Living 'As If Not': Pauline Messianism and Continental Political Philosophy

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> "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?... But God has chosen what is foolish in the world to confound the wise; God has chosen what is weak in the world to confound the things which are mighty. And base things and things which are despised in the world hath God chosen, yea, and things that are not, to bring to nought things that are..." (Apostle Paul in first letter to Corinthians).

What might this confounding messianic wisdom have to say to contemporary political philosophy? In *The AntiChrist* Nietzsche cites this passage at length to show how completely out of touch with reality the dysangelist Paul really was. He calls Paul the greatest of all apostles of revenge, an insolent windbag who tries to confound worldly wisdom—but to no effect, says Nietzsche (*AC* 46). Nietzsche notwithstanding, certain recent continental philosophers have been reading Paul the Apostle's confounding letters to great effect, allowing his messianic message to disrupt certain modern conventions, political ontologies and habits of mind; to challenge the technological globalizing wisdom and rulers of this age and to suggest a hidden messianic counter-sovereignty not conceived in any human heart. Modern political theory has often regarded messianic political theology and ethics in particular as a dangerous threat to secular liberal democracy—and not without reason. Yet it is also the case that the first theory of the *saeculum* in the West, Augustine's *City of God*, was developed precisely within a Pauline apocalyptic messianic understanding of history and the political. It is also the case that notions of neutral technology and juridical state sovereignty that underlie current conceptions and embodiments of the secular are themselves dangerously totalitarian, exclusivist and violent, though often hidden beneath the veneer of progressivist liberal assumptions.

This is the position articulated in the apocalyptic messianism of Jewish culture critic Walter Benjamin, whose position is closely related to the Paul of the New Testament on the question of sovereignty (which is the central

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focus of my paper). The political theological concept at the heart of modern secular politics and political theory was given its classical formulation by Carl Schmitt. "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," says Schmitt which requires that sovereignty be seen not in strictly juridical terms but as a limit concept in which there is an agential power behind the law who decides on the "state of emergency" that suspends the normal rule of law. This founding notion of sovereignty must be read together with Schmitt's founding definition of the political, namely, the distinction between friend and enemy. For Schmitt the ultimate challenge to this basic political principle is found in the words of Jesus: "Love your enemies"—which Schmitt, in keeping with conventional Christendom ethics, regards as a private, a spiritual and individual, not a public political ethic. Surely President Bush would agree. So also would ultraliberal Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau have agreed when he invoked the "war measures act" in Canada during the FLQ crisis of 1970, thus deciding the exception which suspended "normal law" in the face of an "emergency situation".

It is precisely this definition of political sovereignty that Walter Benjamin had in mind when he wrote his Eighth Thesis on the philosophy of history:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live... is the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge....

Benjamin clearly sets himself against this secular progressivist politics to which all seeming political options are conformed, and he does so in the name of a "*weak* Messianic power" in which each day is lived as the day of judgment on which the Messiah comes, "not only as the redeemer" but also "as the subduer of Antichrist." Such a "Messianic time" may not be thought within the categories of historicism but only from the perspective of a "*Jetztzeit*", a "real state of emergency" that calls into fundamental question the normal state of emergency—i.e. the politics of modern secular state sovereignty—in which we live. It will bring into view the violent

and destructive foundation of this sovereignty with its homogeneous and totalitarian order by remembering another sovereignty, a Messianic counter-sovereignty that reorders the secular on completely different terms, terms compatible, argue certain recent Continental philosophers, with Paul's gospel.

The apostle Paul stands in the messianic tradition of biblical political theology, where the central overriding claim is "Yahweh is king," a claim that subverts any merely human claim to sovereignty and political authority. This includes (and here is where Paul's messianism begins to scandalize) any claims for the sovereignty of law—whether that law be the Torah mediated by Moses or the Nomos mediated by Greco-Roman philosophy, or (we might add) the Christendom tradition of secular juridical state sovereignty and its many modern liberal copies. "We preach Messiah crucified," says Paul, "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" and to triumphalist globalizing Christians, one might add, a foolish scandal. Paul's messianism will not accommodate conventional discourses of human mastery—which is to say, all conventional political discourses. As Alain Badiou puts it, for Paul the "becoming subject" founded by the messianic event "is a-cosmic and illegal, refusing integration into any totality and signalling nothing." For Badiou, Paul's relevance for the contemporary political situation is precisely to counter the relativism of postmodern identity politics, the multicultural consensus of neo-liberal progressivism that has become conscripted to the globalized logic of capital. Here the only common currency is the abstract imperialist count of commercial and economic homogeneity—an empty universality that cashes out all communitarianisms. The beneficence of contemporary French cosmopolitanism that gets worked up at the sight of a young veiled woman (11) nicely displays this problem.

Into this political context Badiou proposes the radical disruption of Paul's messianic proclamation concerning the conditions for a "universal singularity"that defies the globalizing logic of the count, and its prevailing juridical and economic abstractions. It does so by an appeal to what Badiou calls an "evental truth" that reconfigures the universal messianically with reference to the resurrection, as a human "becoming subject" in relation to a truth that is universal but not abstract. For Badiou, Paul is a "poet-thinker of the event" that neither constitutes nor claims authority from an identity or a law. It cannot therefore be a logic of mastery. Rather it is a discourse of rupture, a discourse of the sending of the Son that is detached from

every particularism and every form of mastery. Paul's apostolic calling is characterized by "militant peregrinations" (19), a "nomad leadership" (67) that is equally out of place everywhere, a "nomadism of gratuitousness" (78) that exceeds every law and therefore disrupts every established identity and difference. Evental grace has a particular site of course but the "becoming subject" that it founds is one that must "displace the experience historically, geographically, ontologically" (99). It can do this, not by escaping the embodied particularity of customs and differences, but rather by "passing through them, within them." As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 9: "For though I am free from all... I have become all things to all people."

For Badiou, then, Paul's messianic logic offers a critique of all onto-theologies, all discourses of mastery rooted in appeals to wisdom and power as divine attributes. It does this by making possible an advent of subjectivity as "becoming son," a process of messianic filiation rooted in the foolish and scandalous power of weakness (1 Cor. 1:17–29). This means that, contra Nietzsche, such a messianic becoming may not become a subject discourse of glorification that builds a new economy of power and wisdom on the strength of the ineffable. Paul will not glory in his mystical visions or try to tell "things that cannot be told;" he will glory only in his weakness. But what is the "real content" of this "naked declaration" that is borne in militant weakness by messianic earthen vessels?

Here the continental clouds of fabulation begin to obscure the figure of the real, of the truth procedure that is in question. Badiou is deeply suspicious of any messianic appeal to the way of the cross. While he wants to insist on a Pauline "subjectivity of refuse," of abasement, this must be detached from any historical particularity that would make of Christ a "master" or an "example" (60). The truth that founds the christian subject is not a matter of historical content; it is a birth, a filiation in which subjects are founded equally and universally as "sons" insofar as they take up the work of filiation. Paul himself may well have contested Badiou's account of the messianic event. This new gnostic politics of fabulation divides what Paul's messianism unites: the cross and resurrection. Like any good worldly philosopher Badiou too is scandalized by both the cross and a resurrection that testifies to a Messiah raised up by divine agency.

But Badiou is faithful to Paul's messianic logic when he says it critiques all onto-theologies, all discourses of mastery rooted in human appeals to wisdom and power as divine attributes. A messianic identity or

movement may not become a discourse of glorification that builds a new economy of power and wisdom on the strength of the ineffable. Paul will glory only in his weakness, in a subjectivity of abasement that continually goes outside itself in loving service. Badiou is very nervous about Christian triumphalism that "glories in the cross," coercively trading in the political capital of sacrificial victimhood (whether that be George Bush, Mel Gibson, or Constantine and the Crusades). This is an understandable worry but for Paul one cannot address it simply by doing away with scandalous messianic content. "Jesus the crucified messiah is cosmic lord" is Paul's claim, one that Badiou doesn't really engage. Badiou's portrait of Paul is indebted to that of another French philosopher, Stanislaus Breton—a Catholic (and therefore perhaps of all people these days most to be despised). Most philosophers are tempted, like Kant, to join the company of liberal Protestant scholars who domesticate Paul's messianism by a) controlling it through scholarly contextualization that gets rid of its political incorrectness, its scandal factor, and b) aligning it with the most progressivist of modern humanisms—liberal democracy and all its colonizing works carried out in the name of sacrificial victims and human rights. In which case, who needs Paul? He really is only finally an embarrassment—and it is the embarrassment factor by which the philosophers I am interpreting are intrigued (to differing degrees).

Let me return to Breton, who argues that for Paul the messianic call to dispossession and critical detachment from prevailing orders of human sovereignty cannot bypass the path of the cross as Badiou does. For Paul the *logos* of the *stauros* (word of the cross) is the very power of God; precisely the scandal of the cross disrupts the humanist appeals of the wise and the strong. In Jesus the crucified messiah the sovereignty of history and all creation is disclosed in the form of the suffering servant, and only those willing to empty themselves of possessive desires that cling graspingly to the eternal form (whether it be a teaching, an ethic or an identity), only those who take the kenotic form of the servant may journey messianically with the eternal in time. Here we may be reminded of Badiou's worry, about a morbid and *ressentiment*-laden glorying in the suffering of the cross. Does not this "path of the cross" simply constitute a reversal of worldly values in which obedient Christians build up heavenly treasures by trading on a divine spiritual economy that denigrates this world only to gain preeminence in the other world? Breton is fully aware of this danger:

He says, "The God of the Cross is not the God of desire, and that is why this God does not know how to be a God of the superlative." What is scandalously revealed in the resurrection event is precisely that the superlative God has died on the Cross—the power of the Cross thus confounds every "what is" that may be desired by the weakness of "what is not," and this "meontological mission" is the focus of Paul's gospel. The power of the Cross is therefore a performative act, a mission that continually moves outside itself in unseen, quotidien service to the least, the lowly, the despised, even those who are not—and thus becomes a foolish spectacle as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things. Such a dispossessive, exilic love serves "what is not" not out of resentment or impotence but because God creatively acts *ex nihilo* (from nothing) in a love that is endlessly kenotic and dispossessive rather than acquisitive and accumulative.

Of course we may ask, what has all this got to do with politics? Is this but a story of the exodus of the soul or the postmodern diaspora self? Breton is clear the logos of the stauros cannot be so understood—it is very much related to an *ekklesia*, those called out to a body politic that cannot be reduced to an experience of the individual soul nor to a church that lives unto itself (whether in a liturgy of adoration or in a separatist isolationist sect). The dispossession displayed in Acts, represented in the sharing of the fractured eucharistic body, must be continued in the diaspora messianic body: "instead of persisting as establishment," Breton writes, "the church must in the final analysis be forgotten in the service of... those who do not exist" Whatever else this might mean it cannot mean anything like a Christian nation or any other self-enclosed political entity—Breton suggests that it will be a politics of "*hos me*"—to make use of the world "as if not" (*hos me*) using it.

This *hos me* political theology is further developed in the interpretations of Paul by the German Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. There is not space to fully lay this out. Of course it is fashionable these days to reclaim the Jewish Paul, but Taubes and Agamben, like Walter Benjamin, are not interested in what is fashionable. At the center of Paul's messianic logic is his declaration of faith in the crucified messiah as the divine act of atonement by which "all Israel" shall be saved. For Taubes this is neither a noetic universalism nor a liberal *nomos* universalism:

"Sure, Paul is also universal," says Taubes, "but by virtue of the 'eye of the needle' of the crucified one, which means: transvaluation of all the values of this world... This is why it carries a political charge." The death of the messiah as a scapegoat, a criminal, signals for Paul nothing less than the end of righteousness based upon law. "Outbidding Moses" Paul's political theology believes the messiah, condemned according to the Law, accomplishes what the Law cannot—namely, the healing of the nations. Hence the place of Moses and the Law is transfigured messianically in the direction of "all Israel," an Israel whose definition can no longer be restricted only to Jews.

This transfiguration, moreover, takes the election of Israel seriously in a manner that is perhaps all the more embarrassing for modern Christianity. The Messiah redeems Israel by extending divine mercy to the unrighteous enemy, even calling "my people" those who were not a people and "beloved" those who were not beloved. In Paul's letter to the Romans this is linked to a mysterious "drama of jealousy" that is paradoxical: "all" will be saved but only by the messianic "remnant" who proclaims mercy to the enemy and to those who are *not* a people. Hence the central importance of enemy love in Paul's political theology, in a (contra Nietzsche) completely non-moralistic way. The sovereign Messiah, by suffering death, bears witness to the breakdown of every human moral claim to self-sufficiency or righteousness. It is *God* who elects a people for the sake of redeeming all, in a politics of messianic suffering and martyrdom where, in the "time that remains" the "called" live *hos me*, "as if they have not." Only such messianic politics will be able to discern that the "state of emergency" in which we live is the norm, and that its task is to bring into view the "real state of emergency" in which divine sovereign action proclaims the messianic exception.

Giorgio Agamben helps us pursue this further. Like Taubes, he emphasizes that Paul is a diaspora Jew whose Greek is neither properly Jewish (Hebrew) nor Greek. He cites Taubes' wonderful story of his student days in Zurich when his teacher in classical Greek, Emil Staiger, confided:

> You know, Taubes, yesterday I was reading the Letters of the Apostle Paul. To which he added, with great bitterness: But that isn't Greek, it's Yiddish! Upon which I said: Yes, Professor, and that's why I understand it! (Taubes, 3–4).

Paul speaks the language of Jews in exile in a manner that works over the host language from within and confounds its identity. The messianic is

precisely related to this diaspora linguistic situation. In order to understand how this relates to the politics of a messianic community, Agamben reflects first on what he calls the structure of messianic time, expressed in I Corinthians 7:29: "the kairos has been contracted; in what remains, let those who have... live *hos me* as though they have not..." This is what Benjamin calls "*Die Jetztzeit*"—the time of the "now" in which the accumulative flow of *chronos* is interrupted, burst open or "contracted" by a Messianic event that coincides with the very "*Figur*" that is human history.

For example, Paul refers to himself frequently as *doulos*, slave of the Messiah. This is a juridical term that Paul now confounds from within, since the sovereign Lord whom the *doulos* serves is a crucified Messiah. As such the condition of *doulos* is itself transformed, and it stands for a general transformation of worldly-political-social conditions here blasted out of the continuum of history. This also has everything to do with the language of "calling"—Paul's calling as *doulos* of the Messiah but also the calling (*klesis*) of the *ekklesia* further described in 1 Cor. 7:17f. in confounding relation to worldly "callings"—"remain with God in the calling in which you have been called"—including that of a slave. Contrary to Weber's secularization thesis where "calling" indicates an eschatological indifference to the worldly, Agamben shows that for Paul "calling" is the language of messianic transformation (39, 41f.). Above all, it stands for the nullification and revocation of every vocation (43f.).

The nullification of every worldly vocation here is not abandoning the world for an "elsewhere" but is a dwelling within it in dispossession, thus confounding its identity from within and allowing the power of God to transform it in keeping with its true condition or "figure," that is, its "passing away" toward an end that lies beyond it. In other words, the messianic is not a new identity with its own set of rights; it is rather the power to use without possessing. In this way worldly vocations and identities are never "replaced" by something new, but there is rather a "making new" that occurs within them that transfigures and opens them up to their true use in keeping with their true condition. In effect this is a slavery liberated from juridical bondage to worldly possession for free creaturely action. For Benjamin this weak messianic power accomplishes what Marx's proletariat revolution cannot. It hollows out the progressivist, abstracting grip of the capitalist count from within, and yet with reference to the very sovereign power of creation—i.e., redeeming love. For Paul the *ekklesia* is

precisely this classless society where all are freed by becoming slaves of the messiah. They become free not by possessing rights nor by taking over the instruments of power for their own superior Christian control, but precisely by using the world "as if not"—in a dispossessive manner that assesses the value of each particular thing or relation with reference to the passage of God in the world.

This "as if not" messianic ethic is therefore the opposite of Kant's "as if" moral universal that strives to possess an ideal (Kant says: act *as if* God, immortality, and freedom exist as regulative ideals). Paul's position is rooted in a kenotic movement of dispossession that cannot become yet another act of (self) legislation; it relinquishes its moral striving and its hold—whether of the technological means of progressive liberation from the decay of nature, or the political means of liberating particular identities from the burdens of oppression. The point is rather to open up all worldly callings to the transfiguring passage of God—through slavery to the sovereign crucified Messiah. Here it is necessary to get beyond possessive identities and aspirations altogether via messianic healing. With Karl Barth and Franz Kafka, the Pauline messianic subject "knows that in messianic time, the saved world coincides exactly with the lost world"—there is no path to salvation except via self-losing service to what cannot be saved. This is why both Kafka and Barth emphasized the secular language of the parable as the proper discourse for ethics: the parabolic reversal of conventional criteria by which we measure strength and weakness, success and failure.

In the secular present, all knowledge and prophecy is "in part" but the messianic body looks forward in hope to the "all in all." The only way to relate "in part" to the all, in Paul's view, is through self-sacrificing love. It is the patient, non-possessive "waiting" of love that constitutes the messianic time in which the messianic body is called to live. The remnant therefore is not the possessive object of salvation so much as its instrument in the ministry of reconciliation, and it is precisely the kenotic movement toward the "unsavable" that effects salvation. In Kafka's parabolic formulation, "there is salvation, but not for us."

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