



## Capitalism and Catholicity: Ecclesiological Reflections on Alain Badiou's Pauline Universalism

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### Abstract

Emancipating Saint Paul from both his imagined “spiritual” prison and interpretations that cast him as Nietzsche’s venomous priest, Alain Badiou reads Paul as providing the resources necessary for standing in the face of the endless flows of global capital that characterize the geopolitical landscape at “the end of history.” Read against the background of the apparent triumph of political and economic liberalism I will argue that the most compelling aspect of Badiou’s reading is that he finds in Paul a universalism that resists the rampant automatism of capitalism. Moreover, I will be primarily interested in the extent to which Badiou’s reading of Paul radically calls into question the conclusions not only of those self-proclaimed prophets of the ethics of alterity but also of those theologians that are finally unable to give up the desire to control outcomes and master contingency. In this way I will argue that, despite his proclamation of Christianity as a fable, Badiou can be helpfully read as a profound theological resource that points toward the shape of a radical ecclesiology that refuses to be defined on the artificial terrain of modernity and struggles instead in all its fragility to remain faithful to the resurrection.

### Keywords

Capitalism, Badiou, Paul, universalism, ecclesiology

He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.<sup>1</sup>

— Friedrich Nietzsche

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 98 [Aphorism 146].

## The Geopolitical Gaze at the End of History

I begin with Nietzsche because his aphorism nicely displays the problematic with which we shall be concerned, namely how the church ought to respond to a world so thoroughly captured by the apparent triumph of political and economic liberalism. Many Christians have greeted this historical development with deep satisfaction, believing that the gospel is quite compatible with the logic of capital and have boldly proclaimed, with Michael Novak, that “we are all capitalist now.”<sup>2</sup> However, many other Christians lament this development and view capitalism as a monstrous aberration that is incompatible with the truth of the gospel. Taking as a starting point the latter position, what is less than clear is how to adequately wrestle with this great leviathan, whose power seems insurmountable. I will suggest that the universalism Alain Badiou reads out of Paul is precisely designed to address this conflict and does so in a remarkable fashion by refusing to violently dominate or overthrow capital and rather inhabits a vulnerable stance that risks its own annihilation. However, to begin to understand Badiou’s theologico-political reading of Paul we must have at least some sense of the background against which it is set and it is to that task that we now turn.

The modern imagination has been conditioned to believe that the nation-state is the only imagined community around which life can be adequately organized. Politics thereby becomes the science of statecraft that is based not on the shared ends or goals of a given state but rather on the means of rule, which is to say, on coercion. This idea of an abstract sovereign state based on the successful manipulation of the citizenry can be traced through Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, however what is most important to note for our purposes is that modern politics is based on the ontological primacy of evil and violence borne out of the fear of death.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps seen most clearly in Hobbes, the state is envisioned as an artificial man, the great Leviathan, who can guarantee individual rights, personal security and non-interference only with absolute and unlimited power.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of any shared ends, jettisoned in favor of securing both property and self from perceived threats, the modern liberal state

<sup>2</sup> Michael Novak, *The Capitalist Revolution*, (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially pp. 20–38.

<sup>4</sup> Manent helpfully notes the sense in which Hobbes’ definition of Leviathan’s power resembles Anselm’s famous ontological argument for the existence of God. See Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, p. 30. Equally important is the pervasive influence of Hobbes on modern politics and the sense in which he remains “modernity’s instructor” with regard to issues of power. See Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 214–56 & 393–5.

depends for its very survival on a social contract that imbues it with a monopoly on the legitimate uses of violence, which are so judged solely on the basis of state sanction. The enduring power of the *mythos* of the state illuminates the extent to which it has been able to so thoroughly discipline our bodies and minds that we are unable to break free of its imaginative hold on us. Put simply, that we are unable to imagine the world differently is a testament to the powerful, near univocal, character of the state story. However, as William Cavanaugh notes, the state is just one more historically contingent community founded upon stories of human nature, the sources and origins of human conflict and enacted as a solution to these modes of conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Complicating the *mythos* of the state, recent theorists of global capitalism argue that the nation state is in decline and the clear boundaries and spheres of sovereignty that once dominated the geopolitical landscape are giving way to increasingly decentered and deterritorialized notions of power that progressively incorporate the entire globe. No longer can we point to one dominant center but are instead embedded in vast mobile networks where borders are more flexible and identities more hybrid and fluid. However, while the nation state is declining in the face of new global networks that increasingly relativize the significance of national borders, that does not mean that sovereignty as such is in decline. It has, rather, descended from its transcendent heights to become immanent. Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that this epochal shift is best understood as the passage from a disciplinary society to a society of control where power is no longer contained within social institutions (schools, factories, hospitals, prisons, churches, etc.) but rather becomes a machine that creates and sustains power relations independent of those exercising power and is deployed with logics of subjectification that are generalized across the social field.<sup>6</sup> What is especially important to note is that this immanentization of sovereignty is also, at the same time, the emergence of the biopolitical character of modern politics. The modern self is no longer simply the political animal envisioned by Aristotle but is produced and called into question by power. What is at stake is nothing less than the production and reproduction of life itself. Making the connection between the political philosophy

<sup>5</sup> See William T. Cavanaugh, "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State", *Modern Theology* 11:4 (1995), pp. 397–420; and "The City: Beyond Secular Parodies" in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 182–200. Particularly instructive is his claim that the "soteriology of the modern state is incomprehensible, however, apart from the notion that the Church is perhaps the primary thing from which the state is meant to save us."

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 329.

of Carl Schmitt, who famously designates the sovereign as he who decides on the state of exception, Giorgio Agamben argues that “the immediately biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension emerges clearly in the ‘military order’ issued by the president of the United States on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2001, which authorized the ‘indefinite detention’ and trial by ‘military commissions’ of noncitizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities.”<sup>7</sup> From this perspective it is clear that what binds this genealogy together is its continued reliance on a Hobbesian legacy of fear that remains the primary mechanism of control. What is equally clear is that far from conceding its significance, the state remains as an instrument of biopolitical production, smoothing out the terrain on which commodities travel, thereby neutralizing opposition to the endless flows of global capital and enabling its acceptance as inevitable and natural. Thus the age of globalization, as we seem destined to regard it, can be seen as a hyperextension of the state *mythos* insofar as it continues to subsume local particularities and differences under its universal mapping of social terrain and envelops them in its vast fluctuating networks of power, rendering them *merely* different.<sup>8</sup> What seems clear, then, is that the viable alternatives to Western liberalism have been crushed by the Soviet tanks that rolled through Prague in 1968 and finally dismantled with the Berlin Wall in 1989 such that we have arrived at what Francis Fukuyama calls “the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s [*sic*] ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>9</sup> The apparent triumph of political and economic liberalism is realized today in the new face of capitalism that, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari note, “is an

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> See William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002), pp. 97–122. The logic of global capital, which is the pinnacle of the modern biopolitical paradigm, celebrates the illusion of diversity by mapping it within one global and universal marketplace, for example, in the facile multiculturalism of the food court. Fueled by its accelerating need for growth, which is to say its need for greater and greater profits, it seeks out ever more specialized products, prized for their novelty, that it subsequently envelopes within its commodifying mechanisms whilst simultaneously masking the rigid boundaries it underwrites. See also Kenneth Surin, “A ‘Politics of Speech’: Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald’s Hamburger,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), pp. 192–212. Surin helpfully notes the sense in which the “democratization of difference,” while premised on recognizing plurality, is always fatally linked to a homogeneous logic that irons out particularities and subsumes them under a totalizing global gaze.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.

independent, worldwide axiomatic that is like a single City, megapolis, or ‘megamachine’ of which the States are parts, or neighborhoods.”<sup>10</sup> As an “international ecumenical organization,”<sup>11</sup> capitalism has co-opted the state as an instrument of biopolitical production that has finally infiltrated every aspect of life with its logic of consumption and admits of no “outside” to its power, no “pure” space from which a critique could be mounted.<sup>12</sup>

In this admittedly bleak context it seems that Walter Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history in which theology is cast as the hunchback that must “keep out of sight”<sup>13</sup> is not only an apt description of the state of our contemporary situation but has also been adopted by the church as its own self understanding. In the conditions of late capitalism, heralded as “the end of history,” the church seems to think it self evident that if it is to have any public relevance at all it will have to be on the grounds that it fosters the ideals and motives that are required for engagement in secular politics or that a more just society can be achieved by deriving and translating Christian values in to a new desacralized public philosophy that can be embraced by anyone. Simply put, the church has become convinced that, if it is to have any public relevance whatsoever, it cannot be itself. However, Slavoj Žižek has recently suggested that it is time to reverse Benjamin’s first thesis: “The puppet called ‘theology’ is to win all the time.”<sup>14</sup> This is quite a startling reversal, especially given the extent to which the *mythos* of the state, now in the service of smoothing out the terrain and enabling the endless flows of global capital, has been able to so thoroughly capture us in its mechanistic logic of endless consumption. Despite this fact, Badiou turns to the conceptual resources and classic texts of the Christian tradition precisely as a way (perhaps the last way?) to stand in the face of the twin dangers of capitalism and liberal democracy that dominate the geopolitical landscape at “the end of history.”

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 434–5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 435.

<sup>12</sup> Hardt and Negri take this analysis even further, arguing that since power takes on the form of a web of shifting alliances, clarifying a common enemy becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. See *Empire*, pp. 56–7. It is helpful to note at this point that while this may present a rather hopeless picture, it is drawn from the heights of Deleuzian metaphysics where the line between oppressor and oppressed is obscured in a way that, as Hardt and Negri seem to realize, is brought into focus on the ground in places like Rwanda or Darfur.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Suffolk: Chaucer Press, 1970), p. 255.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 3.

## Badiou's Paul: The Event of Christianity and the Politics of Truth

Against this background, Badiou's reading of Paul turns on four interrelated concepts: truth, event, subject and fidelity. What is most important to see in Badiou's reading of Paul is the "paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support,"<sup>15</sup> which opens up the possibility for the first truly universal teaching within history itself. That is, Paul's proclamation that "Jesus is resurrected" (Rom. 1:4, 1 Cor. 15:1–4) names an *event*, the first interruption of an absolutely universal claim.

Lest confusion run rampant, Badiou makes it perfectly clear from the outset that, for him, Paul is not a saint nor an apostle but rather a "poet-thinker of the event" who propounds a "speech of rupture" that mobilizes a universal singularity against the prevailing abstractions of capital that dominate the contemporary world. Read this way, Paul becomes, for Badiou, a political thinker of the utmost importance and, moreover, the founder of an "unprecedented gesture" that subtracts truth from the communitarian grasp. The great "unprecedented gesture" Badiou attributes to Paul is simply that he reduces Christianity to a single statement, an event, moreover, that he identifies as a *point fabuleux* that "fails to touch on any Real." Throughout *Saint Paul*, Badiou is at pains to reiterate this point and notes that Paul's texts retain little of Jesus' teachings or miracles and instead bring everything "back to a single point: Jesus, son of God, and Christ in virtue of this, died on the cross and was resurrected. The rest, all the rest, is of no real importance."<sup>16</sup> What this means for Badiou is that the Christian subject is "devoid of all identity and suspended to an event whose only 'proof' lies precisely in its having been *declared* by a subject."<sup>17</sup> That is, what is true cannot be reduced to an "objective aggregate" and is thoroughly subjective and radically singular all the way down and is, furthermore, only constituted by a process that is inextricably intertwined with the rupture that is the event. Thus Badiou will often refer to truth as a process, as that which is materially produced in exceptional circumstances under the sign of an event that represents a radical break with the prevailing logics and structures that govern the cosmos. Indeed, Badiou claims "that a truth-process is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation. Or – to use an expression of Lacan's – that it punches a

<sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33. Or, again, "Jesus is resurrected; nothing else matters, so that Jesus becomes like an anonymous variable, a 'someone' devoid of predicative traits, entirely absorbed by his resurrection" (63).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. Emphasis added.

‘hole [*trouée*]’ in these knowledges.”<sup>18</sup> That is, for Badiou, truth is an absolute and immanent break, a rupture, a subtraction, a crisis that is beyond all calculation, prediction and management, a kind of creation *ex nihilo*.

His zealous commitment to truth as a universal singularity is, perhaps, the most striking general characteristic of Badiou’s philosophy and differentiates him from fields of academic philosophy as diverse as the analytic, hermeneutic and poststructuralist traditions that all harbour, as Peter Hallward notes, “a profound suspicion of the very word *truth*.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, truth is sustained, for Badiou, by fidelity to the event, by holding fast to the evental becoming of truth in the face of countless obstacles and objections. Truth, event, subject and fidelity are thus all part of a single process: truth comes into being via subjects who declare an event and, in so doing, are constituted (“subjectivated” Badiou likes to say) precisely by their faithful and continuous response to the irruption of that revolutionary event. Echoing Paul’s words that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17) Badiou says that “for Paul, the event has not come to prove something; it is pure beginning” and holds fast to the conviction that Christian discourse is “absolutely *new*.”<sup>20</sup>

Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:6–11) nicely displays Badiou’s conception of the evental becoming of truth and, furthermore, mimics the founding event of Christ’s resurrection. It is clear from Paul’s own account that there was nothing leading up to his so called conversion, it was in itself incalculable and of the order of an encounter, and in his letter to the Galatians he makes it clear that this conversion was not carried out by anyone but was rather received through a revelation (Gal. 1:11–12). Furthermore, he does not seek subsequent confirmation of this event that has appointed him an apostle to the nations, as Badiou says “he leaves this subjective upsurge outside every official seal.”<sup>21</sup> Paul does not travel to Jerusalem nor does he seek out the apostles who knew Christ but rather goes into Arabia to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15–17). Interestingly, Badiou sees Paul’s confidence rooted in this encounter on the road and, furthermore, notes that his conviction will cause him to enter into conflicts with the core of the historical apostles, most notably Peter. In what is perhaps his most covertly theological affirmation, Badiou links this with the fact that Paul’s letters are best

<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, (London: Verso, 2001), p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 49 and 43, respectively.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.



read as interventions in the lives of the enclaves of the faithful with all the political passion proper to the inevitable struggles that holding fast to a declaration will bring.<sup>22</sup> That is, Badiou, rightly, sees the *ecclesia* as a site of contestation that requires nothing less than an active and never-ending pursuit of clarification to remain faithful to the truth-event that is named in the resurrection.

Badiou's understanding of truth as a universal singularity helpfully illuminates the deliberately provocative subtitle of his book: the foundation of universalism. To reiterate, Paul's great "unprecedented gesture," as we have seen, is to subtract truth from the communitarian grasp and to never let it be determined by the available generalities of the evental site. What Badiou means, then, by saying that Paul is the founder of universalism is precisely that the proclamation "Christ is resurrected" exceeds every generality and consists in the potential of universal recognizability alone. It is a going beyond, an address that is radically "for all," that is, an entirely new conception of what universalism is. Conceding that various forms of universalism existed "in this or that theorem of Archimedes, in certain political practices of the Greeks, in a tragedy of Sophocles, or in the amorous intensity to which the poems of Sappho bear witness," Badiou nevertheless claims that Paul's founding gesture, which constitutes the immense echo of Christianity, reveals the formal conditions of truth rooted in a pure event that is supported only by itself.<sup>23</sup> Paul's founding gesture, then, is not the production of a universal truth as much as it illuminates, for the first time, the laws of universality as such. Therefore Badiou can see in Paul an "antiphilosopher of genius" who "warns the philosopher that the conditions for the universal cannot be conceptual."<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, Badiou can be situated as an interventionist thinker whose central insight is that the militant apparatus of truth can only be achieved by going against the flow of the world.<sup>25</sup> This becomes especially clear in his militant advocacy that "Paul demonstrates in detail how a universal thought, proceeding on the basis of the worldly proliferation of alterities (the Jew, the Greek, women, men, slaves, free men, and so on), *produces* a Sameness and an Equality (there is no longer either Jew, or Greek, and so on)."<sup>26</sup> What this amounts to is nothing less than a scathing indictment

<sup>22</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107–9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Badiou explicitly claims that his admiration of Blaise Pascal consists in "the effort, amidst difficult circumstances, to go *against the flow*; not in the reactive sense of the term, but in order to invent the modern forms of an ancient conviction, rather than follow the way of the world." See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 222.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 109.



of those philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, Luce Irigaray and others, who have been preoccupied with the category of alterity. Badiou's scathing critique of Emmanuel Lévinas, whose "ethics of difference" amounts to "good old-fashioned 'tolerance,' which consists in not being offended by the fact that others think and act differently from you" and "has neither force nor truth" is a case in point.<sup>27</sup> Militantly in defiance of this mode of thought, Badiou claims that the question of universality is about "maintaining a nonconformity with regard to that which is always conforming us,"<sup>28</sup> or, as Paul magnificently exhorts, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2).

Badiou is at his strongest in pointing toward the inconsistencies of contemporary discourses that claim to respect differences but only on the unacknowledged grounds that the celebrated "Other" be subject to generalized circulation and fall under the logic of the count. Characterizing the contemporary world in terms of two processes that are perfectly intertwined, Badiou claims that:

On the one hand, there is an extension of the automatisms of capital, fulfilling one of Marx's inspired predictions: the world finally *configured*, but as market, as a world-market. This configuration imposes the rule of abstract homogenization. Everything that circulates falls under the unity of a count, while inversely, only what lets itself be counted in this way can circulate. On the other side, there is a process of fragmentation into closed identities, and the culturalist and relativist ideology that accompanies this fragmentation.<sup>29</sup>

Taken together, these two processes constitute the state of the contemporary world in which what is of utmost importance is the absolute necessity that everything be subject to free circulation, that is, provide material for its own investment in the market. Therefore, as Badiou recognizes, the appearance of difference is precisely what is most amenable to such investment. Indeed, difference must be actively sought out since ever more specialized products, prized for their uniqueness, create in their wake new and ever-expanding market niches. Examples of the proliferation of specialized products abound, from environmentally sensitive clothing made from organically grown cotton to gourmet coffee made from beans passed through the digestive tract of the Asian Palm Civet. Badiou claims this process, which is nothing but monetary homogenization, largely takes the form of demanding recognition of the cultural significance of various communities or minorities (women, homosexuals, the disabled,

<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 18–25.

<sup>28</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

Muslims, etc.) and is furthermore often combined and specialized by coupling this demand with the seemingly inexhaustible addition of various predicative traits (female ecologists, black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, moderate Muslims, etc.) such that “each time, a social image authorizes new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, ‘free’ radio stations, targeted advertising networks, and finally, heady ‘public debates’ at peak viewing times.”<sup>30</sup> Tipping his hat to Deleuze here, Badiou argues that:

capitalist deterritorialization requires a constant reterritorialization. Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole.<sup>31</sup>

What is most important to note is that *there is no true respect for difference here*. On the contrary we have a radical effacing of difference in the name of difference or, as Badiou says, a kind of abstract homogenization whereby these differences are systematically caught up and distributed in the marketplace, rendering them *merely* different. In effect evacuating any substantive difference, those self-proclaimed apostles of the ethics of alterity reveal themselves to be sutured to the capitalist logic of endless consumption, advocating a thinly veiled version of liberal tolerance, for they cannot sustain any encounter with a rigorously defended difference. This problem is nicely displayed by the demonization of “Islamic fundamentalism,” especially in the United States where there can be no freedom for the enemies of freedom. As Badiou disdainfully remarks, this kind of ethical ideology “is simply the final imperative of a conquering civilization: ‘Become like me and I will respect your difference.’”<sup>32</sup>

It is precisely in the face of this deplorable situation that Badiou reads Paul’s proclamation of a universal singularity. For Badiou, capital’s apparatus of capture, necessarily a dominant cycle that subjects everything to the logic of the count, is radically without truth since, as we have seen, a truth procedure is an interruption that cannot be supported by the abstract permanence of capital’s repetitive homogenization. Alternatively, the universalism Badiou claims to read out of Paul is such that it permits resistance to the imperialistic demands of the logic of capital, not by coercive argument or legal demand but rather by a proclamation that summons a response. It is interesting

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 25.

to note that this reading requires Badiou to give a much stronger defense of Paul against the traditional charges of misogyny and anti-Semitism leveled against him.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Badiou makes reference to Paul's claim that "for though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win the more" (1 Cor. 9:19). This initiates what Badiou calls a process of "subsequent symmetrization" whereby particular differences are affirmed, for example between men and women (cf. 1 Cor. 7:10–11), in such a way that they may be exposed to the universal event. As Badiou says, "this is the reason why Paul not only refuses to stigmatize differences and customs, but also undertakes to accommodate them so that the process of their subjective disqualification might pass through them, within them."<sup>34</sup> Terming this subjective process "an indifference that tolerates differences," Badiou goes at least some of the way toward critiques that would turn his incisive indictment of contemporary philosophy's ultimately disingenuous preoccupation with alterity against him.<sup>35</sup> However, in a beautiful formulation Badiou claims that "what matters, man or woman, Jew or Greek, slave or free, is that differences *carry the universal that happens to them like a grace*."<sup>36</sup> For Badiou, then, it is of the utmost importance that existing differences are not simply patronizingly tolerated nor strategically deployed in the marketplace as a potential source of income but that they are rather exposed to the universal such that they are capable of welcoming the truth that traverses them. As such, Badiou's profound thesis is "that universalism supposes one be able to think the multiple not as a part, but as in excess of itself, as that which is out of place, as a nomadism of gratuitousness."<sup>37</sup> Thus imagined, the eventual becoming of truth is capable of transcending and traversing received opinion and custom without having to give up those differences which allow us to recognize ourselves in the world, precisely what the abstract homogenization of the logic of capital does not allow. Read this way, Badiou's Paul represents a radical disruption of unproblematic accounts of identity and difference that interrupts their otherwise smooth integration in the rampant automatisms of capital and thus represents a compelling alternative picture to the current world-as-market configuration.

<sup>33</sup> For a helpful excursus on the traditional charges of misogyny and anti-Semitism that are routinely leveled against Paul see Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), especially pp. 136–57 & 201–27.

<sup>34</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "Badiou's Faith and Paul's Gospel: The Politics of Indifference and the Overcoming of Capital," *Angelaki*, 12:1 (2007), pp. 97–111.

<sup>36</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 106. Emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

## Bell on Badiou's Paul: A Politics of Indifference or A Vulnerable Universality?

While there are admittedly serious theological problems in Badiou's reading of Paul, perhaps most seriously his claim that for Paul there is no path of the cross<sup>38</sup>, the extent to which his reading of Paul helpfully articulates a vision for the shape of the *ecclesia* within the conditions of late capitalism is not best understood as yet another point of conflict in which a new threat calls for additional security measures and defense but rather as a providential occasion for further clarification and appreciation of the valuable treasure that has been entrusted to the church as gift, not possession. However, to receive Badiou's reading as a gift, I suggest we shall have to risk letting Paul go, risk keeping nothing safe for the sake of the Gospel since our investigation will be more meaningful when less concerned to dominate. The resources that Badiou offers the church in his powerful diagnosis of the contemporary geopolitical landscape are significant and, moreover, can easily be missed even by those theologians that claim to have moved beyond the division between Paul's texts and Paul's faith displayed in his reading. The extent to which this is the case is brought into sharp relief upon close examination of a recent theological critique of Badiou that helpfully teases out the profound sense in which Badiou points the way toward a radical ecclesiology.

In his essay entitled, *Badiou's Faith and Paul's Gospel: The Politics of Indifference and the Overcoming of Capital*, Daniel Bell, Jr. helpfully situates Badiou as exceeding the threadbare debates of an earlier age in his confrontation of the empty universalism of capital.<sup>39</sup> Making his analysis of Badiou even stronger, Bell recognizes from the outset the danger inherent in a theological reading of Badiou's Paul and claims that he will take issue with Badiou's use of Saint Paul, "but *not for the sake of defending Paul*."<sup>40</sup> This is all to the good. However, just a few sentences on, describing the ways in which he argues Badiou's Paul fails, Bell says that "Badiou retreats from the full radicality of Paul's gospel and that, as a consequence, his thought does not foreshadow liberty and liberation from capital,"<sup>41</sup> a statement that goes at least some of the way to questioning the extent to which Bell is genuinely able to take issue with Badiou on his own terms.

<sup>38</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 67. For an alternative view that complicates Badiou's radical separation of cross and resurrection see Stanislas Breton, *Saint Paul*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), with whom Badiou triangulates his own reading of Paul.

<sup>39</sup> Bell, "Badiou's Faith and Paul's Gospel," p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98. Emphasis original.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

What is fundamentally at stake for Bell is Badiou's universalism. In his discussion of what he calls the "withering of the Jews" in Badiou's thought, Bell notes that Badiou does not seek to eliminate particular differences but questions the sense in which his indifference is, nevertheless, its own form of destruction. Articulating this point, Bell notes that "Jews remain; but they are deracinated. They are Jews like a food court taco is a taco."<sup>42</sup> What is most important to note in Bell's critique of Badiou, however, are his reasons for arguing that Badiou's Paul cannot, in the end, stand against the homogeneous logic of capital. Suggesting that Badiou's pronunciation of the resurrection as a fable is simply the result of his fidelity to the truth-event of post-Cantorian mathematics, Bell argues that Badiou's atheism is best understood as a "commitment to modernity – at least its thought, if not its politics, ethics, and economy."<sup>43</sup> His conclusion that Badiou's universalism is thus thoroughly situated and his concomitant rejection of it based on its being sutured to the logic of the Enlightenment is too easy and uncritical a dismissal of Badiou's Paul, which cannot be so easily identified with the modern project.<sup>44</sup> Linked with his easy identification of Badiou and modernity, Bell outlines what he takes to be the most serious flaw in Badiou's Paul.

... Badiou's universalism, effacing as it does differences and particularity even as it affirms them, actually mirrors capitalism's abstract homogenization of differences and particularities. Indeed, it is not immediately clear what distinguishes the truth procedure that traverses differences and the generic subject that results from that procedure from the commodities produced by capitalist monetary homogenization.<sup>45</sup>

Bell's central worry here is that Badiou's Paul remains too close to the logic of capital such that it may well slide into or mirror the very processes of abstract homogenization that he seeks to repudiate. Indeed, it seems this proximity to capital is exactly what is at stake since Bell claims that "the (minimal) distance Badiou asserts exists between capitalism's universality and his own universalism of love has failed to materialize."<sup>46</sup> Thus Bell rhetorically asks "Whence cometh peace? ... Badiou's mathematized grace can actually promise nothing in the way of deliverance."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>44</sup> This easy dismissal of Badiou based on his affinities with modernity belies Bell's claim to have exposed the sense in which Badiou fails on his own terms. His claim that "Badiou's thought approaches the level of the dogmatically modern when it begins simply with the supposition that the theological has been finished off once and for all," (100) remains insufficient to characterize Badiou's thought as modern.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

What is most remarkable about Bell's reading is that in exposing the reasons he thinks that Badiou's Paul cannot stand in the face of the logic of capital he articulates perhaps the most profound aspect of Badiou's reading yet rejects it by interpreting it as a weakness. Bell is incisively correct in his analysis of Badiou's Paul, his universalism is indeed close to the false universalism of capital, however it is precisely this proximity that makes Badiou's Paul so compelling. In this sense Bell may very well be right that Badiou's reading could end up being a withering of the Jews, however this does not necessitate a counter-reading, a "concrete universalism" that can guarantee results.<sup>48</sup> What Bell interprets as a weakness is actually the greatest strength of Badiou's reading, a strength that consists in its vulnerability (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9). While he may not impugn Badiou's Paul by arguing that Badiou has failed to articulate an authentic or canonical Paul, in the end, Bell makes Christianity necessary for a complete and proper understanding of Paul.

Attempting to exploit the the fragility of the proximity to capital that Badiou reads out of Paul even further, Bell makes much of the fact that, in affirming Karl Marx's radical critique of feudal socialism, Badiou claims that "on this point we are rivals to capital, rather than merely reacting against it."<sup>49</sup> Bell seems to think that what Badiou means by this is simply that he is "better understood as a *rival* rather than an *opponent* of capitalism"<sup>50</sup> and that an emancipatory politics worth the name necessitates a truly *alternative* approach that goes beyond mere rivalry. Undoubtedly part of Bell's reason for this is his own critique of capitalism, which will have none of the half-hearted condemnations issued by Marx. His more comprehensive work, *Liberation Theology After the End of History*, illuminates the sense in which for Bell there is almost nothing redeemable in capitalism whatsoever but "only a madness, a culture that in its destruction of peoples and nature amounts to a celebration of collective suicide."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> This *possibility* of becoming the unconscious agents of capital itself is precisely what the vulnerability of Badiou's position consists in and this *possibility*, which is by no means a necessary one, must remain perpetually exposed. Bell's attempt to cover it over by linking it with an obliteration of difference is unconvincing at best and is not sufficiently demonstrated in his argument against Badiou. Moreover, Bell seems not to recognize the possibility that becoming a *conscious* agent of capital might itself work as a kind of redistribution that hollows out the abstract permanence of capital's repetitive homogenization from within. Many of the immigrant communities in Manchester, where I currently live, work precisely to send money back home and serve as an example of how this kind of redistribution is already happening.

<sup>49</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 114. See also Alain Badiou, *Manifesto For Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, (Albany: SUNY, 1999), especially pp. 56–8 where he is more positive about a point of collusion with capital.

<sup>50</sup> Bell, *Badiou's Faith and Paul's Gospel*, p. 103. Emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel M. Bell, Jr. *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 12.

Moreover, Bell seems unable to recognize the sense in which the vulnerability he writes off in Badiou's reading as a weakness would, in fact, strengthen and complement his own elaboration of universalism that consists in the possibility, even the normativity, of the peaceful embrace of difference that is rightly named catholicity. Indeed, speaking directly to Bell's worry about the erosion of particularity, Badiou turns to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played on the flute or the harp?" (1 Cor. 14:7). Like Bell, Badiou is concerned to save particularity from the cold waters of selfish calculation and argues that "differences, like instrumental tones, provide us with the recognizable univocity that makes up the melody of the True."<sup>52</sup> That Bell cannot make this recognition and reads his own "concrete universalism" against Badiou's vulnerable universalism, reveals his reading to be nothing less than an attempt to shore up the gospel against external threats in a way that is certainly not in keeping with the Pauline text. In this way, Bell's critique of Badiou can be turned back against him since it is Bell the Christian theologian, not Badiou the professed atheist, who retreats from the full radicality of Paul's gospel.

This stance of vulnerability can be seen throughout Badiou's reading of Paul and is precisely what marks a radical ecclesiology. For Badiou, Paul presents a "militant discourse of weakness," a "struggling universality"<sup>53</sup> in which fidelity to the event necessitates ongoing clarification, a nomadism of gratuitousness that is never finally settled.<sup>54</sup> Thus Badiou is able to appreciate the sense in which for Paul, the task of the *ecclesia* is not to reactively overcome capital as it is for Bell but rather consists in the vulnerable stance of patiently dwelling within the world capital dominates and struggling to remain faithful to the event of the resurrection, even if it means that Christ's own body becomes infected.

### Toward a Radical Ecclesiology

In conclusion I would like to return to Nietzsche's aphorism and suggest that what is at stake between Badiou's reading of Paul and Bell's critical rejoinder is not only differing conceptions of universalism but also differing conceptions of the monstrous. In his discussion of the relationship between pity and fear in his *Sweet Violence*, Terry

<sup>52</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> This term is Žižek's. See *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 109.

<sup>54</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, pp. 53 & 78.



Eagleton suggests that “for the radical, the real monsters are ourselves.”<sup>55</sup> What this means for our purposes is that Badiou’s vulnerable universalism is able to embrace self-critical practices since it is perpetually aware of its own fragility and susceptibility of mirroring the abstract homogenization of capital whereas Bell’s concrete universalism is reactionary in its perpetual drive to overcome capital and is constructed precisely to master the contingency inherent in Badiou’s reading. In the end, Bell is unwilling to inhabit a space in which we may be exposed to the risk of being the unconscious agents of capital itself and seeks instead to insulate and shore up his position against such immanent dangers. In this way, Bell directs our attention to the first half of Nietzsche’s aphorism, which places the emphasis squarely on our avoidance of the monstrous we see in others. However this reading misses the profound implication in the second half of Nietzsche’s aphorism, which suggests that we may well embody the monstrous that we seek to expose in others. That is, alongside the task of diagnosing the multiple flows of power with which we are confronted at “the end of history” must go a renewed analysis of the ways in which we ourselves are the products of these very powers. I suggest that Badiou is able to recognize this precisely insofar as he articulates a universalism that is not primarily a reaction to external threats, which would make his position all the more amenable to the mechanized logic of capital, but rather embodies a stance of vulnerability. As Badiou says, following Paul’s proclamation that God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor. 1:25), we must dispense with every formula of mastery.<sup>56</sup>

In habituating ourselves to the sense in which we may well be the monsters, we become enabled to see the complex movements of power that are covered over by the abstract homogenization of capital and remain hidden from sight. Going beyond Badiou, this means cultivating an awareness that if the church is truly to be itself in the conditions of late capitalism it must not hover on the margins to keep itself pure but rather realize the profound sense in which its proclamation of the lordship of Christ depends on a network of complex relationships that consist of profound and costly involvement with each other where disagreement can flourish and we can vulnerably put ourselves in question. In this sense, the church must refuse any and all strategies that attempt to secure a “peace” beyond vulnerability by avoiding tension and must instead cultivate practices that enable us to see the monstrous in ourselves. That is

<sup>55</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 165.

<sup>56</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, pp. 58–9.

to say, the church must be the kind of place that is *hospitable* to conflict.<sup>57</sup>

What is required, then, in the face of these desires to control outcomes and master contingency is a constant potential for radical reformation that is fostered by seeking out conflicts and creatively addressing them in ways that neither obliterate differences nor patronizingly tolerate them but rather engage them as a generative source for learning how to live better together. Simply put, the church must be a site of contestation, not a place where fundamentals are preserved beyond debate and conversations begin by searching for some kernel of unity upon which differing sides can easily agree and move forward. This can only be accomplished by *costly* engagement with each other in which we actively seek out difficult conversations that question the sense in which our conclusions may be artificial. In the end, there is no way of knowing precisely what shape these costly conversations might take, however it is clear that any honest proclamation of the lordship of Christ must inhabit this fragile space if it is not to become yet another commodity that presents itself for investment in the market. It is precisely this fragility, this vulnerability, this openness to seeing the monstrous in ourselves that makes possible the peaceful interaction of differences Bell rightly calls for. That Bell retreats from the admittedly dangerous precipice that Badiou articulates and favors a position that can guarantee the “undulations of the snake” will be overcome, means that he fails to discern the profound sense in which Badiou has rightly understood Paul’s vision of the ecclesia as a body that is organized around a response to the proclamation of the resurrection, with all the political passion and conflict that such a body will undoubtedly engender. Thus, in its struggle to be faithful to the resurrection, Badiou’s vulnerable universalism points toward a radical ecclesiology that is closer to the universalism that is rightly named catholicity just to the extent that Bell’s concrete universalism refuses to inhabit this space of fragility.

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<sup>57</sup> Romand Coles makes an insightful case for this in his reading of Rowan Williams in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), especially pp. 174–94.