

*The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* by Slavoj Zizek

reviewed by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

The rumor swept through my circle of friends like wildfire: Bob Dylan had been converted to Christianity (by Larry Norman, no less) and was going to release a religious album! This was many years before Christian rock became mainstream, with mega-hit bands like Creed. In the '70s, contemporary Christian music occupied a small ghetto in the entertainment world, stigmatized by its association with the inherent rebelliousness of rock-and-roll. Musicians like Norman, Keith Green and Phil Keaggy, however, helped many young evangelicals reconcile their cultural isolation from pop culture. My friends and I were desperate to have rock music affirm our faith, in part, I am sure, so that we could listen to it with a clean conscience. We even entertained reckless dreams that Dylan would ignite a renaissance of religious music as powerful as any pagan revelry.

Dylan's faith has come and gone, but pop music is in the church to stay. It is not clear, however, whether the church has baptized rock-and-roll in order to save others or to save itself. Is the church merely updating its musical liturgy, or has it fallen victim to the nearly omnipotent power of popular culture? Who has converted whom?

I was reminded of such questions--and my own youthful enthusiasms--when I read *The Fragile Absolute*. Slavoj Zizek, who is from Slovenia, is known for blending psychoanalysis and Marxism, with plenty of references to pop culture thrown into the mix. This has given him a virtual cult following overseas, and his reputation is growing in America. Ironically, he is the perfect thinker for global capitalism. He incorporates everything into his philosophy, from Oprah Winfrey to Stephen King. Like a multinational corporation, he will not be satisfied until he penetrates every market.

His attempt to absorb Christianity, then, should not be surprising. Indeed, in Europe, where the post-Christian era has already reached high noon, philosophers are once again exploring Christianity precisely because it seems so strange and new. Zizek wants to recruit Christians to work against the enchantment of popular culture and

the universal religion of consumerism.

Secular promises of liberation through psychoanalysis or Marxism have always been better at criticizing society than offering practical proposals for a better world. Psychoanalysis tries to enable individuals to deal with personal traumas that can never be fully healed, and Marxism is a reaction to the trauma of social injustice. For Žižek, who calls himself a "Paulinian materialist," both of these systems of thought must rely, in the end, on the practice of sacrifice. Psychoanalytic patients must learn to give up their investment in their personal problems, and Marxists must give up the Stalinist legacy of an oppressive nationalism.

But how do we give up one dream without replacing it with another? Žižek turns to Christianity, especially the story of Abraham and Isaac, for a lesson in how to separate the act of sacrifice from blind loyalty to a sacred cause. The father lets go of the son without resentment or calculation. Christians are called to renounce worldly idols in order to work toward the concrete ideal of an inclusive community. To put it in psychoanalytic terms, Christians sacrifice the imaginary for the real. Žižek thus decisively abandons, once and for all, the tired leftist diatribe that Christianity promises a magic kingdom of escapism rather than a realistic kingdom of justice.

Does Christianity need saving, or does Marxism? Is Žižek a Bob Dylan, turning to Christianity because socialism is in decline, or is he a sincere convert to the rabbi from Galilee? I do not think that Christians need to be anxious about whether celebrity philosophers respect their faith, but I do think it is important to evaluate the future of this new alliance between postmodern European philosophy and the church. Žižek assumes that the church and Marxism can be allies because they have a common enemy in the corrosive consequences of consumerism. The question is whether they have a common hope. Given the present disarray of socialism, Žižek's ideal of absolute justice is very fragile indeed. It makes sense that he would reach out to the church to fill the vacuum left by a proletariat that has lost its voice. It would make a lot less sense for the church to try to salvage an economic ideal that has ruined many countries and countless lives.

Žižek believes in the absolute of a classless society that is rendered fragile by global capitalism. The church believes in an absolute that is fragile precisely because it is absolute. History has shown how dangerous it is to turn Žižek's dream into a sacred truth. To say that the absolute is fragile, then, is not to say that our fragile dreams of justice should be made absolute.