SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

# Solidarity, Theology, and Materialism

Rowan Williams' *Solidarity*[1] is a breathtaking achievement, an obligatory reading for all of us who are desperately searching for a new revitalized Left. With implicit references to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Williams describes our basic predicament as that of being thrown into a situation in which the big Other doesn't exist: an I (subject) emerges out of the complex network of symbolic interactions where it comes second after others who surround it – it is spoken about before speaking. This complex network is inconsistent: others are impenetrable to me, and when they bombard me with contradictory messages and demands, I soon discover that they are also impenetrable to themselves. But since my own desires are mediated by the desires of others, such a situation makes me also impenetrable to myself – I don't know what I am for others, and since what I am for others constitutes my identity, this means that I also don't know who or what I am.

Issy Ronald reports on a strange incident that happened to the sea researcher Jared Towers. When he set up his cameras underwater to observe a pair of killer whales, he saw something strange. One of the orcas, a juvenile female, "approached a camera I had in the water to film her young-

1 Rowan Williams, *Solidarity* [forthcoming]. All quotes from Williams refer to the manuscript.

er brother and then opened her mouth and let out a dead seabird."[2] She closed her mouth, paused, apparently watching for Towers' reaction and hung in the water while the dead seabird floated up above her. Then, after a few seconds, she rolled around towards the camera and swallowed the bird again. Why did the orca do this? Perhaps the killer whales are curious and exploring how humans will react to a gift. Maybe they are playing, though this theory is largely discounted because whales of all ages, rather than just juveniles, provisioned food. Or perhaps it is something more sinister – killer whales have been known to use prey to attract other species and then kill them, but there is no record of orcas ever killing humans in the wild. Killer whales are one of the most intelligent animals; only humans have a larger brain relative to their body size, so it is reasonable to presume that there is an intention at work in this act of offering a gift, but an intention which is impenetrable to us, the receivers. Does this situation not render perfectly the most elementary encounter that constitutes our desire – the encounter of the *Other's* desire which remains opaque?

Or, to put it the other way round, when I don't know who I am, I presuppose that some figure of the big Other knows me better than myself; but then comes the painful insight that my own lack echoes a lack in the Other itself. The genius of Williams is that he doesn't see this echoing of lacks as an obstacle to solidarity but as its very resort: at its most basic, solidarity is not a stance shared by those who are united under the same goal of helping suffering victims; it is rather that solidarity emerges as a link among those who share a loss of orientation in what their pain and suffering amount to. They suffer (or are humiliated or deprived of something vital), but they don't know what makes others suffer and sometimes even dismiss others' suffering as unimportant or deserved.

The key moment that gives birth to authentic solidarity resides in a double move: not only should I detect in the other (with whom I'll enter into a relationship of solidarity) a specific form of pain, suffering and humiliation which cannot be reduced to mine, but this experience should also dislodge me from the contours of my own suffering and pain – with-

2 See Issy Ronald, "Orcas Are Bringing Humans Gifts of Food – But Why?"

out this dislodging, the limitation to my own suffering and pain can easily give birth to multiple forms of fake solidarity or sympathy. In a perspicuous, detailed analysis, Williams analyzes a whole series of forms of a false solidarity – say, a contemporary example, if I say just "We are all in Gaza!", such an identification with the victim is a fake because it unquestionably assumes that I know how they suffer in Gaza, which precisely from my safe position in a Western country I don't know. Authentic solidarity emerges only when I realize how solidarity is not a zero-sum game: my tolerance of the suffering in Gaza also deprives me of my own humanity, limits my own life fulfilment.

Another trap here is the false elevation of the "primitive" other into a group that enjoys a more modest but spiritually superior form of life – when the British colonized India the very same people who enforced brutal economic exploitation were as a rule full of admiration for the spiritual depth of "simple" Indians. One should mention also the disavowed *jouissance* in observing others' suffering. Let's take a case of the direct "critical" depiction of the oppressive atmosphere of an imagined conservative-fundamentalist rule. The new TV version of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* confronts us with the weird pleasure in fantasizing a world of brutal patriarchal domination – of course, nobody would openly admit the desire to live in such nightmarish world, but this assurance that we really don't want it makes fantasizing about it, imagining all the details of this world, all the more pleasurable. Yes, we feel pain while experiencing this pleasure, but Lacan's name for this pleasure-in-pain is *jouissance*. The obverse of this ambiguity is the fundamental blindness of Atwood's tale of the limitations of our liberal-permissive universe: the entire story is an exercise in what Fredric Jameson called "nostalgia for the present," it is permeated by the sentimental admiration for our liberal-permissive present ruined by the new Christian-fundamentalist rule, and it never even approaches the question of what is wrong in this present so that it gave birth to the nightmarish Republic of Gilead. "Nostalgia for the present" falls into the trap of ideology because it is blind to the fact that this present permissive Paradise is boring, and (exactly like the blessed souls in Paradise) it needs a look into the Hell of religious fundamentalism to sustain itself.

Williams correctly targets a self-enclosed identity of my own way of life as the main obstacle to authentic solidarity – the obvious example is how the majority in Israel totally ignores the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. In the same way as (according to Bonhoeffer) solidarity of the victims of Nazism during the Nazi rule is worthless without including Jews, today solidarity in the Middle East is worthless without including Palestinians. Similarly, Russia claims that Ukrainians are not an autonomous nation but part of Russia, and it nonetheless ruthlessly bombs them. Solidarity is solidarity with those who remain outside my self-enclosed identity, and to see this I must dislodge my identity. No big category is here outside suspicion, not even international working-class solidarity if it ignores specific forms of racial or women's suffering – just recall Steve Bannon's (white) workers' solidarity based on the exclusion of immigrants. That's why solidarity is an endless hard work of redefining my own position – no fixed result, every formula of solidarity is something that I, together with others, *imagine*, rather than simply establish.

However, in my view, the focus on opening ourselves to the other's view of the situation hides its own traps. Recall a definition of enemy in which utter fatuity is masquerading as a deep wisdom: "An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard."[3] There is no better literary example of this idea than Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In it, Shelley does something that a conservative would never have done. In the central part of her book, she allows the monster to speak for himself, to tell the story from his own perspective. Her choice expresses the liberal attitude to freedom of speech at its most radical: everyone's point of view should be heard. In *Frankenstein*, the monster is not a Thing, a horrible object no one dares to confront; rather, he is fully *subjectivized*. Mary Shelley moves inside his mind and asks what it is like to be labelled, defined, oppressed, ex-communicated, even physically distorted by society. The ultimate criminal is thereby allowed to present himself as the ultimate victim; the monstrous murderer reveals himself to be a deeply hurt and desperate in-

3 Epigraph of "Living Room Dialogues on the Middle East," quoted in Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion*.

dividual, yearning for company and love. There is, however, a clear limit to this procedure: are we also ready to affirm that Hitler was only an enemy because his story was not heard? Or, on the contrary, is it the case that the more I know about and "understand" Hitler, the more Hitler is my enemy? The move from the externality of an act to its "inner meaning," the narrative by means of which the agent interprets and justifies it, is a move towards a deceitful mask. The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie. Rather, the truth lies outside, in our actions, in what we do. So, at a certain moment we have to say: I don't care about your own perspective, you just must be destroyed!

I also agree with Williams that the imperfect human solidarity has to be supplemented by collective rituals: "Solidarity, it seems, needs some kind of ceremonial and celebratory articulation, a public drama of 'rebalancing' in which we are urged to imagine ourselves afresh as standing on common ground with common needs; and we currently live in a culture where even religious ritual can be assimilated to something other than itself, becoming one or another kind of performance generated by professionals for spectators, rather than a work that is both shared and differentiated." The need for rituals is grounded in our constitutive lack and disorientation: rituals fill in a lack of knowledge. Here is not the time to deal with the basic fact, noted already by Hegel, that rituals as blind acts (we perform rituals without fully knowing what they mean) bring enjoyment (Hegel directly mentions *Genuss*): contrary to the Enlightenment commonplace, we enjoy only ignorance, never knowledge.

Such a dislodging of my self-enclosed identity is not a joyful expansion: there is also a very painful element in this loss of what I considered my stable home – Williams is, of course, well aware of this: in the very last lines of his book, he writes that solidarity is "a 'dislodging,' a new imagining of what it is to be a self, to be *my* self, in that elusive relation we have been calling communion. The question is whether our understandable fear of this drastic rupture in the selfhood we take for granted is more or less rational than the fear we *ought* to feel at the erosion and shrinkage of the world that is promised by the refusal of communion." He even goes a step

further and writes that "something *dies* in solidarity": "The uncriticized, unchallenged claim of the solitary ego cannot survive in a deepening practice of communion and mutual recognition in common work for the fuller humanizing of our relations with one another and the world." I think that much more dies – the very idea that we are originally rooted in a particular lifeworld must be left behind, we are compelled to admit that every particular lifeworld is an attempt to patch up some underlying discord.

Here we should also problematize Williams' aversion to the Cartesian subject and to Protestantism: he perceives both as unduly privileging the individual "pure" subject who is in direct contact with God and only in a second step relates to others – but is this correct? In contrast to catholic confession, Protestants assert the community of believers (*Gemeinde*) as the form within which religious life takes place. As for Descartes, his "abstract" ego is a necessary step to undermine any fixed social identity. Remember that in the first chapters of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes repeatedly varies the motif of how the customs of other ethnic groups may appear weird and "irrational" to us, but to others our own customs may also appear "irrational" – Descartes' aim is, of course, to arrive at the absolutely certain universal knowledge independent of my particular situation, but we can also skip this aspect and reduce the Cartesian *cogito* just to an *operator of dislodging ourselves, of never being reducible to our particular situation*.

Williams' Catholic bias surfaces in his sympathy for the idea of a harmonious social order in which each of us has a specific place we have to occupy, and he deplores the gradual disappearance of this idea with the advance of Protestant individualism: "the idea of an 'appropriate' position to occupy in the network of finite agencies has retreated almost to vanishing point. This attrition of the idea of a given order of proportion and interaction between agents, with its strong religious underpinning, is perennially at risk of slipping towards the abstraction that we have seen as a constant concern in recent discussion." Williams, of course, admits that this "idea of a given order of proportion and interaction between agents" is as a rule reproducing in an idealized form the existing order of social hierarchies, which implies that every attempt of radical emancipation

thoroughly changes social hierarchy (say, noblemen lose their privileges, women acquire the same legal rights as men, etc.).

But I see two things still missing from his account. First, he ignores the full extent to which the need for solidarity arises from social antagonisms embedded in state power and in what Marxists call modes of production and exploitation, things which cannot be changed by extended openness towards the other's suffering and pain. Second, he seems not to analyze sufficiently the ambiguity of the reference to religion in dealing with social hierarchy. He is well aware that the religious grounding of social hierarchy is a deep obstacle to authentic solidarity – the solidarity than can arise within this frame is a Fascist type of solidarity where every organ of the social body is presumed to possess its own dignity *insofar as it acts according to its proper place*: workers are good workers, good capitalist managers with a sense of social solidarity, etc. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit undoubtedly evokes a full solidarity with the impoverished, suffering and excluded, a solidarity which cuts across every social hierarchy. So when Williams writes: "The roots of the language of right lie in a strong commitment to cosmological order, so that any affirmation or defense of a right is *ipso facto* a commitment to a good that is not just ours (remember Aquinas' argument about why *iustitia* is first among the virtues because it is not only about the single agent's moral standing)." It seems clear that such a right grounded in a cosmological order refers to a "good that is not just ours" but a good defined in the terms of a hierarchic social Whole. So, what happens when we abandon any notion of such a Whole? The ultimate inconsistency and contingency of our experience compel us to redefine the basic Christian stance along the lines of how Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes

> the experience of accompanying someone in a "serious" situation like bereavement, where we may respond in "helpless solidarity" rather than by a confident declaration of the triumph of the resurrection or whatever. "Why is my mouth often closed when it should give voice to the ultimate, and why do I opt for a thoroughly penultimate human solidarity?" Perhaps, he suggests, this silent and inexplicit standing alongside may be a more faithful

> witness to the "ultimate" in that it leaves God to "speak in God's own time," rather than insisting on my own capacity here and now to transmit the Word of God directly and unambiguously.[4]

Towards the end of *River Runs Through It*, Rev. Maclean gives a sermon about being unable to help loved ones who are destroying themselves and will not accept help: all that those who truly care for such a self-destructive person can do is to give unconditional love, even without understanding why.[5] This is the Christian stance at its purest: not the promise of salvation but just such unconditional love whose message is: "I know you are bent on destroying yourself, I know I cannot prevent it, but without understanding why I love you unconditionally, without any constraint." Do these lines not evoke the enigmatic scene in Gethsemane where Jesus tells his disciples who lay tired around him: "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me"?[6] Liza Thompson pointed out that Jesus is here "asking for solidarity. Not followers or crowds to listen to his teachings but an act of togetherness. And it comes from a place of such radical vulnerability that it disrupts notions of Jesus as some kind of hierarchical leader."[7] Jesus himself is here on the path to his self-destruction (knowing that he will die in terrible pain the next day), and the only thing he asks of his followers is to give him their unconditional love, even without understanding why. When we curse our fate in despair, when we courageously accept that no higher force will help us, Christ is here with us – and this is reconciliation at its most radical. My claim is thus that while we can and should get involved in multiple communal projects of solidarity to alleviate suffering, the ultimate form of solidarity is such a helpless standing alongside. Along these lines, I find problematic the way Williams introduces God – the creator of the entire universe – as the ultimate presupposition and guarantee of global solidarity:

4 Quoted in Rowan Williams, *Solidarity*.
5 *A River Runs Through It* (film) – Wikipedia. Dir. Robert Redford, 1992.
6 Mt 26:36–38.
7 Liza Thompson, personal communication.

> if we are genuinely "displacing" ourselves for the sake of the other within the Body of Christ, we cannot make our displaced identification, our solidarity, dependent on being able to recognize in the other exactly the same commitment that (we hope) is in us. The failure to defend, to "represent," the genuinely other – in this [Bonhoeffer's] case, the Jew – is a failure in manifesting the solidarity that exists not only in our humanity as such but more deeply in the identity between all human creatures as those with whom God has chosen to be.

The reasoning that underlies this move is: we as finite human beings cannot fully dislodge ourselves in the sense that we fully cut links with our particular identity and act only as representatives or placeholders of the other's suffering and pain, which means that our solidarity is never truly global. Only a divine person can do this: in his incarnation as Christ, God dislodged himself from his divinity and fully identified himself with human mortality. If "the universal value to be ascribed to human agents" is not to be a mere impotent ideal, it has to be grounded in the actual universality of the God who created all of us out of his love for us: humans "exist as a consequence of the gratuitous love of God in creation, and their exercise of love and intelligence, however expressed or embodied, reflects the initiative or creativity of divine life." Only in this way, "every finite agent is a unique crystallization of the infinite self-diffusing good that is the source of all." I don't reject this line of reasoning, I would just add a materialist qualification: yes, "the central element in human right/s is *the right to be 'imagined'* – the expectation that one's perspective and desire and liberty to speak are taken with maximal seriousness by any responsible other"; but is not the ultimate act of imagination precisely the act of imagining the divine creation of humanity out of love as the foundation of our always biased and imperfect acts of solidarity?

I follow here Badiou who perspicuously turns around the theological premise that God created the world out of nothing: "in the theological discourse this is how God created the world: out of nothing. But I'd still say that the greatest example of creation ex nihilo is the creation of God. It was God, rather than the world, that was created out of nothing! Because if

God had existed, the creation of the world wouldn't have been a problem. God is, by definition, limitless. His power is infinite, so he could well have created something out of nothing. The problem lies rather with us: how could we, poor finite, mortal humans, create something out of nothing?"[8]

If what we experience as reality is to retain its consistency, it must be supplemented by a virtual "fiction" – this paradox, known already to Jeremy Bentham, was poignantly formulated by Chesterton: "Literature and fiction are two entirely different things. Literature is a luxury, fiction is a necessity."[9] However, it was also Bentham who saw it clearly that we can (and should) nonetheless clearly distinguish between reality and fiction – therein resides the paradox he tried to capture with his notion of fictions: although we can clearly distinguish between reality and fiction, we cannot simply drop fictions and retain only reality; if we drop fictions, reality itself disintegrates, loses its ontological consistency. The enigma Bentham is confronting here is a strange *eppur si muove* – even when an (ideological) fiction is clearly recognized as fiction, it still works. This is the paradox of which Marx was already aware when he pointed out that commodity fetishism persists even after we denounce it and render transparent its illusion.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy often mentions the ancient story of the twelfth camel: an Arab merchant dies and leaves to his three sons eleven camels, with the precise instructions on how to distribute them: the first son gets half of the camels, the second one fourth, and the third one sixth. So how to do it when 11 is not divisible by 2, 4 or 6? A wise judge proposes the solution: he will add to the sum a camel of his own, and now we have twelve camels – the first son gets six, the second three, and the third two, together eleven; the judge then takes back the camel he added, so that he is not at a loss. Niklas Luhmann has written an essay on this.[10] The key feature is here that, obviously, one can also merely *imagine* the twelfth camel – it needn't exist in reality. And is God not something like the twelfth camel,

8 Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Philosophy*, quoted from the manuscript.

9 G. K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls," 77–78.

10 Niklas Luhmann, "The Return of the Twelfth Camel: On the Meaning of the Sociological Analysis of Law."

i.e., is the twelfth camel not one of the names for God? It is a lie (a nonexisting entity) which creates a consistent order out of the inconsistent mess of factual reality. So, does God exist or not? It does not exist as a fact, but it in-exists counterfactually, which does not mean that it is simply an illusion: it is the paradox of an illusion which is immanent to reality itself, a counterfactual entity immanent to factuals, to our symbolic universe.[11] I emphasized the term "imagine" because my conjecture is that it can and should be used in exactly the same sense in which Williams uses it: as a fundamental term in his elaboration of the theological dimension of the notion of solidarity.

In an ancient Sufi myth often referred to by Borges, the faraway king of all the birds, the Simurgh, lets fall a magnificent feather in the center of China: tired of their age-old anarchy, the birds resolve to go in search of him. They know that their king's name means thirty birds; they know his palace is located on the Kaf, the circular mountain that surrounds the earth. They embark upon a nearly infinite adventure, many of them give up and others perish. Thirty, purified by their efforts, set foot on the mountain of the Simurgh where at last they gaze upon it: they perceive that they are the Simurgh and that the Simurgh is each one of them and all of them. In the Simurgh are the thirty birds and in each bird is the Simurgh. Is this reversal not the same as the one which defines the Holy Ghost in Christianity? There is no "second coming" in which Christ will again be reincarnated as a human being; the community of believers in search of God *already is what they are looking for*.

*This article is a result of the research project J6-4625 "Names at the Tip of the Nose" and the research program P6-0252 "Philosophical Investigations," both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.*

11 I've dealt with this topic in more detail in the chapter "Negative Theology" of Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*.

## Bibliography


Badiou, Alain. *In Praise of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2025.

Brown, Wendy. *Regulating Aversion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Chesterton, G. K. "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls." In: *A Defence of Nonsense, and Other Essays*, 75–87. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911.

Luhmann, Niklas. "The Return of the Twelfth Camel: On the Meaning of the Sociological Analysis of Law." *Droit et Societe* 47 (2001): 15–73.

Ronald, Issy. "Orcas Are Bringing Humans Gifts of Food – But Why?" *CNN*, 9 July 2025. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/09/science/orcas-humans-gifts-food-intl-scli.

Williams, Rowan. *Solidarity: The Work of Recognition*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2026 (forthcoming).

Žižek, Slavoj. *Disparities*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2016.