

‘Already/Not Yet’: St Paul’s Eschatology and the Modern Critique of Historicism

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Abstract

This paper interrogates some prominent post-Marxist engagements with St Paul’s messianism by reading them in the theological context of the anti-historicist revival of Pauline eschatology in the twentieth century. In both readings, the means through which the critique of historicism is delivered is the revival of the eschatological core of Paul’s proclamation. Paul is read as inaugurating a ‘new world’ of freedom, love and redemptive hope as opposed to the ‘old world’ of oppression, sorrow, death and despair. And yet, it is exactly in such an apocalyptic reading of Pauline eschatology that both philosophical and theological critiques of historicism, despite protestations to the contrary, remain prisoners to the aporias of a historicist temporality. The symptom of the philosophers’ residual parasitism on historicism is expressed as antinomian negativism, while in the case of the theologians it can take the form of a self-assured Church triumphalism.

Keywords: St Paul, eschatology, historicism, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Henri de Lubac

Introduction

There is little doubt that one of the most interesting -albeit, as usual, contested- developments in the philosophical study of the intersection between religion and politics in the last thirty years has been the appropriation of St Paul’s messianism by post-Marxist critics of global capitalism.¹ In their effort to revitalize the emancipatory dimension of the Marxist legacy after the collapse of ‘really existing socialism’, several post-Marxist continental philosophers have turned to St Paul in search for a new model of dissident/revolutionary subjectivity. It suffices only to mention Jacques Derrida’s messianicity without messianism, Alain Badiou’s reading of Paul as a theorist of the Event, Slavoj Žižek’s reappraisal of kenotic Christianity and articulation of a Pauline materialism, and Giorgio Agamben’s imaginative engagement with Paul’s messianic temporality.² The central concern of this renewed interest in Paul’s messianic imaginary seems to be the critique of Marxist historicism, i.e. a rigid interpretation of Marxist thought that views history as moving towards a predetermined *telos* and society operating according to iron-clad socio-economic laws destined to turn the very instruments of capitalist exploitation into the midwives of a society free from want and oppression.

Paul's thought was 'rediscovered' as a useful ally against the naivety of historicist interpretations of Marxist revolutionism, despite the risk that Pauline messianism carries a theistic baggage which some might argue is more than a disposable part of the apostle's message. Indeed, the distinctive feature of the aforementioned philosophical interventions is that they are explicitly informed by what Habermas would call 'methodological atheism'. Namely, such an atheism is not an accidental dimension of their forays into religious thought, but rather a constitutive part of their approach to the truth of religion approached within the parameters of what they would recognise as our contemporary nihilist predicament. Apart from the fact that philosophy, in search of its own sense of autonomy, has always had a strenuous relationship with theology, post-Marxist philosophical readings of Paul tend to take their cue from a post-Nietzschean death-of-God sensibility³ or simply resonate with similar developments within theological studies, such as the rise of death-of-God theology in the early '60s, itself in many ways an offshoot of the encounter of modern theology with Nietzsche's *problematique* of nihilism and concomitant critique of Christian theism.⁴

At first glance, the fact that both the critique of metaphysical theism and that of developmental historicism seem to issue from the same anti-historicist impulse might strike as a bit odd. After all, Nietzsche's critique of Western metaphysics and ontotheology owed a great deal to the nineteenth-century historicist *Zeitgeist*.⁵ And yet, employing historical thinking without reducing the past to an inventory of our epochal prejudices or to a propaedeutic for a progressive reading of history is no easy task. It is the aporias of such kind of historicism that not only philosophical but also theological engagements with Paul's radical proclamation⁶ sought to unravel. While post-Marxists turned against twentieth-century rigid historicism in the form of orthodox Marxist determinism,⁷ theologians waged their own battle against the overwhelming influence of nineteenth-century critical-historical hermeneutics in biblical criticism, a task most vividly exemplified in the critique of David Strauss' New Testament scholarship by the 'History of Religions School' (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*). In both readings, the revival of the eschatological core of Paul's proclamation served as the means through which the critique of historicism was delivered. Paul was read as inaugurating a 'new world' of freedom, love and redemptive hope as opposed to the 'old world' of oppression, sorrow, death and despair. And yet, this paper argues that it is exactly in such an apocalyptic reading of Pauline eschatology that both philosophical and theological critiques of historicism, despite protestations to the contrary, remain prisoners to the aporias of a historicist temporality. The symptom of the philosophers' residual parasitism on historicism is expressed as antinomian negativism, while in the case of the theologians it can take the form of a self-assured Church triumphalism.

Paul's antinomianism and the roots of modern anti-historicism

In *The Faith of the Faithless*, Simon Critchley reminds us that the invocation of Paul's name in politico-religious struggles was usually directed against the prevailing orthodoxy of the era.⁸ The apostle's message was perceived as announcing the advent of a new order/creation (*καινή κτίσις*) through the revolutionary transformation of the old order.⁹ In theological parlance, Paul's messianic call activates a complex dialectics of law and grace that does not seek to abolish the law but fulfil it, namely interpret it under a messianic light as something that conditions our relation to faith

and redemption. Yet, due to its inherent ambiguity and the unstable dialectics of law and its overcoming on which it rests, the Pauline message has been interpreted in various, sometimes diametrically opposed, ways: either as legitimizing the powers that be (Romans 13:1-3) or as entirely antinomian, opposed to the order of being which represents man's sinfulness and constitutive imperfection (Galatians 3:10; Romans 3 and 7). The latter impulse has frequently been the inspiration behind reactions against the secularism, corruption and scholasticism of the established Church in favour of a return to the 'authentic core' of Christianity. What was usually implied when Paul's dangerous legacy was evoked -as Luther's case strongly exemplifies- was that the official Church was denounced as a nest of vipers in need of purification and reformation.¹⁰

Indeed, Paul's uncompromising spirit and radical messianism can be regarded as both deflecting and enacting the temptation of antinomian dualism (law, canonicity vs. redemption, messianicity) in religious thought. The antinomian impulse expresses the desire to be free of certain rigid structures within Christendom (e.g. established Church) or Judaism (e.g. the rabbinic Torah), inherited doctrine or, perhaps, even religion itself. Colby Dickinson has recently argued that antinomianism arises as a revolutionary or reform-oriented movement within a given normative framework and that it needs to be comprehended as a *political* challenge to rival authorities.¹¹ Dickinson gives examples of a series of antinomian thinkers who contested established interpretations of the Christian message or its mortified institutional expression: Johan Agricola's antinomian rejection of Luther's legitimist bias in favour of social order, the 19th century Reformers -particularly Calvinists- who sought justification by faith alone, or Kierkegaard's critique of the 'ethical' structures of Christendom and his existential re-signification of religion as a 'mad' act of suspension of every given normativity (from the Torah to contemporary attitudes of religious piety as well as ecclesiastical/canonical structures).

As Dickinson admits, the point here is not to label those attitudes antinomian *per se* since a number of those who could be described as antinomians -a broad group that for Dickinson includes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simon Weil and the great Protestant theologians Karl Barth and Paul Tillich- would reject the label. Rather, the point is 'to stress that their theologies bore traces of this anti-structural, anti-institutional impulse that is hard to disentangle from 'antinomian' thought in general, whatever such a thing, in reality, actually is'.¹² Dickinson, then, argues that the original Lutheran reformist intuition carries within it an antinomian impulse that harks back to the original Pauline declaration of a faith 'in Christ' that may de-stabilize, yet does not entirely do away with the institutionalized structures of the religious body out of which these desires spring:

What these modern and even Pauline examples suggest to us is that the same 'antinomian' impulse that once ignited the righteous vigor of Johann Agricola was probably something latent within Luther's own objections to the Roman Catholic Church of his time, but which was, for Luther himself, something that necessarily needed to be tempered with structure and law in order for the Reformation to have any traction as an institutional movement in its own right. This would explain, on the one hand, why Luther had to resist such impulses, yet, on the other, why his own reforming tendencies were potentially mistaken as antinomian, why the antinomian impulse still refuses to go away and yet why it also cannot be embodied as a free-standing ecclesiastical structure.¹³

As his own formulations belie, Dickinson arguably falls prey to an understanding of the antinomian impulse as a trans-historical dialectical structure that is programmed to make its appearance whenever existing ecclesiastical structures are rigidified or rendered obsolete. Antinomianism, then, for him represents the supra-historical healthy spirit of revolt and reformation that periodically breathes new life into old institutions. Apart from the fact that this strikes as a very Protestant understanding of antinomianism, it also reflects a specific theory of history underpinning Dickinson's reading of the dialectical tension between history and redemption, law and grace, immanence and transcendence. Whenever antinomian dualism is turned into a rigid oppositional structure that expresses an implacable tension between the order of history/immanence and the order of eternity/transcendence, or of law vs. love, antinomianism assumes the form of the exception to an established order that is simultaneously included to it as its negation. One could be tempted here to observe that such a model of antinomianism exhibits structural similarities to the Schmittian logic of the political as the exception to a sovereign order that is both external and internal to its constitution.¹⁴ As will become clear in the next section, this Schmittian logic of the exception is one that is shared -yet also resisted- by philosophical readers of Paul. More specifically the next section will look at Paul's messianic antinomianism as expressed in the readings of Badiou, Žižek and Agamben. First, however, one needs to establish the hermeneutic horizon within which, not only the philosophical appropriation of Paul's message by post-Marxist philosophers became possible, but also the hermeneutic 'prejudices', to use a Gadamerian concept, underpinning their antinomian anti-historicism. In their case, these are a) Heidegger's phenomenological rendition of Christian life and b) the messianic libertarian romanticism, to employ Michael Löwy's felicitous coinage, of the early 20th century Jewish intelligentsia.¹⁵

To begin with Heidegger, the Swabian existential philosopher engaged with Paul's thinking at the early stages of his philosophical career when he was still struggling to formulate his own approach to the phenomenology of human experience. Heidegger reads Paul through phenomenological lenses with an eye on providing a descriptive-analytical account of the fundamental structures that render experience intelligible in religious terms.¹⁶ Heidegger's interpretive wager here is that religion -or, as Heidegger would put it, its 'formal indications'- has something valuable to tell us about the fundamentals of human experience. Heidegger, as later post-Marxist anti-historicists, was not interested in the 'official' Paul as the founder of institutional Christianity. He was rather interested in Paul's eschatological message as a specific kind of temporal experience that is enacted in the mode of a proclamation. Paul, for Heidegger, emphasizes not the 'what' of faith but the 'how' of a lived experience that the new life *in* Christ inaugurates. Heidegger was not a historian, neither did he labour under the historicist illusion that he had some privileged access to what Paul was 'really doing'. On the contrary, he sought to recruit Paul's thought as a *counter-cultural* possibility for his own time, a critical resource against both the complacency of liberal Protestantism and what he regarded as the deadlocks of traditional metaphysics. Indeed, Heidegger's reading of Paul and his own philosophical agenda and cultural criticism go hand in hand. Just as he read Western metaphysics as the degenerative, reified expression of an earlier Greek (pre-Socratic) encounter with Being as emergence (*Ereignis*), so did he regard Christian dogmatic history or the

‘Hellenization’ of Christianity as the forgetting or concealing of the original Pauline eschatology of ‘watchful anticipation’.

Within an interpretive horizon whereby phenomenology becomes a secularized eschatology, Paul’s opposition between ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ is creatively reconstructed by Heidegger as denoting two different modes of being in the world, rather than an opposition between a physical condition and an otherworldly one. More specifically, the word ‘world’ in Heidegger’s phenomenological parlance is not a collection of objective items that make up what we understand as the cosmos, but a comportment, a way of relating to structures of meaning and intelligibility that condition human experience. Living according to the ‘flesh’ then, for Heidegger, would be living an inauthentic life that engages with the world as an object of possession, manipulation or mastery. Living according to the ‘spirit’ would rather enact the authentic life lived in ‘anxious concern’ (*Sorge* or *Bekümmern*) and constant anticipation or watchfulness. Heidegger then seems to be juxtaposing an image of an uncorrupted primitive Christianity (*Urchristentum*) with the capitulated institutional Christianity of the post-Constantinian Church that had arguably abandoned its messianic vocation.¹⁷ As we shall see, it is exactly this reappraisal of Paul’s antinomian messianism as the spirit of renewal of an ossified state of affairs that provides inspiration to the anti-historicism of Badiou, Žižek and Agamben.

The other major influence on the recent philosophical appropriation of Pauline thought by post-Marxists, is a group of Jewish messianic Marxists that opposed nineteenth-century historicist thinking and philosophies of progress, liberal and socialist alike. If Heidegger turned against the liberal Protestantism of his time and positively influenced later Protestant and Catholic theologians, such as Bultmann, Rahner, Barth and Tillich, in their rediscovery of the eschatological dimension of the Christian message, Jewish revolutionary thinkers, such as Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Gustav Landauer and Walter Benjamin, revolted against the bourgeois ideology of uninterrupted progress as well as Herman Cohen’s assimilationist project of a Judeo-Christian cultural synthesis. In so doing, they recovered the messianic legacy in Jewish thought as a means to denouncing the capitulation of faith to culture and the close proximity of throne and altar. In his remarkable essay, ‘Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism’, Gershom Scholem stresses the links between the Jewish messianic tradition and, what Löwy calls in his work, libertarian utopianism or radical anarchism.¹⁸ By libertarian utopianism, Löwy meant not only anarchist (or anarcho-syndicalist) doctrines in the narrow sense, but also the revolutionary trends in socialist thought. Löwy talks about ‘elective affinities’ between the apocalyptic character of Jewish theocratic anarchism and the subversive anti-capitalist romanticism of the Germanic-Jewish intelligentsia after the breakdown of the pre-World War One Jewish-Christian cultural consensus, typically exemplified in the work of Herman Cohen.¹⁹

In her superb study of those she calls Jewish nominalists or ‘neo-Marcionites’, Agata Bielik-Robson recovers the philosophico-religious roots of the antinomian tendencies in the work of prominent Jewish intellectuals, such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacob Taubes, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Walter Benjamin.²⁰ Antinomianism, for Bielik-Robson, marks the specificity of Jewish religious thought that seeks to break with the confined cyclical universe of the Greek cosmos and announces, not an Odyssean homecoming, but an Abrahamic exodus to a path of risky freedom and

revolutionary hope.²¹ The interesting dimension of Jewish antinomianism, whose paradigmatic biblical figure is Job, is that it is *at once* an act of individuation that appears as the presupposition for any real relation and communication with the divine *and* an act of rebellious defiance that relates to a psychic economy of evil enjoyment.²² It offers, then, no clear standards of distinction between the voice that calls for redemption and happiness, and the destructive death-drive that leads to an illusory sense of self-sufficiency, sin, and death. This ambiguity of Jewish messianic antinomianism is an underlying motif in philosophical approaches to Paul's messianism, especially those that relate it to Lacanian psychoanalytical insights and the role of enjoyment in the constitution of political subjectivities.

Paul and the post-Marxist critique of historicism

Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben are avowed anti-historicists in the sense that they all envisage their revolutionary politics as a break with the poverty of philosophical rationalism, substituting the twists and turns, the ironies and contingencies of the historical process for any notion of historical *telos* or inevitability. But if this post-Fukuyaman sensibility is precisely the interpretive horizon of the politics of our time, their anti-historicist critique is far from proposing an exit from what Derrida would call the 'spirit of Marx'. Revolutionary dialectics and its anticipatory logic essentially become the vehicle of an immanentizing transcendence and the expression of a non-linear temporality: the future is already here as an ever-open-to-be-activated potentiality, insofar as the revolutionary event can break through at any time. Far from existing in a parallel plane outside of time, the messianic locates the future in the visible here and now.

This defence of an anti-historicist historical materialism has, of course, shaped the critique of orthodox Marxism at least since its inception in Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).²³ However, it is really only since the reception of Walter Benjamin's explicit messianism in the 1970s, as elaborated in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), that an anti-historicist Marxism as a theoretically self-conscious –if heterogeneous– critical tradition is born.²⁴ According to Benjamin, history is not based on the linear flow of 'homogeneous, empty time', but on an idea of time as something which can be interrupted, brought to a halt and 'rebooted', time and again. In his favourite manner, Benjamin uses an image to convey the presence of divine time, eternity, into human history, time: the 'splinters' or 'chips' of messianic time.²⁵ This image denotes the possibility of politically recapitulating or recapturing in the present 'lost causes' or unredeemed struggles of the past that animate the historical discontinuum of the 'tradition of the oppressed'. These possibilities cannot be intentionally activated since it is only by way of the 'weak messianic power' of the oppressed that they are enacted.²⁶ This notion of a disruptive anti-historicist messianic openness operates beyond conventional dichotomies of activity and passivity, intentional acting and non-intentional contemplation as well as beyond theological apologetics or progressive narratives. It is, rather, an anti-teleological temporal constellation of past, present and future as now-time (*Jetztzeit*), which is the term Benjamin uses to indicate *kairotic*, i.e. interrupted, time pregnant with repoliticising possibilities as opposed to the linear, irreversible flow of homogeneous, empty time of historicism.

It needs, however, to be clarified what kind of theory of history is presupposed here by such a type of anti-historicism. Is the method of messianic nihilism proposed by Benjamin only a break with notions of temporality as dead, flat or homogeneous, or is it primarily a break with, and universal transformation of, mythical (regressive or progressive) or dialectical conceptions of history (whether conservative, liberal or Marxist)? The latter impulse turns against unidirectional conceptions of history and contemplates the messianic as an ‘interruption’ of the dynamics of secular capitalist progressivism. That is, in refusing to define the historical process as either flat, regressive or unquestionably progressive, the messianic event becomes identifiable with, or more precisely constitutive of, a revolutionary agency that stands in the moment and passage of the event’s interruption to redirect the historical process.²⁷ And yet, paradoxically the understanding of the messianic event as the exception that ‘interrupts’ or unsettles the historical continuum can arguably be re-inscribed within the horizon of historicism since even the anti-historicist temporality of the messianic ‘now-time’ seems to rely on the idea of the ‘other’ of history being asymptotic to the order of the historical.²⁸ Strangely, then, the messianic, envisaged as an uncanny exceptionality or, in the vocabulary of this paper, as antinomian negativism, fails to escape the orbit of historicism, despite the very promising redefinition of temporality upon which it rests. It is the traces of such an antinomian exceptionality that one can detect, to larger or lesser degree, in the philosophical eschatologies of Badiou, Žižek and Agamben.

Alain Badiou has made it abundantly clear that he is an adamant atheist. Yet, this denunciation is slightly misleading, since it is precisely the turn to the early-Christian subject of Paul’s writings that furnishes Badiou’s theory of the political subject with the subject who arises in fidelity to a cause. In the language of Christianity, faith –or fidelity for Badiou– is a gift that is continuously lost and re-gained as a condition of the universality of truth. What makes one a subject, for Badiou, is the unconditional commitment to what transcends one in its universal truthfulness. Badiou’s principal concern in his reading of Paul’s letters is to show, above all else, how Paul *subtracts* truth both from the fake/abstract universality of global capitalism and ‘from the communitarian grasp’ of identity politics and the proliferation of differences.²⁹ For Badiou, in marking off the resurrection as the site of universal faith, of faith for all, Paul never allows any ‘legal categories to identify the subject’.³⁰ In Pauline faith, there is ‘neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female’. On this account, Paul considers all proselytes to Christianity as fully practising followers regardless of their gender, ethnicity, social status or cultural practice as is circumcision in the case of men. Yet, Badiou does not think that faith is the absolute negation of the law, but only of the law of the *letter* as opposed to the law of the *spirit*. Under the latter the subject is committed, in faith, to an account of law that addresses truth to all. In fact, to be a true subject of universality one has to transgress the letter of the law to embrace the infinity of love. The Pauline subject sustains its subjectivity, not by a fidelity to the letter of the law (performance of good deeds), but by declaring its faith to the infinite grace of the Event of resurrection. The nature of this event cannot be reduced to any pre-given rationality or legal instrumentality; neither can it be sustained solely by good works (it is not ‘waged’, in Badiou’s terminology). Rather, it is the work of faith and hope as patience and relentless striving ‘of the subject in process’.³¹

This latter point is crucial for Badiou's understanding of universality and truth. Badiou does not invest faith with mythical dimensions (resurrection is a 'fable' in the sense of Michel de Certeau's idea of fables as social practices, not something that belongs to the order of the unreal).³² Neither does he believe that it can be the object of justification through the pursuit of virtue or through submission to the ineffable demands of the divine. For Badiou, these injunctions are part of a discourse of (Judaic or Greek) mastery from which the Pauline faith declares itself disconnected. Badiou may not have a theory of the 'remnant', as Agamben does, yet he insists that the force of truth is made to be immanent to that which is 'weak', i.e. a universal call for fidelity to the resurrection-event as an authentic Truth-Event. The latter, for Badiou, is what instigates a radical new beginning and therefore, consequently, dissolves the old coordinates of subjectivity and social order. The Badiouan event embodies the messianic experience as the exception to the positivity of Being ('the state of the situation') which in Badiou is apriori equated with evil.³³ In fact, evil, for Badiou, is any constraining factor that betrays the openness of the event, misrecognises its character or forcefully tries to objectify the truth. A Truth-Event is, then, the break with any prevailing or normal 'state of affairs'; a rupture that may strike without warning, and, as such, can occur in any situation that has been declared closed.

On this score, Badiou uses Saint Paul to advance a formalist notion of truth-as-the-void, in which truth subtracts itself, and empties itself out, from customary and everyday practices and beliefs. In subtracting truth from the givenness of a situation, truth is uncompromisingly opposed to the 'reciprocal maintenance' between abstract universality and identitarian particularism. That is, in being 'indifferent' to the given state of a situation, truth announces a new universalism premised on what the situation excludes, or what lies outside of its known coordinates. True universalism is active, proclamatory, irruptive, and as pleonastic and gratuitous as grace. Badiou's formalism is further revealed in the nature of this declarative universalism that he sees encapsulated in the statement 'Christ is resurrected'. Badiou is adamant that this statement does not appeal to a personal Messiah as the founding agent of a particular historico-religious community with a separate identity (even an identity that hollows out every other particular identity). Rather than focusing on Paul's own preferred declaration of faith which seems to be 'Christ is Lord' (*Kyrios Christos*), Badiou disassociates the death of Christ from the Event of the resurrection and, thus, rejects the idea of a personal Messiah that brings historical time, death and life under His Lordship. His formalism has no need for an incarnate Messiah in the same way that his void universalism has no place for actual historical experience which for him is apriori equated with evil rather than brokenness.

Žižek endorses Badiou in much of his defence and analysis of Paul, but, unlike Badiou, he insists that Christianity is to be taken seriously, making his contribution to the debate one more openly revolved around the articulation of a Pauline materialism. Christianity, for Žižek, -at least its 'perverse core' as he calls it- is not simply an empty shell that provides a time-honoured vocabulary that can be plundered for progressive purposes. Žižek believes that only by going through the radicality of the Christian experience as the self-voidance (*kenosis*) of a God who truly dies on the cross can one become a true historical materialist.³⁴ Only through abandoning certainty in the benign *telos* of history or the inexorable laws of historical progress does one become a true revolutionary materialist. In this, Žižek's anti-historicism

adopts a Blochian strategy: in order ‘to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience’.³⁵

Like Badiou, Žižek begins his reflections on Paul by making the anti-historicist point that Paul is indifferent to the actual life and beliefs of the historical Jesus. For Paul, the only thing of importance is that Christ died on the cross and was resurrected. Echoing Badiou, Žižek then locates the distinctiveness of Pauline Christianity in the event of rupture with its Judaic origins. For, in the resurrection, the ‘new life’ has already arrived, thereby irreversibly shifting the Jewish God of the sublime beyond to the immanent God of the earthly ‘already’. Judaism reduces the promise of another life to a pure Otherness, a messianic promise which will never become fully present and actualized (in the way, for example, Derrida envisages the Messiah as always ‘to come’). On the contrary, for Christianity, the Messiah is here, he has arrived, the redeeming Event has *already* taken place. Still, the gap which sustains the messianic promise remains since the full realisation of that promise is *not yet*. In other words, the ‘new life’ of the resurrection dispels the interminableness of Jewish messianic hope, forcing the faithful to live up to the implications of the qualitatively new Event. At this point, Žižek supplements his Heideggerian insight with a Lacanian twist. The Pauline ‘weakness’, which for Žižek is the work of love, is not the denunciation of the Judaic law, but rather the undercutting of its obscene supplement (i.e. the logic of transgression that fuels the cycle of sin and guilt) that sustains its operation. Christ’s ‘uncoupling’ (‘so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away’, B’Cor. 5:16-7) ‘*suspends not so much the explicit laws but, rather, their implicit spectral obscene supplement*’.³⁶

Žižek’s interpretation captures the urgency and imminence of the Pauline ‘already’. What remains vital and dangerous about the Pauline irruption is precisely its perversity (‘faith through atheism’) and non-conformism (‘weakness as power’). Unlike in the modern Jesus-tradition or liberal Christianity, with its benign ecumenical message of social responsibility and bourgeois ethics, the centrality of the resurrection-event in Pauline Christianity is that it grounds faith as a struggling universality. The recourse to Pauline Christianity reconnects politics to the necessity of drawing a line in order to hold onto the possibility of an antagonistic universalism. The universal or the absolute is fragile, as Žižek puts it, ruptured from within; the One is severed from the Other and the All; totality is never all, but always non-all.³⁷ Here, we are given a clearer picture, then, about what is politically at stake in Žižek’s adaptation of Badiou’s St Paul. A ‘weak’ universality (which in Badiou’s transgressive antinomianism is still tainted by a residue of Nietzschean *ressentiment*) is replaced by a fighting universalism: ‘The division introduced and sustained by the emancipatory (‘class’) struggle is not the one between the two particular classes of the Whole, but the one between the Whole-in-its-parts and its Remainder which, within the Particulars, stands for the Universal, for the Whole ‘as such’, as opposed to its parts’.³⁸ In Žižek’s Rancierian optic, the agent of a fighting universalism is, actually, the remainder itself, ‘that which has no proper place in the ‘official’ universality grounded in exception’.³⁹

This leads Žižek to develop his own reflections on the Truth-Event as revolutionary *praxis* by way of adopting a very Lukacsian perspective on the idea of the Truth as contingency.⁴⁰ In Lukács, the revolutionary act does not await its objective conditions of realisation. Rather, through the actions and intervention of the collective

revolutionary subject, history is not created *ex nihilo*, but its existing symbolic coordinates are re-signified. Objective conditions do not constitute but the formal possibility of a revolutionary situation. Yet, revolution occurs when some individuals –or, even, a single individual– take the risk of jumping into that empty ‘space’ consciously affirming history’s contingency. This is what Žižek calls an authentic political ‘act’: a jump beyond the symbolic order, beyond the signifier’s security. The point here is not that Pauline Christianity, and Lukács thereby, share a political eschatology, but that, in Paul and in early Lukács, the time of the Event (in Paul the *Parousia*, in Lukács the hoped-for post-1917 revolution in Europe) cannot be announced, given the fundamental unpredictability of the messianic event. Here, Benjamin’s concept of ‘now-time’ (*Jetztzeit*) and his eighteenth thesis that ‘every second of time [is] the strait gate through which Messiah might enter’ serve as a direct inspiration for Žižek.

However, it is exactly on this point that he may be parting ways with Paul’s messianic sensibility. Although the complex Pauline dialectics of the *already/not yet* are here employed to justify a view of revolutionary subjectivity irreducible to the ‘objective’ historical process, ‘which means that things can take a messianic turn, time can become ‘dense’, *at any point*’.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it can be argued that Paul’s proclamation enacts a more radical messianism positing a gap within messianic time itself after the Messiah has arrived. While Žižek’s revolutionary subjectivity captures the need for painstaking day-by-day work to bring about the messianic event without passively waiting for its realisation, the Pauline *already/not yet* operates within a transformative experience that is already under way mystically transfiguring time and creation. The point here is not to claim that Paul’s apocalyptic eschatology has a cosmic, pre-modern dimension, while Žižek’s revolutionary messianism is stubbornly modern or anti-mythical. Rather, the point is that Paul announces a new life that he labels ‘in Christ’, a life that is not characterised by the modernist logic of the break/Event/rupture (which still clings to a view of salvation as a miraculous intervention from the ‘outside’ into the dull, repetitive order of history),⁴² but by the experience of the defeat of death *qua* the inexorable logic of this world.

In comparing faith to work and hope to active patience, Badiou and Žižek seem to be opting for an interpretation of Paul’s letters within what they believe to be an anti-apocalyptic and anti-prophetic context. The letters, they insist, reveal the apostle to be primarily the modern-day equivalent of the militant ‘political strategist’, rather than an apocalyptic preacher of damnation or of the end of times. Paul is certainly not the harbinger of some Jewish apocalyptic vision of future catastrophe or Stoic conflagration (*ekpyrōsis*). Yet, his letters do not necessarily set apart the missionary from the apocalyptic, the prophetic and the political. Historical scholarship on Paul has indeed shown that prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology were interdependent narrative lines in the Jewish post-exilic and Second Temple eschatology which Paul was steeped in.⁴³ This conjugation of the prophetic and the apocalyptic in Paul’s eschatology is central to his messianic understanding of history and temporality, a dimension duly captured in Agamben’s close reading of the opening lines of Paul’s letter to the Romans in his *The Time That Remains*.⁴⁴ Indeed, in a manner similar to Jacob Taubes’ *The Political Theology of Paul*, Agamben seeks to restore Paul’s message to its proper apocalyptic and messianic dimensions.

Key to this, for Agamben, is how Paul inaugurates a new messianic temporality which the apostle calls the ‘time of the now [*ho nūn kairos*]’. For Agamben’s Paul, the ‘time of the now’ is the crucial ‘time that remains’ between the resurrection and the Parousia. More specifically, the messianic time is the operational time (the time that falls in the gap between *chronotic* and *kairotic* time), the time that time takes to end. As Agamben points out, there is a tendency to conflate the messianic, the prophetic and the apocalyptic. The apocalyptic and prophetic are usually focused on the *eschaton* qua the end of time –although it eludes Agamben that this is a rather limited understanding of the two terms. Messianic time, on the other hand, is not focused on the *end* of time at all (as if the messianic event contrasted with an autonomous historical continuum that it interrupts from the outside or is part of a linear process of salvation-history), but the time or the *temporality* of the end. Consequently, messianic time possesses a specificity that is quite different from the traditional apocalyptic *eschaton*. At this point, historical time contracts (*ho kairos synestalmenos estin*; A’Cor. 7: 29) and begins to end or wither away until the time of the Parousia (the full presence of the Messiah). Messianic time, therefore, represents a cut in historical time. By dividing the old age from the world to come, it introduces a remainder into historical time –the ‘time that is now’– that re-divides the division between past and future.

For Agamben, this represents the true meaning of Paul’s universalism. Because the messianic event is ‘already’ and the full content of the messianic is ‘not yet’, what is opened up by the messianic event –the fact that division between the sexes or the nations or between (wo)men and God no longer exists– means that no universal identity is available to men and women, Jews and Greeks, until the Parousia fulfils the original messianic event. The messianic vocation, then, separates every identity from itself (Jew from Jew, Jew from non-Jew, Greek from Greek, Greek from non-Greek etc.), founding true universality on the promise of a ‘new age’ that has already begun. This idea of the universal as the internal gap that prevents any identity from coinciding with itself is, for Agamben, the quintessence of the Pauline vocation: to live in the messianic is to live without identity under the form of the ‘as not [*hōs me*]’ (A’Cor. 7: 29-32). Obviously, there is an affinity here with Badiou’s reading of ‘weakness’ as the indictment of the ‘mastery’ of Jewish priests and Greek philosophers but, nonetheless, Agamben’s antinomianism is very different from Badiou’s. In contradistinction to Badiou’s formalist fascination with the resurrection-event as a ‘pure beginning’, Agamben is much closer here to recent scholarship on Paul that stresses the Judaic context of Paul’s writings and the continuity between Jewish law and the Abrahamic covenant. For Agamben, to live in the Pauline messianic is not to live outside the law, or even to question its ultimate authority, but to *suspend* the operation of the law, to render it inoperative. One does not usher into the new age through the absolute negation of the law but, in a sense, through suspending the law’s coercive character (Žižek’s obscene supplement) in order to fulfil the true content of the law which is love: ‘The law can be brought to fulfilment only if it is first restored to the inoperativity of power’.⁴⁵

What would be scandalous to the Jews, however, is Paul’s proclamation of the ‘age to come’ as already *having arrived*. In this light, as the first Jewish theologian of *inaugurated* eschatology –as opposed to traditional Jewish *realised* eschatology– Paul conjoins the ‘already’ and the ‘to come’, rather than keeping them separate, giving a new content to the confluence of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology in Jewish

thought. As Roberts puts it, ‘after the Christ-event, far from living solely in a ‘new age’, believers are held to be living in two ages *simultaneously*. The ‘new creation’ of the Christ-event, therefore, is not creation *ex nihilo* (in Badiou’s language) but a redemption, transformation and *completion* of the ‘old age’’.⁴⁶ Thus, while Badiou’s formalism seems to be re-inscribing Paul’s eschatology back into the two-age dualism of conventional apocalyptic thought alienating Paul from his Jewish messianic context, Agamben (and Žižek) seem(s) to be more faithful to the image of Paul as an engaged missionary that exhibits no contempt for this world, the latter being precisely the trademark of two-age dualism. Agamben’s anti-historicism, then, appears to be a lot more consistent with a conception of messianic time that undermines the autonomy of the historical/secular time. In insisting on the messianic context of Paul’s writings, the apocalyptic divisions between ‘the already’, the ‘not yet’ and the ‘to come’ are given a temporal *interdependence*. The simultaneous, yet non-coincidental, time of the ‘old age’ and the ‘new age’ is a time that focuses neither on the end nor on the present or past, but on how their interrelation redefines time’s linearity and directionality. There is no split of history in two in St Paul (as in Badiou’s reading), but, on the contrary, a move across, between and within the cut. What is distinctive about this Agambenian de-temporalizing and re-temporalizing logic of the messianic is not only that it introduces a cut *in* history but that it, actually, founds a science *of* history. In other words, Agamben realises that it is not enough for an anti-historicist argument to be opposed to the status-quo or reject teleology, it also has to incorporate an anti-historicist understanding of temporality/historicity.

The theological revival of Paul’s eschatology

Agamben’s reconstruction of messianic temporality, by his own admission, owes a great deal to Benjamin’s theory of history as the fulfilment of the past in the present. Agamben indeed believes that the radical Pauline double cut (‘old age’/‘new age’, ‘flesh’/‘spirit’) is restored to its original Judaic context in the late writings of Walter Benjamin: ‘[N]othing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past –which is to say, only a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments...and that day is Judgement Day’.⁴⁷ Or, as Agamben writes, ‘an instant of the past and an instant of the present are united in a constellation where the present is able to recognize the meaning of the past and the past therein finds its meaning and fulfilment’.⁴⁸ The Pauline ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ are here held in tension against a horizon of historicity that understands the eschatological, not as a parallel or asymptotic dimension to the historical plane (as, for example, the early Benjamin of the ‘Fragment’ used to think), but rather as the possibility of transcendence within immanence. Agamben’s Benjaminian anti-historicism is, therefore, closer to -yet not always entirely in line with- Paul’s historical sensibility informed by the conjoining of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology. Such a confluence reads redemption, not as a remote event to be enjoyed in the future, but as the ever-possible restoration of the present in the dimension of its fulfilment.⁴⁹

Agamben’s reading, however, also builds on the rich twentieth-century revaluation of the eschatological core of Paul’s message born as a reaction to liberal Protestantism’s tendencies to either ‘historicize’ or ‘liberalize’ Paul *qua* the founder of Orthodox Christianity. As Paul scholarship has established, the orthodox ‘Christian origins’ narrative about Paul and modern Christian ecclesiastical practice has tended either to

normalise Paul's eschatological radicalism or dilute his message within the hermeneutical tradition of supersessionism.⁵⁰ As such, Paul's theology has assumed within Christian tradition the status of a 'revealed doctrine' reducing the core theme of his 'glad tidings' –salvation for all through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ– to a matter of truth as an apodictic discourse of objectivity, rather than a *way of life* that is revealed in the *example* of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In contrast, specialist Paul scholarship seems to agree that the apostle's thought in his letters is rather directed and framed by spiritual demands that are grounded in a politics of transition from the 'old' Israel to the 'new' ecclesiastic community, from the old order of Judaic law to the new order of messianic love, a transition that in theological terminology is called *Apocalypsis Theou*.⁵¹

Paul scholars tend to identify the latter view as 'apocalyptic', distinguished by its emphasis on the 'eschatological reserve' pervading Paul's message.⁵² Although the rediscovery of eschatology was inaugurated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, the wider acceptance of Paul as an apocalyptic thinker is the fruit of Karl Barth's separate but parallel work.⁵³ As the popularity of Barth's view of divine revelation breaking into human history through Christ began to take hold in wider theological circles, it became easier to see this apocalyptic perspective in Paul's letters as well.⁵⁴ While prominent New Testament scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann, were influenced by Barth, it was Bultmann's student, Ernst Käsemann, who popularized this perspective. Käsemann primarily grounded his understanding of the 'apocalyptic' on God's act in Christ to establish his Lordship over the world and over the evil powers controlling it. The culmination of God's apocalyptic activity would arrive at Christ's imminent return as the kingdom of God was universalized and Christ's Lordship came to encompass the entire cosmos.

The upshot of the above argument is that *without* the rupture of apocalypticism the resurrection-event becomes simply a docetic miracle: an event that appears in history without affecting its direction. Contrastingly, *with* the rupture of apocalypticism it becomes an event for the sake of history's transformation. Hence Jesus's resurrection, for Paul, has massive eschatological significance. In its proleptic disruption of historical time, it inaugurates the advent of a new creation that is not perceived as something destructive of the 'world' -understood positively as God's creation- but only of the 'world' of Satan's enslaving reign through sin/death. Hence, for Paul, there is no contradiction between apocalypticism and the contingencies and daily demands of missionary strategy (reflected in the context-specific character of the letters themselves). Indeed, for Paul, the belief in the imminent coming of Christ, consciousness of the end of history, and the transformation of history, are all intimately interwoven exactly because he does not entertain a notion of history as a separate order unrelated to God's initial promise to Abraham and active commitment to his creation (the incarnation being the supreme act of fidelity to this relationship).

And yet, while Paul specialists or historians of theology could claim that Paul would not have recognised the relevance or perhaps the 'regime of historicity', to use François Hartog's apt term,⁵⁵ behind the nineteenth-century search for the 'historical Jesus' in the work of David Strauss or Ernest Renan. Nevertheless, neither would the need to react to such an excessive historicism with a countervailing emphasis on the apocalyptic character of the Christian message -such as those found in Albert

Schweitzer's critique of Biblical studies historicism, Ernst Käseman's famous declaration that the 'apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology', and, above all, Karl Barth's crisis theology⁵⁶- arguably be part of Paul's symbolic horizon. Even the slightest fissure between the historical and the eschatological/apocalyptic⁵⁷ would have probably been foreign to Paul's figurative historical imagination. Such a fissure would rather reflect a nominalist vision of temporality and historicity that the apostle could not have had access to. For the doyens of Radical Orthodoxy, for instance, this dichotomy between profane history and eschatology is the result of modernity's rupture with forms of historical experience that used to recognise no autonomy or self-sustainability to the 'historical' or 'natural' as opposed to the 'spiritual' but rather relied on a sacramental view of reality bringing together the worldly and the eschatological as a transimmanent mode of *living participation* in the infinite differentiation of the Trinity itself.⁵⁸

An illuminating reconstruction of the conditions that led to the separation between the plane of immanence and that of transcendence, or the order of history (secular time) and the 'other' of history (eternity) -as a radically heterogeneous temporality that either remains asymptotic or indifferent to history or invades it from outside as a miraculous force of disruption- is offered in the work of the Catholic *Nouvelle Theologie* historian of theology, Henri de Lubac. De Lubac's account of the gradual autonomisation of a concept of nature as separate from grace in his celebrated monograph, *Surnaturel* (1946), and his rumination on the thinning-out of the concept of mystery during the high Middle Ages in his equally famous work on the *Corpus Mysticum* (1944), shed light on alternative conceptions of the relationship between finitude and eternity that underpinned early Christianity's sacramental temporality.⁵⁹ For de Lubac, early Christians would never have thought of the Church as a separate 'historical entity', a sociological institution distinct from the mystical communion of believers with Christ that grounds its operation. They would rather have thought of the Eucharist as that sacrament of communion with Christ's body, now ascended to heaven, but really and mystically present in the one true Church.⁶⁰ The Church receives its institutional life, its reality, as a gift of grace precisely because it receives Christ's mystical presence in the Eucharist. Therefore, *corpus mysticum* would not have been thought as referring to 'the body of believers' as a separate institutional entity. The Church was mystically related to the Eucharist as the *corpus mysticum*. That said, Christians of the first millennium could make distinctions between Christ's historical body, his sacramental or mystical body, and his true, ecclesial body. Yet, it is in the making of these distinctions that the term gained some 'freedom of movement' that would later alter its meaning and turn it into an abstract fiction serving the legitimisation of ecclesiastical power claims once it was unhinged from the liturgical sphere.⁶¹

This development constituted, for de Lubac, an impoverishment of the idea of 'mystery' itself. The Eucharist was now thought to be 'an objective Real Presence produced by the intervention of an extrinsic miracle...[and] the church simply a hierarchy channelling this intervention'.⁶² De Lubac was instead -one could say with Jennifer Rust- arguing for a *performative* rather than static understanding of the 'mystical.' In this performative sense, then, the 'mystical' does not simply signify the superimposition of one discrete entity over against the other (Church vs. sacrament), but rather evokes a state of affairs in which the relation between the two is ceaselessly dynamic in line with the true meaning of the word 'mystery' which, for de Lubac,

expressed -in the pagan sense of the word- a form of *praxis*, ‘more of an action than a thing’, a way of life and a communal experience, rather than a supernatural, magical intervention.⁶³ This dimension of an invisibility which is visible - not as a thing or a fictional representation of a transcendent beyond, but as a transimmanent comportment, a genuinely incarnate spirit - is de Lubac’s path to conceptualising the Christian eschatological ‘already’, i.e. the mystical dimension of the ongoing transformation of the world, without falling to some kind of ‘bad faith’ mysticism that views the whole process either as a Gnostic fidelity to a metaphysical dualism or a pantheistic immanentism that dissolves the eschatological tension with the ‘not yet’.

In his latest translated work on the *Mystery of Evil*, Agamben makes a similar point - although he typically does not cite the Jesuit theologian- about the theatrical origins of the word ‘mystery’ and its association with Greek pagan mysteries. Like de Lubac, Agamben points to the performative dimension of the notion that did not use to convey the meaning of a secret doctrine, but rather that of a historical drama that separates the initiated from the uninitiated, the ones who participate in the theatre of salvation from those who do not understand the world as divine play: ‘[t]he term *mystērion* indicates a praxis, an action of a drama in the theatrical sense of the term as well, that is, a set of gestures, acts, and words through which a divine action or passion is efficaciously actualized in the world and time for the salvation of those who participate in it’.⁶⁴ Finally, again like de Lubac, Agamben is well aware that the Church lives out the Pauline *already* through the liturgy that concretises, as a dramatic act of participation in the new life in Christ, the messianic mystery: ‘In the time of the end, mystery and history correspond without remainder’.⁶⁵ Agamben openly sides with those theological contributions of the last century (Barth, Moltmann, von Balthasar) that argued for the revival of the eschatological spirit of the Church nineteenth-century historicist biblical criticism had rejected as mythology or superstition. Like Weiss and Schweitzer who restored the eschatological orientation of the Christian message, Agamben laments the fact that, to quote Troeltsch, the Church in practice, if not in doctrine, had closed the eschatological shop.⁶⁶ Instead, he pleads for a return to ‘the eschatological experience of its historical action -of all historical action- as a drama in which the decisive conflict is always under way’. Eschatology is here taken to be a model for genuine historical action, one that does not submit to the economy of the eternal governance of things -which Agamben identifies with ‘hell’⁶⁷- but takes every moment as a decisive call to action where everything is at stake and where ‘all are called to play their part without reservation and without ambiguity’.⁶⁸

Agamben’s revaluation of eschatology issues an indictment against those who have downplayed the eschatological thrust of the Christian message which resulted in evil (the *mystery of lawlessness*) being turned into an ontological reality. He invokes Paul’s disputed Second Letter to the Thessalonians and the obscure figure of the *katechon* introduced therein to show that the Schmittian interpretation that takes the state to be the restrainer of chaos, but also the one who delays the end of days, is only the mirror image of the naturalism of evil. The State or the Church, when assuming the role of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, are content with the perpetual deferral of the end of days – ‘Go and do not come again’, the Grand Inquisitor says to Christ’.⁶⁹ In contrast, Agamben turns to Augustine and another important theologian of the 4th century that was a major influence on Augustine, Tychonius. Tychonius came up with the idea of the Church as *res permixta*, not the huddle of the elect but a community

that includes both saints and sinners, both the good and the bad seed in its ranks. For Agamben, behind Augustine's eschatological understanding of the two cities lies Tychonius' idea that the one city was a mixture of the wheat and the chaff. Augustine does not map the two cities out in space, but rather projects them across time. The reason that Augustine is compelled to speak of two cities is not because there are some human pursuits that are properly terrestrial and others that pertain to God (rather they all use the same things), but simply because God saves in time (again the paradoxical abridgment of time and eternity). Christ has triumphed over the principalities and powers, but there remains resistance to Christ's saving action. The two cities are not the sacred and the profane spheres of life. The two cities are the *already* and the *not yet* of the Kingdom of God.

William Cavanaugh makes the similar point that Augustine is misunderstood if sin takes on the status of a given reality that then necessitates the violence of a permanent, natural political sphere, the state. Where this move is made, it tends either to de-historicize the *already* of the Kingdom of God or argue for a 'balance' between the *already* and the *not yet*. For Augustine, however, the *already* is not a transcendent principle but a mystery as historical *praxis* to which the Church is a witness (literally what the Greek word *martyr* means). Thus, the *already* and the *not yet* are not to be 'balanced' any more than the city of God and the earthly city are to keep each other in check. For Cavanaugh,

'the reality of the *already* and the *not yet* is not a kind of Stoic admonition to seek moderation, a middle course between the contrasting passions of optimism and pessimism. The advent of the Kingdom of God is not balanced by any countervailing principle; Christ has definitively triumphed, and the powers and principalities are passing away. The reason that the Kingdom is not yet fully consummated is not that God is holding back, as if God would want the Kingdom to be revealed only partially, in anticipation...[t]he *not yet* results not from God holding back, but from humans holding back. And there is nothing "natural" or fated about human sin. Indeed, the story of the Fall makes clear that human sin is not the way it is meant to be, nor indeed the way that it really is.⁷⁰

And yet, despite their common aversion to the ontologisation of evil, the difference between Cavanaugh's eschatological tension and Agamben's *mystērion* reflects a perhaps imperceptible but significant disparity in their reading of historicity. For the former, the Kingdom is already present, Christ's victory over death is the only reality. The violence of the *not yet*, expressed in the violent death of the martyrs, is exposed as belonging to a type of rule that is passing away.⁷¹ In their imitation of Christ, the martyrs become the icons of the new age that provide the key to reading and performing history eschatologically. However, their death is already declared a victory. It is as if there is no more risk or undecidability, no perception of a dramatic action staking everything out, as Agamben would imagine it. The historical drama is already structured, not by the *economy of mystery*, but by the *mystery of the economy* qua God's salvation plan that guarantees the benign consummation of all things. From a promising recalibration of the relationship between time, history and eternity, the eschatological becomes yet again the point of departure from a temporal, finite world to a pre-ordained eternal heaven. Apocalyptic ontological dualism returns from the back door whereby eschatology becomes the a-temporal 'background reality' disconnected from the doctrine of creation, the latter now regarded not as an ongoing and genuinely kenotic act of divine dispensation and a divine-human dialogic

partnership, but ‘as the reality within which our world and its history exists’.⁷² Instead, true eschatology cannot dismiss the created world and its history since finitude and creatureliness are not ‘defects’ to be superseded in the world to come. If so, eschatology can only be a re-doubling of *protology*, i.e. an affirmation that all ‘first things’ were created good including all those fundamental features of the human condition that are routinely yet misleadingly considered deficiencies or ‘evil’, such as vulnerability, fragility and mortality.

Conclusion

Philosophical approaches to Paul’s messianism by post-Marxist anti-historicists seem to share in a radical gesture of freedom-as-contraction from worldly determinations that informs their antinomian inclinations. Badiou’s eventual formalism, Žižek’s death-drive and (up to a point) Agamben’s messianic nihilism revolve around this break with the given ‘state of affairs’ -be it the Judaic law as operative power, its obscene superego supplement or economic theology. Their anti-historicist impulse also reflects the Heidegger-like invitation to *abandon* oneself to the contingencies of history without safety nets or apriori expectations and the ‘Jewish’ messianic gesture of breaking the mythic cycle of a natural order of things. Yet, Badiou and Žižek may still be viewed as remaining wedded to the residues of a recalcitrant historicism that sustains their revolutionary dreams *qua* eventual breaks with the order of historicity. Agamben’s reformulation of historical temporality through his creative re-appropriation of Benjaminian and Pauline messianisms reflects his awareness that a successful confrontation with historicism necessarily involves a recasting of the relationship between the temporalities of history and eternity. His formulations are not always felicitous, and he often runs the risk of postulating an unbridgeable rift between an eschatological messianism and the hell-like governance of worldly things. It is for this reason that theologians would find such a radical antinomianism, in the form of either a commitment to axiomatic immanentism or their rejection of theistic transcendence, disappointingly lacking in appreciation of the mystery of the world’s ongoing transformation.

At the same time, however, theologians seem to rest too comfortably in their professional laurels. Their presumption to sit in judgement of the philosophers ‘without engaging the urgent contemporary context in which the philosophers seek to make their intervention, seems more than ungracious’.⁷³ It also seems rather self-defeating as their triumphalism stands in the way of the most promising insights furnished by the revival of eschatology in the twentieth-century. At least Agamben has understood that well. To be fair, some theologians and biblical scholars have also understood it very well and have thus been open to a creative interaction with philosophical insights rejecting attitudes of ‘theoretical imperialism’ and ‘epistemic privilege’.⁷⁴ To the extent that theology and politics share a common interest in the investigation of alternative temporalities that would dismantle the machine of historicism, their students should be open to cross-pollination. Both might then transform themselves in the process. The theological might discover in the political the lost ethos of humility and the political might reclaim from the theological the much-maligned virtue of hope.

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NOTES

¹ The philosophical readings of Paul's messianism have not gone unchallenged by scholars who work in Paul studies. The general accusation launched from their corner is that the new philosophical interpretations of Paul's message do not take seriously the historical and theological context of Paul's letters and that their reading is selective, typological and inattentive to Paul's own world (e.g. see the contributions in John Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009]). In general, readers of Paul seem to be divided between those historicist scholars who wish to confine the apostle within the first century AD and those who wish to highlight his relevance for contemporary political and theological discourse, whether approached from a theological/theistic or a philosophical/atheistic angle (see e.g. Douglas Harink (ed.), *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others* [Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010]; Peter Frick, *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers: The Apostle and Contemporary Continental Philosophy* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013]; Ward Blanton and Hent De Vries (eds.), *Paul and the Philosophers* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2013]).

² See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning and The New International* (London: Routledge, 1994); Alain Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London and New York, 2000); Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). The main intellectual precursors of the recent post-Marxist revival of Paul are Stanislas Breton, *A Radical Philosophy of St Paul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). Breton's Pauline *kenotic meontology* expounded in his book on Paul, published in French in 1988, has evidently influenced Badiou's void ontology and Žižek's tragicomic reading of Christianity. Agamben's debt to Taubes' Benjaminian reading of Paul's messianic nihilism in his lectures on Paul's political theology, delivered in 1986, is duly acknowledged and evident throughout Agamben's commentary on the Letter to the Romans.

³ See Peter Frick, 'Paul in the Grip of Continental philosophers: what is at stake?', in ed. Frick, *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers*.

⁴ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Aurora: Davies Group, 2002); John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

⁵ For a comprehensive overview of the varied meanings that historicism may carry both as a historiographical outlook and as a late nineteenth/early twentieth century cultural mood, see Georg Iggers, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56(1) (1995): 129-152.

⁶ Apropos, the exact nature of Paul's proclamation is disputed among his philosophical interpreters, a dispute that arguably reflects their political priorities. For example, Badiou in *St Paul* seems to think that the core of Paul's message is the Event of Christ's resurrection. For Agamben (*The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017], p. 30), it is summarised in 1 Cor. 1:23: 'We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and

foolishness to the Gentiles'. Yet, arguably the emphasis on either resurrection or crucifixion may not be radical enough in its anti-historicism as it still appears too concerned with separating the mythological/figurative from the historical. A counter-example of what an alternative conception of temporality/historicity -that I would dare describe as *mythistorical*- might be is the following: 'In Greek-Orthodox temples—in a beautiful short-circuit of the events of crucifixion and resurrection—the icon of the crucified Jesus is accompanied by a crowning inscription that implies the only existence, to invoke Paul, messianic subjects can be boastful of. Above the hanging, mutilated, humiliated and wretched body of a condemned Christ—an outlaw for the Roman state, a scandal for His own community and a fool for Greek philosophers—the sign paradoxically declares: *Ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῆς Δόξης* ('The King of Glory')." (Vassilios Paipais, *Political Ontology and International Political Thought: Voiding a Pluralist World*, [Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017], p. 228)

⁷ Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁸ Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), p. 155.

⁹ See also Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), pp. 167-8.

¹⁰ The millenarian movements this attitude inspired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are superbly described in Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957). Cohn's work as well as Jacob Talmon's treatise *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (New York: Praeger, 1960) are early examples of works that, in the aftermath of totalitarian terror, issued warnings against the destructive effects of the antinomian messianic impulse in politics. The problem here, of course, is that in their work messianism is exclusively identified with a violent extremism that needs to be kept at bay.

¹¹ Colby Dickinson, *Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Colby Dickinson, 'What Christians Need No Longer Defend: The Political Stakes of Considering Antinomianism as Central to the Practice and History of Theology', *Crisis and Critique*, 2(1) (2015): 115-149.

¹² *ibid.*: 122.

¹³ *ibid.*: 123.

¹⁴ For a critique, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe*, London and New York: Verso, 2017).

¹⁶ See also Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Benjamin Crowe, 'Heidegger on the Apostle Paul', in ed. Peter Frick, *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers*.

¹⁷ This antinomian tendency is, indeed, a trope that is strongly present in all the post-Marxist thinkers we will examine and especially Agamben who sets up a stark opposition between the State/Church, on the one hand, and the messianic/form-of-life, on the other, as two irreconcilable options (see Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom* (Salt Lake: Seagull Books, 2012) and Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*).

¹⁸ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

¹⁹ Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, p. 21; see also Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, pp. 234-250.

²⁰ Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

²¹ See also Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). Note, however, here the view of Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) -with whom Bielik-Robson would not necessarily disagree- that the emphasis on divine hiddenness and dialectical rupture, so fashionable in the intellectual milieu of the Germanic philosophical Jewry (not just in Benjamin, but also in Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, early Lukács, Ernst Bloch and Jacob Taubes) is, in fact, not very Jewish at all, but rather strongly influenced by the German-Protestant notion of *Deus Absconditus*, deeply entrenched in reformed Christianity, from Luther via Kierkegaard to Barth, itself exemplifying strong affinities to Marcionite Gnosticism. Heidegger's attempt to recover an *Urchristentum* also bears traces of such a crypto-Marcionism (see Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, p. 201).

²² See also Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²³ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

²⁵ *ibid.*: 261, 263.

²⁶ *ibid.*: 254, 257

²⁷ All three (Agamben, Badiou and Žižek) operate generally, if with different philosophical materials, within such a conception of the messianic. Hence, although their anti-historicism is clearly the product of defeat, it is not the product of the defeat of historical progress *tout court*. As a result, they all place renewed emphasis on politics *as* commitment to an emancipatory cause, a move characteristic of critical Marxism. As such, in a period of extensive post-revolutionary defeat for the Left and, consequently, the retreat of 'communism as the real movement that abolishes the present state of society', the legacy of Marxism here is identified broadly with a recovery of *praxis* as a theory of revolutionary fidelity, a notion which is, for example, central to Badiou's ethics (Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. P. Hallward [London; New York: Verso, 2001]).

²⁸ It is not a coincidence that this is indeed Benjamin's understanding of the messianic in his early period of the 'Theological-Political Fragment' in *Reflections; Essay, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Nemetz (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), which is totally Marcionite or Basilidian, when seen from the perspective of the being *abandoned* to 'happiness' which is its intrinsic 'rhythm of transience' (see also Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004]). At this earlier stage, his nihilistic world politics had nothing to do with the messianic, simply because the messianic and the historical could never intersect at any point. It is only later that Benjamin, having learned about the Lurianic sparks/traces, will adopt the idea of a 'weak messianic power' that is reflected in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Yet, at the time of the 'Fragment', human beings are totally fallen and can aid the messianic 'new creation' only by ending this one as quickly as possible and hastening its 'passing away' (see Agata Bielik-Robson, 'Walter Benjamin: All Shades of Gnosis', in Philip Goodchild and Hollis Phelps (eds.), *Religion and European Philosophy: Key Thinkers from Kant to Žižek* [London: Routledge, 2017], pp. 115-126).

²⁹ Badiou, *St Paul*, p. 5.

³⁰ *ibid.*: 13

³¹ *ibid.*: 93

³² Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1992).

³³ See Badiou, *Ethics*.

³⁴ Žižek (*The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 3) provocatively starts off his reading of Pauline Christianity, with a reversal of Benjamin's first thesis on the Philosophy of History: 'The puppet called 'theology' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to be kept out of sight'.

³⁵ *ibid.*: 6. See Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972)

³⁶ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 120.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 133.

³⁹ *ibid.*: 109.

⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

⁴¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 134.

⁴² In that sense, it is not a coincident but symptomatic of his theory of history that Žižek's theory of the authentic political act has attracted criticisms from the likes of Romand Coles ('The Wild Patience of Radical Democracy: Beyond Žižek's Lack', in (eds.) L. Tønder and L. Thomassen, *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006], pp. 68-85), among others, who charge him with entertaining a 'Bing Bang' theory of revolutionary agency.

⁴³ See Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of the Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Richard J. Bauckham, 'The Rise of Apocalyptic', *Themelios*, 3(2) (1978): 10-23; Christiaan J. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); John N. Oswalt, 'Recent Studies in Old Testament Eschatology and Apocalyptic', *JETS*, 24(4) (1981): 289-301; Frank M. Cross, 'New Directions in the Study of Apocalyptic', in ed. Robert W. Funk, *Apocalypticism*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp.157-165.

⁴⁴ That said, Agamben (*The Time that Remains*) still seems to distinguish between the messianic and the apocalyptic Paul falling prey to a distinction that reveals more about the modernist bias in differentiating between eschatology and apocalypticism than corresponding to the experience of Paul and Paul's audiences (see Elizabeth Philips, 'Eschatology and Apocalyptic' in ed. Elizabeth Philips and Craig Hovey, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* [Cambridge University Press, 2015]).

⁴⁵ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, p. 98.

⁴⁶ John Roberts, 'The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part II: The Pauline Tradition', *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008): 77-103, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 254.

⁴⁸ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ Agamben's antinomian approach to the messianic is crucially inspired by Jacob Taubes' (*The Political Theology of Paul*) reading of Paul's messianism as negative political theology. Taubes reads Paul as a radical Jew who announced the creation of a spiritual (*pneumatic*) community embodying a living condemnation of both Rome (sovereign power) and Jerusalem (revolution). While Taubes consciously diagnoses Gnostic tendencies in modernity and equally derides Jewish and Christian

Orthodoxy, either for capitulating to the secular orders of this world through their institutionalisation and accommodation to power or (as Jewish mystics and Christian Protestants have done) for ‘interiorising’ faith in order to keep its spiritual message unalloyed from any temporal contamination, he himself exhibits the same attraction towards antinomian negativism in proclaiming that Pauline messianic nihilism should be seen as authorising ‘*no spiritual investment in the world as it is*’ (emphasis added) (Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, p. 103). That said, his struggle with Hegel’s *historiosophy* (see Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009]) makes his antinomianism a lot more complex as he is never certain about how to relate to the ambivalences of the Hegelian dialectics (see Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity*, pp. 166-212).

⁵⁰ See Beker, *Paul the Apostle*; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 1997); Ward Blanton, *A Materialism for the Masses: Saint Paul and the Philosophy of Undying Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁵¹ Douglas Harink, ‘Introduction: From Apocalypse to Philosophy-and Back’, in ed. Douglas Harink, *Paul, Philosophy and the Theopolitical Vision*, p.

⁵² See Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich and Jason Maston (eds.), *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2016).

⁵³ Robert W. Jenson, ‘Eschatology’, in eds. Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Benedict T. Viviano, ‘Eschatology and the Quest for the Historical Jesus’, in ed. Jerry L. Walls, *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ron Cameron, ‘The Anatomy of a Discourse: On ‘Eschatology’ as a Category for Explaining Christian Origins’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 8(3) (1996): 231-245; David E. Aune, ‘Understanding Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic’, *Word and World*, 25(3) (2005): 233-245.

⁵⁴ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1960); Philip G. Ziegler, ‘Some Remarks on Apocalyptic in Modern Christian Theology’ in ed. Blackwell et. al., *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 199-216.

⁵⁵ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁵⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity* (London: A & C Black Publishers Ltd, 1968); Ernst Käsemann, ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology’, in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans W.J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 102; Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of the Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1972); Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Phillips (‘Eschatology and Apocalyptic’) argues that the fact that the two terms are usually juxtaposed in popular Christian imagination -with apocalypticism conjuring up violent images of world destruction and eschatology carrying less violent, yet otherworldly, connotations- has more to do with, on the one hand, modern dispensationalist millenarianism and, on the other hand, post-Barthian eschatological otherworldliness, rather than bearing any direct relationship to the overarching contents and functions of actual apocalyptic texts.

⁵⁸ The arch-statement of this argument is Henri de Lubac’s *Surnaturel: études historiques*, (Paris: Aubier, 1946). See also John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); John Milbank, Graham Ward and Cathrine Pickstock (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998); William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

⁵⁹ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages: Historical Survey*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, p. 13.

⁶¹ *ibid.*: 16.

⁶² Jennifer Rust, 'Political Theologies of the Corpus Mysticum: Schmitt, Kantorowicz and de Lubac' in eds. Graham Hamill and Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Political Theology and Early Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 106.

⁶³ De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, pp. 37-45.

⁶⁴ Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*, p. 28.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*: 30.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*: 37.

⁶⁷ Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, p. 41

⁶⁸ Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*: 11.

⁷⁰ William Cavanaugh, 'From One City to Two: Christian Reimagining of Political Space', *Political Theology*, 7(3) (2006): 299-321, p. 312-3.

⁷¹ Despite the promising revival of eschatology and the idea of mystery as *praxis*, this is a point where both de Lubac's work and Radical Orthodoxy's Christian Neo-Platonism converge in their religious complacency. Their eschatological *already* presupposes a community of salvation constituted outside the dramatic upheavals and undecidabilities of history. Turbulence may rock the ship of the Church, but victory is secured. Hope and faith are not the fruits of anguish and watchfulness, but the markers of a promised life already secured for the Eucharistic community. The transition from the Garden of Eden to the Kingdom of God includes no passage through the Garden of Gethsemane.

⁷² Philips, 'Eschatology and Apocalyptic', p. 291.

⁷³ Neil Elliot, 'The Philosophers' Paul and the Churches' in ed. Peter Frick, *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers*, p. 236; See also, Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Ward Blanton, 'Paul and the Philosophers: Return to a New Archive', in eds. Blanton and de Vries, *Paul and the Philosophers*. But also, Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2015).

⁷⁴ See, for example, Blanton, *A New Materialism for the Masses*; Theodore Jennings, *Outlaw Justice: The Messianic Politics of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).