the subject, i.e., with the "externalised shit" (150) understood as the piece of the self revealed in defecation. The anal association of the Kinder egg makes Žižek observe that the treasure of the self "oscillates radically between the sublime and (not the ridiculous, but, precisely) excremental" (*Puppet* 150; *On Belief* 59). This observation offered in the context of the Egg seems to feed on (and to confirm) the ambiguating power of the Kinder Surprise image.

Žižek adds another turn to the numerous changes of the Kinder metaphorical image when he evokes the ideological presentation of the Israeli weeping soldier: "a soldier who is ruthlessly efficient, but nonetheless occasionally breaks down in tears at the acts he is compelled to perform" (*On Belief* 151). The ideological character of that image lies in its attempt to render invisible the ambiguity emerging from the anal association discussed above. The Israeli weeping soldier is supposed to undo the inherent complication of the excremental/sublime character of the subject. Significantly, Žižek does not merely neutralise the ideological edge of the image but weaves its supposed undoing into his own reading. He repeats here the earlier anal association with a "twist" (*Puppet* 149) relocating the excremental from the externalised inside to the misleading outside.

The soldier and Kinder egg share the same structure in that both have the precious treasure (a toy, a sensitive heart) enveloped by the vulgar shell (brownish, excremental chocolate or insensitive behaviour). It is worth mentioning that when both lines of anal association are seen in conjunction, i.e., when we juxtapose toy-as-excrement with chocolate-as-excrement, we encounter another form of the chocolate-and-toy-as-a-continuum which informed Žižek's readings of the Egg as a substance-less commodity. As we follow the ins and outs of the precious kernel (the toy) and of the misleadingly unattractive appearance (the brown chocolate), we are faced with the incessant oscillation at the heart (and at the borders) of the Kinder image. If his detailed analysis of Kinder Surprise was meant to give Žižek's repulsive



relative a "surprise of his life," a big part of the surprise consists in making the Surprise simultaneously repulsive and attractive, thoroughly dissected and still provocatively opaque, i.e., exploring the ambivalence sprawled over the confectionery-consumerist image.

The ambivalent "overlapping" (*On Belief* 64) of the excremental and the sublime in Kinder Surprise runs parallel to similar overlappings Žižek identifies in other areas of late modern Western culture. One of those areas is art. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek argues that both Kinder Surprise and the Greek vase may be perceived as related moments in the history of the West. The Greek vase - read by Lacan and Heidegger as designating the Sacred Thing formed around a central void - resembles the Kinder egg described by Žižek as the "ridiculous merchandise" (*Puppet* 147) oscillating between the sublime (the secret or treasure as the actual object of desire, symbolised by the toy) and the excremental (represented by the abandoned chocolate shell). The totally useless plastic toy, which supplements the chocolate part of the Kinder egg, is a materialised excess of capitalist consumption (proclaiming "because the chocolate will not satisfy your desire, you may have more than that, i.e., the toy") and a banalised rendering of the spiritual treasure, the sacred heart of the desired Thing. The superfluousness of both the chocolate and the toy (one uneaten, the other useless) bears witness to the fact that today the sphere of the sacred is sustained by the sphere of the mundane, the petty and the trivial. The juxtaposition of sublimation and desublimation in Kinder Surprise resembles the coexistence of the most spiritual and the most ordinary, of sacralisation and degradation, which - in most general terms - are characteristic of the current experience of the sacred.

In *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek comments on the impass characterising the postmodern handling of the sacred which has now come to depend on trash (32). Faced with the uncertainty of the sacred, postmodernism seeks to preserve the sacred place by means of more and more shocking effects. Excrement and leftovers occupy the place of the sacred, virtually reducing in that way the gap between the sublime and trash, and undoing the once crucial difference between the sacred and the ordinary. Excrement filling the sacred place neither ceases being excremental nor undergoes sublimation; they remain excremental provoking our uneasy inquiries about what happened with the sacred. The sacred, in other words, becomes a function of trash, an afterthought inscribed into the excremental disturbance. Consequently, the space between the no longer differentiated spheres of the sacred and the excremental "narrows to the identity of opposites" (*Fragile* 26), and postmodernism comes to rehearse the ambiguation displayed in the structure of Kinder Surprise.



Another area of late modern Western culture, in which the overlapping between the excremental and the sublime resembles the overlapping characteristic for *Kinder Surprise*, is the Western image of Tibet. As "one of the central references of the post-Christian 'spiritual' imaginary," Tibet perceived by European eyes figures as "a jewel which, when one approaches too much, turns into an excremental object" (Žižek, *On Belief* 64). For Westerners, Tibet is both admirably liberated from consumptionist cravings so well known in the West *and* contemptuously primitive; it is simultaneously harmonious *and* corrupt, heavenly *and* perverse. Buddhism is both "hailed as the most spiritual of all religions, the last shelter of the ancient Wisdom, AND as the utmost primitive superstition, relying on prayer wheels and similar cheap magic tricks" (64). Thus, the Western perception of Tibet and Western Buddhism hinges on a major and disturbing ambiguity akin to the crucial ambivalence of the chocolate egg.

In the context of Žižek's exploration of *Kinder Surprise's* oscillating character, it should not come as a surprise that his analysis of Western Buddhism makes the most of its ambiguous character. In *On Belief*, Žižek comments on the widely accepted belief in the fantasmatic status of both the excremental and the treasure-related aspect of the image of Tibet:

It is a commonplace to claim that that the fascination exerted by Tibet on the Western imagination, especially on the broad public in the USA, provides an exemplary case of the "colonisation of the imaginary": it reduces the actual Tibet to a screen for the projection of Western ideological fantasies. The very inconsistency of this image of Tibet, with its direct coincidences of opposites, seems to bear witness to its fantasmatic status. [...] This oscillation between jewel and shit is not the oscillation BETWEEN the idealised ethereal fantasy and the raw reality: in such an oscillation, BOTH extremes are fantasmatic. (64-5)

One can try to undo the Western reduction of the "actual" Tibet, and Žižek discusses two possible antidotes to the topos of the jewel/excrement. The first antidote is to realise that Tibet was in itself a divided place whose unity was imposed from outside. Žižek mentions here the Mongol patron-priest connection of the ninth century and the repeated cases of Chinese intervention, the last of which consists in ethnic and economic colonisation "transforming Lhasa into a Chinese version of the capitalist Wild West, with [...] Disney-like 'Buddhist theme parks' for Western tourists" (*On Belief*



65). This antidote reveals the character of the "actual" Tibet to be inherently disharmonious. The second antidote requires us to see the split character of Tibet as a projection of the split Western attitude (the inconsistency of the image is the function of the Western urge to penetrate and sacralise). In the case of this approach, the "actual" Tibet emerges from behind the screen of projection as "ABSOLUTELY foreign" (67) to the Western desire to grasp the valuable though inaccessible object. In other words, Western enthusiasts of Tibetan spirituality, who believe that the Tibetans possess the treasure no longer available in the West, misperceive "the secret agalma" as the "lost spiritual innocence of OUR OWN civilisation" (67-68).

In terms of the Kinder Surprise logic, the Tibetan spirituality - the unavailable treasure seemingly different from anything Western, and promising more than Western civilisation can offer - occupies the same precarious position as the ambiguous, chocolate-dependent toy. Both the Kinder's "kernel" and the Westernised Tibet partake of that which they were supposed to surpass. Like the toy in the Kinder egg, which remains on the same surface as the chocolate shell for whose lack it allegedly compensates, Tibetan spirituality (as described by Westerners) is a function of Western desires. Moreover, both Westernised Tibet and the Kinder toy owe their independence to external powers: they are independent in a highly dependent way. The toy put inside the Kinder Surprise can be acquired only as a part of the chocolate egg, as its supplement rather than as an independent piece of merchandise. Tibet's independence, argues Žižek, was imposed from outside - "the very name 'Dalai Lama' is of Mongol origin and was conferred on the Tibetan religious leader by the Mongols" (65).

The effect of Žižek's description of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism is aligning them with the Kinder Surprise-like ambivalence and disturbing the possibility of identifying the "actual" Tibet or Buddhism. Žižek's two antidotes - actually, two opposite approaches to the problem - are not given as an alternative one part of which corresponds with the truth of Tibet and its spirituality. Given as responses to the ambiguity of the Western perception of Tibet, those antidotes only escalate the ambivalence because their opposition is never resolved in favour of one of them. Once given and left in tension, the antidotes seem to imply that the ambiguous status of Tibetan spirituality cannot be attenuated, explained away or replaced with a more adequate perception of Tibet. Tibet and appearances cannot be told apart - Western Buddhism is neither a perversion that can be corrected nor a gruesome "truth" of Tibetan spirituality. Buddhism is "ambivalent, or rather, utterly *indifferent* to this alternative [...]" (*Puppet* 31). As Žižek puts it in



*The Puppet and the Dwarf*, "it is no longer possible to oppose [...] Western Buddhism to its 'authentic' Oriental [sic] version" (26). Consequently, the issue of the "actual" or "authentic" Tibet fades away, which is reinforced by Žižek's call to "forget about" Tibet, (*On Belief* 67) to stop being "haunted by the *ambiguous* attitude of horror/envy" (68, italics mine) aroused by the secret Tibetan treasure, and "do it HERE" (67). If we want to be Tibetans, we should abandon the quest for the "true" Tibet and instead, learn the lesson of Tibetan indifference and self-centeredness. Significantly enough, it turns out that the cure does not eliminate but secretly repeats the ambiguity of the diagnosed problem: we uncouple from the irresolvable problem of Tibetan spirituality, and in the uncoupling we "are" Tibetans, whatever that ambiguous "being" comes to denote.

The logic of you-preserve-if-you-abandon that emerges here is the logic of Kinder Surprise, the "kernel" of which can be obtained only by cracking the chocolate coating, and of Western Buddhism, which enables one to enjoy capitalism while maintaining a distance from it. But, as Žižek emphasises, "it is not only that Western Buddhism, this pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner distance and indifference toward the frantic pace of market competition, is arguably the most efficient way for us fully to participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity - in short, the paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism" (*Puppet* 26). Since the relationship between Western Buddhism and Asian Buddhism is not simply based on a contradiction, the same logic can be traced in, for example, Japanese "militaristic" Zen Buddhism (27). Žižek argues that in Japan the rudimentary Zen message about the regaining of the original selfless unity, about liberation from the striving for egoistic profit, and about the all-encompassing compassion legitimises "the most ruthless killing machine" (29). In this statement, as Žižek emphasises,

[t]here is no contradiction [...], no manipulative perversion of the authentic compassionate insight: the attitude of total immersion in the selfless 'now' of instant Enlightenment, in which all reflexive distance is lost, [...] - in short: in which absolute discipline coincides with total spontaneity - perfectly legitimises subordination to the militaristic social machine. (27)

To put it differently, in the militaristic version of Zen Buddhism, the disengagement from violence and the uncoupling from selfish, possibly destructive pursuits actually helps preserve violence. Once the self is lost and



the difference between life and death disappears, the subject performs his military duty automatically and immediately. Not only is killing the *means* of bringing into harmony everything that disturbs the achievement of such harmony, but also "Zen and the sword are one and the same" (28) Thus, the subject who follows the military orders without questioning them, and kills/ dies without being agitated does not merely acknowledge war as the necessary evil subordinated to the greater good. More radically, his enlightened state of selfless, or depersonalised, disengagement, and the killing he performs and passively observes cannot be distinguished. For Žižek, the enlightened subject that uncouples from the unworthy *appearances* of life and death should be seen as someone maintaining the *appearance* of noninvolvement and acting "as if [he is] not an agent, but things, including [his] own acts, just happen in an impersonal way" (32). In other words, militaristic Buddhism - like Western Buddhism - renounces participation in the illusion-ridden world only to find itself engaged in it in a highly ambivalent way.

Two more things Kinder Surprise and Buddhist spirituality seem to share is the problem of the void and of the state of nirvana. While in the Kinder egg the "sacred" void is separable neither from the trashy toy nor from the excremental chocolate shell, in Buddhism the state of nirvana fails to be effectively separated from the phenomenal reality and illusions it sought to transcend. Žižek elaborates on this failure using a story of Bodhisattva, who reaches nirvana but, moved by compassion for other living beings, returns to phenomenal reality to help them achieve nirvana. What is puzzling about Bodhisattva's gesture is the fact that his renunciation cannot be taken to merely mean he lets things happen as he withdraws into the sphere where distinctions do not matter; rather, his getting rid of illusions, i.e., his withdrawal, is not free from the ambiguous re-emergence of illusion, i.e., from the sphere he left behind. "If now," Žižek asks, "we have to strive to break out of the vicious cycle of craving into the blissful peace of nirvana, how did nirvana 'regress' into getting caught in the wheel of craving in the first place?" (*Puppet* 23) In Buddhism as described by Žižek, there seems to be a puzzling relationship between illusion and the beyond of illusion, a relationship from which illusion - like the excremental in the Kinder Surprise central void - cannot be properly eradicated.

## 2. The toy and the Void

The Kinder Surprise-like structure of (Western) Buddhism puts this mode of spirituality close to Steve Bruce's "world-affirming" religiosity (173). For



Bruce, world-affirming religion rests on the belief that once we overcome self-limitating images of ourselves and liberate ourselves from "rationalistic and cerebral culture," we achieve both "a cheerful inner peace, a quiet optimism" and the so-far unimagined control of our life (175). Silva Mind Control, Transcendental Meditation or Scientology, which Bruce groups under the heading of Western world-affirming movements, share the same ambivalence (or, in Bruce's words, "paradox") nested also in *Kinder Surprise*. On the one hand, they offer techniques for becoming more effective and powerful here and now; on the other hand, they promote acceptance of the way things are (Bruce 181). To master life and world, one accepts the resistance of life and world to changes, i.e., one masters one's life through acceptance of its unmasterability. Žižek's (Western) Buddhism and Bruce's world-affirming religiosity are similar in one more respect. Both hinge on an approach the gentle, balanced, holistic and healthy character of which has a violent, aggressive, power-oriented edge. Thus, in the case of Žižek, stories about how Buddhists, "when they dig the foundations of a house, are careful not to kill any worms" (*Puppet* 26), are counterbalanced with stories about aggressive militaristic Buddhism.

In the case of Bruce, world-affirming religiosity helps to widen the scope of one's control and power, simultaneously enabling one to approve of one's current, powerless status. Moreover, neither Žižek's (Western) Buddhism nor Bruce's world-affirming religiosity can be comprehended outside the capitalist context. For Žižek, the Buddhist logic of the purported detachment and covert participation in the capitalist market is the crucial feature of this type of Western spirituality. Bruce argues that the capitalist "commitment to improving productivity and efficiency" spreads onto our attitude to ourselves as we are supposed to improve and perfect ourselves. World-affirming religiosity brings both relief from the frantic pace of capitalist logic *and* the success desired by the believer.

What is quite noticeable in the context of the juxtaposition of Žižek's (Western) Buddhism and Bruce's world-affirming religion is that Bruce chooses to illustrate the "complex accommodation between the goal of self-realization and the massive solidity of bureaucratic capitalism" (Bruce 186) with three Buddhist stories. The stories make the point that "[s]uccess comes from cultivated detachment rather than from striving" (Bruce 186). The first story features the master calligrapher and his frustrated disciple, who is able to write the perfect sign on the banner only when he distracts the ever-criticising master for a moment and hurriedly scribbles the sign. The second story focuses on archers who practice meditation rather than archery,



and who afterwards can hit the target with their eyes closed. In the third story, a master and his disciple meet a pretty young girl hesitating about crossing a muddy road. The elderly master carries the girl over and leaves her at the other side of the road. When he and the young disciple continue their journey, after some time the visibly disturbed young man reproaches his master for touching the girl. The master replies, "I left the girl behind on the roadside. Are you still carrying her?" (Bruce 187).

Even though the immediate aim of those stories (emphasising the achievement-through-renunciation logic of the world-affirming religions) is clear enough, one should not fail to notice that Bruce is "reminded of" (Bruce 186) *Buddhist* rather than any other (non-)religious story when he discusses the relationship between Western religiosity and its capitalist context. On the one hand, Bruce's choice seems to dovetail with Žižek's assertion about the liaison between Western Buddhism and capitalist logic: should such liaison be explained, the mode of explanation imposes itself as Buddhist stories are immediately recalled. On the other hand - and equally importantly - Bruce's illustrative-explanatory tales raise the problem of the ambivalent status of Buddhism in critical reflection. Buddhism is not only the object of scholarly scrutiny but also a *way* to communicate insights about Western religiosity. It is not merely an issue thematised in Bruce's book, a core enveloped by Bruce's reflection; it becomes the vehicle of the reflection, the tissue of his discourse. In terms of the Kinder Surprise, the three Buddhist stories embedded by Bruce *into* his argument are supplements of this argument, staying "on the same surface" as the argument and "rendering visible" (Žižek, *Puppet* 145) its dependence on religious (specifically, Buddhist) metaphor.

In the case of Žižek's writings, the fact that the Kinder Surprise logic may extend beyond the *object* of reflection and encroach upon the *mode* of reflection indicates new problems in Žižek's approach to Buddhism. Does his argument about Buddhism metaphorically depend on Buddhism? Does he separate the cognitive core from the formal shell and a-Void Buddhism? If Buddhism is repeatedly associated with ambivalence, how ambivalent, i.e., how Buddhist is Žižek? A tentative answer to those questions may lie in Žižek's story of the repulsive relative, the Kinder Surprise gift and Žižek's reaction to the provocation. The attitude of Žižek's "repulsive" relative challenging him to present a philosophical explanation of the Kinder egg resembles the ambiguous attitude of horror/envy overcoming somebody faced with a strange, secret jouissance of the Other. Elsewhere, Žižek comments wryly on similar behaviour of his colleagues who are as thrifty and as repulsively condescending as his relative,



My affluent business-oriented colleagues always marvel at how much work I put into theory, and comparatively, how little I earn; although their marvel is usually expressed in the terms of aggressive scorn ("How stupid you are to deal with theory!"), what obviously lurks behind is envy: the idea that, since I am not doing it for money (or power), and since they do not understand the reason I am doing it, there must be some strange *jouissance*, some satisfaction in theory accessible only to me and out of reach of them. ("From Western Marxism" n. 9)

For the relative, the reasons for Žižek's pursuit of philosophy are unfathomable: it cannot be for money (in Žižek's anecdote, it is the relative who is affluent, not Žižek), so it must be for some mysterious satisfaction, for an *agalma* out of reach for the relative himself. Like Western enthusiasts of Buddhism, Žižek's relative is both horrified and attracted by something Žižek apparently possesses.

If the relative is driven by envy not unlike the envy underlying the Western desire to penetrate the Tibetan secret, Žižek and his philosophical pursuits seem to occupy the position of the envied secret itself. Thus, Žižek's arguments in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* - like Tibet and its secret *agalma* he discusses in *On Belief* - are both epiphanic and repelling, intellectually sublime and unnervingly bad-taste. In his accumulated observations associated with the Kinder Surprise, Žižek oscillates between serious philosophical ideas and a variety of trivia. Seen from such points of view, the structure of Žižek's writing resembles not only the treasure-and-excrement structure of Tibet but also the ambivalent structure of the Kinder egg. This means that his seemingly trivial (excremental) remarks about decaffeinated coffee, Israeli soldiers, Elizabethan desserts, Kinder Surprise and the repulsive relative are not essentially different from his precious philosophical points. Žižek's treasure is not merely hidden behind the many detours of his anecdotal and meandering Kinder Surprise argument, but remains continuous with the "useless" surface of the argumentative shell. The repulsive relative, like the brownish chocolate shell of the Kinder egg with its repulsively excremental association, is that on which Žižek's argument depends. If postmodernism needs the shockingly incongruous presence of the leftover to sustain the sacred, Žižek needs the "surprise of his [i.e., the relative's] life" to introduce his (i.e., Žižek's) ideas. Consequently, the relative, the analysed Kinder Surprise and the ambivalent Kinder logic become far from clearly differentiated outside and inside, stimulus and reaction; rather, their relation is reminiscent



of the ambiguous relation between the split character of Tibet and the split attitude of the West towards Tibet, to which no antidote, no resolution can be effectively applied.

Observing the work of the Kinder Surprise logic in Žižek's writing, one may speculate that the ambiguities flowing through his argument resonate with the ambivalent character of Buddhism that emerges from his texts. His way of writing becomes implicated in the theme of his writing. This does not mean, however, that Žižek lets Buddhist-like structure triumph and roam free. Neither the ambiguity of his confectionery Kinder egg image nor the Buddhist ambivalence are allowed to drift and proliferate in Žižek's books. Instead of benign indifference to the unequivocalities, instead of the seeming uncoupling from the tensions of the argument and letting them dance madly on the page, instead of renouncing control while simultaneously capitalising on the proliferating tensions, Žižek advises to learn a paradoxical lesson of Buddhism and forget about Buddhism completely. "The lesson to our followers of Tibetan Wisdom is thus that, if we want to be Tibetans, we should forget about Tibet and do it HERE. [...] We should appreciate the full scope of this paradox, especially with regard to 'Eurocentrism.' The Tibetans were extremely self-centered" (*On Belief* 67). The Buddhist lesson to be learnt by Westerners lies in cutting themselves off the Buddhist way and leaving it behind; or, to put it in terms of Bruce's Buddhist story, the Western disciple should stop carrying the Buddhist teacher and separate himself from his one-time master.

In Žižek's account, such a lesson requires open violence exercised without secrecy or ambiguity, violence of the fundamentalist refusal to rely on ironic distanciation from their own beliefs, violence whose outrageous character can be seen in the Taliban destruction of the ancient Buddhist statues at Bamiyan. If for the Tibetans, the Western logic of desire to penetrate the inaccessible object "was and is ABSOLUTELY foreign" (Žižek, *On Belief* 67), for the Talibans the Western respect for the cultural heritage of other religions was absolutely unimportant as they "had no great sensitivity toward the cultural value of the monuments of other religions [...]" (*Puppet* 7-8). In other words, "the only true lesson we Westerners, can get from the unfortunate Tibet" (*On Belief* 69) is that (1) we need to uncouple from the Buddhist teacher and that (2) to stop having him on our mind, we must develop a true "Teflon-coated" (Bruce 187) mind to which Buddhism cannot stick. It is due to the Teflon-coating that Eurocentrism mentioned by Žižek is no longer reducible to the imperial mentality imposing its own values on the Other, nor to the envy-driven attachment to the Other, but changes into a Buddhist-proof attitude.



There seems to be an immense difference between the Buddhist uncoupling (with its "I-renounce-and-participate-through renunciation" logic) and the violent uncoupling advocated by Žižek. The former is related to the figure of the Dalai Lama, whom Žižek perceives as the epitome of the (Western) Buddhist attitude. The Dalai Lama "presents us with a vague, feel-good spiritualism without any specific obligations; anyone, even the most decadent Hollywood star, can follow him while continuing a money-grubbing, promiscuous lifestyle" ("Melancholy" 677). The other uncoupling is associated with what Žižek labels "The Act" - a "purely formal [...] decision to decide" (*Puppet* 22) - and with Christianity understood by Žižek as "crazy radicality" ("On Divine" 36) that requires the violence of sweeping away the logic of re-establishing balance of opposites. To the extent that Christianity "is the violent intrusion of Difference that precisely *throws the balanced circuit of the universe off the rails,*" (*Fragile* 121) it is "the exact structural obverse of Enlightenment, of attaining nirvana [...]" (*Puppet* 22).

While nirvana means the detachment from the appearances of the world, Christianity builds precisely on the appearance which Žižek does not hesitate to identify with Christ, the central figure of the Christian religion. Christ, says Žižek, is God whose divinity is a fleeting appearance, a "grimace," (*Fragile* 104) an imperfection that does not imply the existence of some perfect state but asserts itself as all there is. As Žižek provocatively argues in "Melancholy and the Act," Christ "is fully human and thus indistinguishable from other ordinary men - there is absolutely nothing in his bodily appearance that makes Him a special case. So, in the same way Marcel Duchamp's *pissoir* and bicycle are not objects of art because of their inherent qualities but because of the place they are made to occupy [...]" (674). What Žižek maintains is that the thus described Christianity does what Buddhism is unable to do: "to pass 'beyond nothing,' into what Hegel called 'tarrying with the negative': to return to the phenomenal reality which is 'beyond nothing,' to a Something which gives body to the Nothing" (*Puppet* 23).

Admittedly, in his reflection on Christianity, Žižek intends to abandon the Kinder Surprise logic. Even though his Christ has excremental associations (as in the juxtaposition of his qualities with the qualities of Duchamp's *pissoir*, or in Christ's status identified with the condition of human "utmost abjection" [*On Belief* 146, italics mine]), Christianity is meant by Žižek to break with the ambivalent Kinder egg structures. Where the Kinder Surprise logic promotes the deep (albeit not obvious) affinity between the shell and the core, Christianity requires a radical separation of one from the other. "It is possible today to redeem this core of Christianity only in the gesture of



abandoning the shell of its institutional organisation (and even more so, of its specific religious experience). [...] Either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form but loses the essence" (*Puppet* 171).

Contrary to Western Buddhism, which mutates its form adapting it to the needs of the modern, permissive society, Christianity demands its own death because "in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself - like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge" (171). Hence, when Žižek dubs Christ's legacy "the religion of atheism" (171), his phrase does not reverberate with the Kinder-like logic of opium without opium, decaffeinated coffee or of other products based on the "X without X" structure. Instead of the ambiguous structure in which lack is covered up and woven into the strategy of preservation and eerie presence, here lack is stripped of any pretence and stands revealed in its imperfection. The core of Christianity for Žižek is neither the omnipotence of the invisible God nor the perfection of the otherworldly divine Logos, but the total abandonment of God by God, God's impotence and "divine" atheism, all concentrating in the anguished cry on the cross "Father, why did you forsake me?" Christ as appearance does not refer to the realm beyond appearances; neither does he issue a Buddhist-like call to leave the realm of appearances for the sake of the enlightened state. Though Žižek acknowledges that Buddha and Christ share the same recognition (both break away with the established social hierarchy and allow everyone to access the Spirit/nirvana [*Fragile* 121]), he foregrounds differences between the radicality and the daring with which they pursue the recognised necessity of uncoupling.

However, the undisputable emphasis laid by Žižek on the difference between Buddhism and Christianity should not prevent one from observing a puzzling symmetry between the structures of those religions. If to be a Christian today means to forget about Christianity as an institution and as a religious experience, what is the difference between this forgetting and the lesson of forgetting offered by Tibet and Buddhism? And also, in the context of contemporary remembering of the "oriental," imperial character of Western interest in everything Asian, how should one understand Žižek's call to forget? Is what Žižek means here a challenge to something arising out of the otherwise admirable effort of the postcolonial studies, something described by Margaret Drabble - a contemporary British novelist - in one of her books?

[...I]ndians and West Indians and Guynese and Sri Lankans resent it when white men and women impersonate their attitudes



and try to write their books for them and adopt their politically correct positions and get their money to go to conferences. The Northern hemisphere is full of Canadians and Danes and Swedes and Germans busy studying postcolonial culture and digging into old colonial archives in order to get themselves on the next aeroplane out of the rain and down south to the tropical sunshine. [...] It's a new kind of colonialism. Cultural colonialism. (Drabble 55)

If Žižek's Buddhist lesson has paradoxical character - acting against "cultural colonialism" and remaining inscribed in the contemporary hegemony of "Asiatic" spiritualities in the West - how do Buddhist paradoxes differ from Christian ones? What makes Žižek say, "[...W]hat I find horrible in these new forms of spirituality is that we are simply losing our sense of [...] paradoxes, which are at the very core of Christianity" ("On Divine" 38)?

It seems that Žižek's approach to Christianity and (Western) Buddhism, founded as it is on the claim of the vital difference separating the two religions, cannot avoid the muddle of unintended affinities opening between them. One is tempted to evoke here the fate of a very old saying which also meant to distinguish sharply between two disparate realms: Tertullian's "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Despite the Latin Church Father's scorn for the seductive pagan philosophy, Athens (representing philosophy) and Jerusalem (representing faith) "came to have much to do with each other. Sometimes mutually antagonistic, sometimes holding secret trysts, sometimes publicly embracing, the history of their relationship has been stormy" (Handelman 3). Žižek's fascination with Christianity, motivated not by the strictly religious urge but by Christianity's structurally revolutionary potential, preserves a grain of Tertullian's stalwart stance and breeds statements like "What Christianity did with regard to the Roman Empire, that global 'multiculturalist' polity, we should do with regard to today's Empire" (*On Belief* 5). Yet, before Žižek's call is heard and the Christian act performed, the ambiguous pick-and-mix sweet counter metaphor and the Kinder Surprise image may keep providing food for thought about the status of spirituality in today's world and about relationships between Buddhism, Western Buddhism and Christianity. The plastic toys at the core of one of Europe's favourite confectionery products still have an inscription "made in Thailand," and the sweet taste of (Western) religion still has a distinct Asian flavour.



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