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## THE TRUTH OF PAUL ACCORDING TO ALAIN BADIOU

### *Introduction*

In 1997 Alain Badiou published a small book entitled *Saint Paul - La fondation de l'universalisme*. This book – one of the first by Badiou to be translated into English – is among his bestselling works, and has played a major role in the rapidly accelerating popularity he is currently experiencing, far beyond the borders of his native France. At the same time, Badiou's book appeared to be the starting signal for an increasing interest in Paul, and in Christian theology more generally, among several other significant contemporary philosophers and critics.<sup>1</sup> This interest, which in itself may well be remarkable, is certainly no less extraordinary given that the majority of these philosophers consider themselves Marxists or Atheists or, like Badiou himself, both.

Perhaps due to this particular context, there exists a certain tendency in both philosophical and theological circles to read Badiou's book on Paul as part of a larger 'turn' towards or 'return' of religion and theology in the field of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> It is evident from the literature that deals with it that this turn or return is a complex phenomenon, encompassing aspects of very different philosophical traditions.<sup>3</sup> However, it also expresses itself in a number of more general trends, which can be roughly categorised into three distinct but partially overlapping positions. Firstly, those who advocate a 'post-metaphysical' approximation of philosophy and theology (e.g. Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo) based on the deconstruction of any absolute opposition between faith and

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<sup>1</sup> Among others: Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Michel Serres, Jean-Luc Nancy, Terry Eagleton and Antonio Negri.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Edna Maccaffrey, *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics* (London: Palgrave, 2009); Victoria Barker, "After the Death of God: Postsecularity?", *Journal of Religious History* 33.1 (March 2009): 82-95; Bruce Benson, "Radical Democracy and Radical Christianity", *Political Theology* 10.2 (2009): 247-259; John Roberts, "The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part II: The Pauline Tradition", *Historical Materialism* 16.3 (2008): 77-103.

<sup>3</sup> The theological and religious turn in philosophy has been discussed among other places in the following works: Niels Grønkjær, *Return of God: Theological Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 1998); Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

knowledge, religion and reason. Secondly, those who speak in favour of a 'post-secular' society that recognizes and seeks to draw advantage from religion's moral resources and potential for social mobilization (e.g. Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor), as a response to the difficulties that a purely scientific and rationalistic approach seems to have in addressing many of the contemporary human problems. Thirdly, those who explore new prospects in parts of the Christian theological tradition for revitalizing Marxist or anti-capitalist politics of emancipation (e.g. Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben), in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the celebration of the so-called 'post-ideological' age. Among the more general issues or themes that characterize this 'turn' are the three following: (i) A discussion of the relationship between philosophy and theology; (ii) a problematization of the dichotomy between the secular and the religious, and by extension, (iii) a renewed interest in the relationship between religion and politics.

In this paper, I will not be presenting a detailed, systematic discussion of these different positions or an examination of the above issues that these positions seem to share. Rather, I simply want to argue that we risk arriving at a grave misunderstanding, not only of Badiou's book on Paul, but also more generally of his position in relation to the above issues, if we read it in the context of and as part of this 'turn' towards religion. I thus propose that we commence our reading of *Saint Paul* by taking seriously Badiou's statement on the very first page of the book, that: "Basically, I have never really connected Paul with religion."<sup>4</sup> The central question I will examine in this paper is therefore: If it is not religion that Badiou relates Paul to, then what is it?

The exposition of this question will, as we shall see, also offer the opportunity to further clarify Badiou's position regarding the above issues concerning the relationship between philosophy and religion, and religion and politics. This does, however, necessitate a broader inclusion of the rest of Badiou's oeuvre, so despite *Saint Paul* being the focal point of this paper, what follows is not exactly a 'study' of that book as such. Nor is it my ambition to extract any 'implicit' theology hidden in Badiou's book, or to evaluate Badiou's contribution to the field of New Testament exegesis. Although Badiou certainly claims his philosophy (including his reception of Paul) to be of an irreligious and non-theological nature, this does of course not preclude it from theological interpretations, as he himself has stressed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou gives the following reason for this stance: "[...] the religious co-opting of my work exists. It exists however, for profound reasons. It is not only the result of my reference to Paul. It exists because when your work concerns the relation between truth and the event you are necessarily exposed to a religious interpretation. You cannot avoid it. You are exposed because you are no longer confined to the strictly empirical or ontological field"

But neither does it, in my opinion, entail that it cannot be of any theological interest unless it is subjected to an explicitly theological interpretation. The aim in this paper is rather to read *Saint Paul* with sound background in Badiou's work as a whole, to clarify his broader philosophical errand with Paul; an errand which is certainly not without theological relevance. The central problem in the following is, as we shall see, the question of how we should conceptualize truth.

### *I. Method and Truth*

Badiou has written extensively about key literary figures such as Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Samuel Beckett, but unlike many of his contemporary equally literature-interested colleagues – such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – he has never been particularly preoccupied with the issues of philosophy of language. While Badiou, in his reading of canonical works of philosophy and literary classics, makes a great deal of deliberations about the method and stylistic features of the authors he examines, there are hardly any general hermeneutical or literary-theoretical reflections on his own method in his work.<sup>6</sup> The book on Paul is no exception in this respect. If it is nevertheless worthwhile to make a few reflections on Badiou's unspoken approach in this book, it is because the question of method anticipates in an instructive manner one of the issues that are at the core in the following, namely the question of the relationship between religion and philosophy.

#### *(a) Formalization versus Hermeneutics*

In terms of considerations of his own approach in *Saint Paul*, Badiou restricts himself to state briefly in the prologue of the book that he does not read Paul's letters as sacred texts, but instead reads them "[...] the way one returns to those old classic texts with which one is particularly familiar; their paths well worn, their details abolished, their power preserved."<sup>7</sup> With this description of Paul's letter as 'classical' one could think that what Badiou is advocating is a hermeneutic approach similar to, for instance Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose notion of the 'classical' refers precisely to the 'lasting power' of an artwork in the form of an, in principle, inexhaustible potential for further interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

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("An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion", *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture* 3.1(2005): 38-42, 40. This also suggests, contrary to what might seem most obvious, that the theological essence, if there is any, in Badiou's work, should not be sought primarily in the book on Paul, but rather, and thus with more far-reaching consequences, at the very core of Badiou's philosophical system.

<sup>6</sup> On this issue of lack of methodological reflections in Badiou's work, see Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, "Postface: Aletory Rationalism" in Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), 260-264.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1993), 289-290.

That is certainly not the case. Badiou explicitly denies that his reading of Paul's letters should be taken as hermeneutic. As he states very clearly, his business is not the revelation of a (hidden) meaning within the writings of Paul.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the unspoken approach of Badiou, is best described as an antipode to hermeneutics. Badiou thus places himself within a broad philosophical and cultural trend in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the persistent contrast between interpretation and formalization, content and form, history and structure.<sup>10</sup> One of the absolute summits of this confrontation between hermeneutics and formalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy took place in the sixties with the heyday of French structuralism. And Badiou is indeed deeply rooted in this tradition, not only due to the stimulation of Louis Althusser, who was his teacher at the École Normale Supérieure, but also in terms of the lasting influence of Jacques Lacan's continuation of Freudian psychoanalysis on his work. That being said, the most decisive influence on Badiou in this respect is no doubt his engagement with modern mathematics, which right from the beginning has left – and continues to leave – significant marks on his philosophy. Although he does not use the term 'formalization' in *Saint Paul*, it seems none the less to be an obvious designation of Badiou's approach, not least since it is a recurring concept throughout his writings and a concept which he explicitly sets in contrast to hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup>

Formalization, in broad terms basically the process through which a relatively informal practice or way of thinking is given formal expression. In this respect the formalization of mathematics in axiomatic form, such as in Euclid's *Elements*, is of course paradigmatic. Badiou, however, also uses the word in a somewhat wider sense. For example, in his book *The Century*, in which he, in addition to the formalization of

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<sup>9</sup> Badiou, "An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion", 38.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou has described aspects of this tendency, for example in *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012), li-lxiii.

<sup>11</sup> Initially it was specifically the formalization of mathematics that interested Badiou, a subject which he deals with in his first book *Le Concept de modèle* from 1969. However, the question of formalization, not only in mathematics, but also in art and politics, is a recurring theme in his authorship, and one that continues to be of importance, for instance in his considerations on the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the book *The Century*. Here he opposes formalization to hermeneutics in the following manner: "The century has come to an end, we have to make its wager ours, the wager on the univocity of the real against the equivocality of semblance. To declare anew, and perhaps this time (who knows?) win, the war within thought which belonged to the century, but which already opposed Plato and Aristotle: the war of formalization against interpretation" (Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 164). For an extensive discussion of the term formalization and Badiou's diverse use of it, see: "The Concept of Model, Forty years later: An Interview with Alain Badiou" in Alain Badiou, *The Concept of the Model: An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, trans. Zachary L. Fraser and Tzuchien Tho (Melbourne: Re.press, 2007), 79-104.

modern mathematics, also describes the new artistic (Avant-gardism) and political (Leninism) practices of the 20th century as the formalization of these areas. The important thing in this context is that, in contrast to a hermeneutic approach, formalization in Badiou's terms is not a matter of interpretation or understanding, rather the exact opposite; it is a matter of the deterrence of interpretation. As Badiou underlines in *The Century*: "If the work must be interpreted, if it can be interpreted, it is because too much particularity still survives within it, because it has failed to reach the pure transparency of the act, because it has bared its real."<sup>12</sup> It must be stressed that the 'real' here should not be taken in the sense of 'reality'. On the contrary, Badiou opposes these two terms in such a way that 'reality', counter to the popular use of the word, assumes the nature of ideology, in the sense that: "It is reality [la réalité] that constitutes an obstacle to the uncovering of the real [le réel] as pure surface."<sup>13</sup> Reality implies, contrary to the pure surface of the real, a depth in so far that it is assumed to *contain* something, a content that begs to be represented and interpreted; in short begs for a hermeneutic. In contrast, Badiou propose that "[...] access to the real is secured through form [...]"<sup>14</sup> Whereas hermeneutics always seeks to interpret content, the formalist approach will evacuate or 'subtract' – and thus exclude the interpretation of – any content. Formalization thus invokes, through this indifference to content, a distance to reality, making it possible to break with its ideological representations and thereby encounter the real. However, it must be stressed that this is not a question of isolating form from content; formalization is not a representation of the real in terms of pure form. The real "[...] is not captured *in* form;

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<sup>12</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 64. Badiou's use of the concept 'the real' is strongly inspired by Lacan. Badiou clarifies this inspiration in following way: "What especially interested me about Lacan was his conception of the real. First, the distinction he makes between the real and reality, which is not the same as the classical metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality, or between phenomenon and noumenon. And in particular, this conception of the real as being, in a situation, in any given symbolic field, the point of impasse, or the point of impossibility, which precisely allows us to think the situation as a whole according to the real." (Alain Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou", *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 3.3 (1998): 113-133, 124). Thus, the real is not reality, but rather that which simultaneously urges and escapes the representations of reality. While both Lacan and Badiou thus understand the real as an 'impasse', Badiou however argues, in contrast to Lacan, that the real, is not only a vanishing point, but that it can be given some form of consistence or passage through formalization: "If, as Lacan says, the real is the impasse of formalization [...], we must venture from this point that formalization is the impasse of the real" (Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 23). On differences between Lacan and Badiou regarding 'the real' see Slavoj Žižek, "From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real" in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 171-178.

<sup>14</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 109.

it *transits through form*.”<sup>15</sup> Formalization is thus rather a way to participate in the real. An act through which the real passes and is encountered.<sup>16</sup>

The reading, which Badiou presents in *Saint Paul*, can initially be described as formalization in the sense that what interests Badiou in the Pauline epistles is certainly not the content of these letters - in short, the message of the death and resurrection of Christ. To Badiou this message is but an irrelevant fable. What interests Badiou is solely the formal structure of that which is stated. Or more precisely, the formal structure of the particular concept or theory of truth which he thinks is laid out in Paul's letters. That the form, not content, is the focal point of Badiou's reading of Paul, is highlighted in several places in the book, including on the very first pages where Badiou states that:

It will be objected that, in the present case, for us 'truth' designates a mere fable. Granted, but what is important is the subjective gesture grasped in its founding power with respect to the generic conditions of universality. That the content of the fable must be abandoned leaves as its remainder the form of these conditions and, in particular, the ruin of every attempt to assign the discourse of truth to preconstituted historical aggregates.<sup>17</sup>

In his reading of Paul's letters, first and foremost Romans and Galatians, Badiou includes a number of key concepts from his major work *Being and Event* to elucidate Paul's conception of truth. Concepts such as 'event', 'evental site', 'situation', 'state of the situation', 'naming', 'intervention', 'forcing' and 'fidelity'. Badiou develops this terminology throughout *Being and Event* to unfold a new and deeply original theory of truth and subject, which has modern mathematical set theory as its main source of inspiration and which, furthermore, can be expressed in the strictly formalist discourse of this discipline. Although it is not explicitly expressed in the book, it seems reasonable to suggest that the

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<sup>15</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 154.

<sup>16</sup> In *Théorie de sujet*, published in 1982, Badiou emphasizes that: "We need a theory of the pass of the real, in the breach opened up by formalization. Here, the real is no longer only what can be lacking from his place, but what passes through by force" (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 23). Badiou's theory of the subject, further elaborated in the 1988 volume of *Being and Event*, is just such a theory, in so far that he conceptualizes the subject precisely as the point of forcing through which that which in a given situation is impossible becomes possible in the form of a truth. Or in the words of Badiou himself: "The impasse of being [...] is in truth the pass of the Subject" (Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 429.

In *The Century*, Badiou also mentions two other approaches to the real besides 'formalization', namely 'purification' and 'subtraction'. For a discussion of these different approaches see Žižek, "From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real," 178.

<sup>17</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 6.

concept of truth which Badiou outlines in Paul's letters, by describing its formal conditions through his own terminology, should be understood as a kind of formalization of Paul's conception of truth. A conception of truth which does not revolve around interpretation and understanding, but which by way of Badiou's conceptual apparatus is formalized as a process and an act or gesture. This implies, as Badiou puts it in *Being and Event*, that: "[...] truth is not a matter of contemplation - or immobile knowledge - but of intervention."<sup>18</sup> Thus, it seems natural to ask whether Badiou also can be said to understand Paul's own venture as a kind of formalization. I will return briefly to this issue at the end of this paper.

*(b) Intervention versus Interpretation*

When Badiou rejects a hermeneutic reading of Paul, it should also be seen in the light of a more profound confrontation in Badiou's work with the so-called 'linguistic turn', which he sees as a reflection of the historicist and relativist character of contemporary philosophy. He therefore tends to describe the latter as 'sophistry' rather than actual philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Badiou sees contemporary philosophy as dominated by three orientations, a German hermeneutic orientation, an Anglo-American analytical orientation and a French post-modern orientation, which, despite their apparent differences, share the trait that they have abandoned one of the most basic concepts of philosophy, namely the concept of truth.<sup>20</sup> This classical philosophical concept, Badiou argues, is firmly rejected today across the traditional philosophical divides in favour of an overriding focus on language.<sup>21</sup> Or, as he puts it in his rather polemic diagnosis of the present in the first chapter of *Saint Paul*: "The progressive reduction of the question of truth (and hence, of thought) to a linguistic form [...] [is] a point on which Anglophone analytical ideology and the hermeneutical tradition both concur [...]"<sup>22</sup> Most contemporary philosophers will thus guard themselves against any notion of Truth, with its essentialist and totalitarian connotations, focusing instead more modestly on

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<sup>18</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 212.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY University Press, 1999), 97-101; Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2003), 39-57; Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), 3-22. This opposition to the 'linguistic turn' has been given more prominence in Badiou's later work, but it can be detected as early as in *Theory of the Subject* (p. 188).

<sup>20</sup> Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 43-47.

<sup>21</sup> According to Badiou the consequence of this is that philosophy is abandoned in its 'locus classicus', in which the concept of truth is the fulcrum. This abandonment of classical or proper philosophy is clearly expressed in the announcement of 'the end of metaphysics', which in varied versions is put forth by all of these three philosophical orientations. In contrast, the basic ambition of *Being and Event* and its sequel *Logics of Worlds* is on precisely show that (and how) philosophy is still - or rather - once again, possible.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 6.

the diversity of historically specific 'narratives', 'discourse rules' and 'language games'. This dismissal or dilution of the concept of truth in contemporary philosophy is in Badiou's view expressed in several ways, however, in our context the main issue is the transformation that this concept undergoes with the hermeneutical tradition.

In the 20th century, hermeneutics launched a devastating critique of the so-called 'correspondence theoretical' definition of truth, which has not only been predominant in the history of philosophy, but also widely presumed outside the philosophical sphere. The 'correspondence theoretical' conception of truth rests on the common presupposition that truth first of all is a matter of 'correctness'. Truth is here construed as the accordance between an assertion and the matter that the assertion refers to, in other words, as 'correspondence' between language and reality. Hermeneutics replaces this 'correspondence theoretical' definition of truth with an understanding of truth as an event.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in the (early) works of Martin Heidegger, truth is understood as the event (*Wahrheitsgeschehen*) in which being is simultaneously revealed and veiled. Heidegger accentuates this ambiguous trait through his use of the ancient Greek word for truth, *ἀλήθεια*, which he translates as *Unverborgenheit*, i.e. 'unconcealment'. Since there will always be something veiled or hidden in that which is revealed or manifest, truth always requires an explication or interpretation. As a result of this the question of truth is thus transformed to a question of meaning, and in Heidegger's case more specifically, '*die frage nach dem sinn von sein*.' A meaning, which, by virtue of this structure of simultaneous disclosure and concealment, never can be determined once and for all, but is rather open to continual re-interpretation. And so, in this perspective any philosophy which continues to take as its task the question of truth must inevitably be some sort of hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup>

While Badiou wholeheartedly endorses the refutation presented by Heidegger, and in the hermeneutical tradition, of the correspondence theory of truth, and the epistemological paradigm upon which this theory rests, he just as determinately rejects hermeneutics' linkage of truth and meaning as a decline of the concept of truth.<sup>25</sup> He thus

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<sup>23</sup> This is the case of two of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most important works of philosophical hermeneutics, namely Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.

<sup>24</sup> However, according to Heidegger, or at least in Badiou's sketch in *Manifesto for Philosophy* (p. 47-59) of 'Heidegger viewed as commonplace', it is not at all philosophy, suffering as it is from 'a metaphysical forgetfulness of being', but poetry, which is able to think being as a truth-event. In Badiou's view Heidegger thereby practically gives up on philosophy and reduces it to poetry.

<sup>25</sup> Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 61, 85. The relationship between Heidegger's and Badiou's concept of truth is not as straightforward as it might seem; it cannot be reduced to a question of either opposition or accordance. As it has been pointed out by several commentators there is obviously a number of immediate parallels between Heidegger and Badiou on the issue of

implicitly rejects hermeneutics as genuine philosophy. According to Badiou this linkage of truth and meaning is indeed rather the very definition of religion: "I propose to call 'religion' everything that presupposes that there is a continuity between truth and the circulation of meaning."<sup>26</sup> With its 'revealed-hidden' structure, the concept of meaning – in parallel with the Christian concept of revelation – is something which is simultaneously constitutive and evasive; sustaining an underlying inaccessibility, which, in Badiou's mind, is incompatible with modernity's declaration of the death of God, and in direct opposition to the demythologizing agenda of contemporary philosophy.

Although religion is rarely subject to immediate consideration in Badiou's work, it nevertheless – like 'sophism' and 'antiphilosophy' – plays a definite part, namely that of a negative contrast, in his endeavour to (re)define philosophy. And so, there is a rather unambiguous relationship of opposition between religion and hermeneutics on one side, and philosophy on the other. Or in Badiou's words: "Philosophy is distinct from religion because it breaks with hermeneutics."<sup>27</sup> Badiou's issues with hermeneutics can therefore not be reduced to a matter of mere methodology. It is rather, with the concept of truth as its pivot, a matter of fundamentally colliding definitions of what philosophy (and religion) are. This is quite evident in the following passage from a text on Althusser's conception of philosophy, which therefore deserves to be quoted in full length:

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truth: Both of them rejects the correspondence theory of truth, both of them contrasts truth and knowledge, both of them link truth to an event and they both relate the event and truth with concepts like 'nothing' and 'the void' (Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2003), 19). However, even though Badiou does not himself comment very extensively on Heidegger's concept of truth (for one of his more thorough comments see *Infinite Thought*, 58-61), it is indisputable that he locates Heidegger in the hermeneutical tradition and explicitly links him to the notion of 'meaning'. This matter thus calls for a more in depth inquire than possible in this context. We can perhaps in brief say that the main differences between Heidegger's and Badiou's concept of truth is, first, that while the latter understands truth as a 'subtraction' from being, to the former truth is always the truth of being. For Heidegger truth is, as Badiou puts it, "[...] the very veiling of being in its withdrawal (retrait)" (Badiou, *Conditions*, 130). And second, whereas Heidegger identifies truth and event (as evident from his use of the word 'Wahrheitsgeschehen'), in Badiou's terms an event and the truth that occurs in its wake are two separate things, since the latter comes into existence only through the post-evental work of subtractive intervention and fidelity.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Conditions*, 24. This (rather wide) definition of religion is consistent throughout Badiou's (later) writings.

<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *Conditions*, 14. The identification of religion and hermeneutics is furthermore affirmed, though in positive manner, inside the hermeneutical tradition itself by Gadamer (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 428).

Within philosophy itself, it [Althusser's conception of philosophy] distances it from all hermeneutical conception of philosophy. This is an extremely precious heritage. The idea of philosophy as questioning and openness always paves the way, as we know, for the return of the religious. I use 'religion' here to describe the axiom according to which a truth is always a prisoner of the arcana of meaning and a matter for interpretation and exegesis. There is an Althusserian brutality to the concept of philosophy that recalls, in that respect, Nietzsche. Philosophy is affirmative and combative, and it is not a captive of the somewhat viscous delights of deferred interpretation. In terms of philosophy, Althusser maintains the presupposition of atheism, just as others, such as Lacan, maintain it in anti-philosophy. That presupposition can be expressed in just one sentence: truths have no meaning. It follows that philosophy is an act and not an interpretation.<sup>28</sup>

Against this background, one can say that Badiou's method can best be understood as a philosophical act in the sense that it takes the form of an intervention rather than an interpretation, but also in the sense that his formalist reading of Paul is part of a broader foray into the discussion (which as we have seen, indirectly touches on the question of religion) about what philosophy is. That is, into the discussion about whether philosophy is in fact at all possible any more. The book on Paul is thus very much a part of Badiou's own particular agenda, and he concludes the prologue of *Saint Paul* by emphasizing that: "My intention, clearly, is neither historicizing nor exegetical. It is subjective through and through."<sup>29</sup> A clarification of what this subjective intention more precisely entails, and how it will be unfolded by Badiou, is the main objective of the rest of this paper. Let us begin, however, by taking a brief detour via one of designations or titles that Badiou gives to Paul.

## II. Antiphilosophy

In the very first pages of *Saint Paul*, Badiou stresses, as I have already mentioned, that he does not relate Paul to religion. He does, however, use another remarkable term in his description of Paul's letters, namely 'antiphilosophy'. Though, Paul is far from the only one to whom Badiou attributes this term, which he apparently borrows from Jacques Lacan.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, since the early 1990s,

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<sup>28</sup> Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 2009), 67.

<sup>29</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> In an interview Badiou states that: "Lacan declared himself to be an 'antiphilosopher'. It is partly thanks to him that I began to ask myself, in a fairly systematic way, what might be declared antiphilosophical, what was it that characterized antiphilosophical thought, why certain kinds of thought constitute themselves as

antiphilosophy has been a recurring theme in Badiou's attempt to elucidate his conception of philosophy, and is thus a relatively well-defined category in the late writings.<sup>31</sup> It will therefore be worthwhile to look more closely at what Badiou means by antiphilosophy, how he uses the term in his attempt to separate philosophy from religion and what role the reading of Paul plays in this.

If one reads the texts in which Badiou addresses the theme of antiphilosophy, it is possible to extrapolate a number of rather constant characteristics, which still – due to their manifold combinations – allow the group of thinkers that Badiou places under this heading, to appear as a fairly heterogeneous entity. In a rather long article on Wittgenstein's antiphilosophy, Badiou outlines the following three characteristics or operations, which in his opinion have defined antiphilosophy ever since it began with Heraclitus.<sup>32</sup> Firstly, antiphilosophy is characterized by a linguistic and genealogical critique of philosophy that dismantles its pretensions to truth and systematism. This aspect is also reflected in the interventionist character and fragmentary style of antiphilosophy. Second, antiphilosophy tries to lay bare what is left of philosophy, when deprived of its drapery and ornaments (e.g. Nietzsche's detection of the figure of the reactive priest behind the lies about 'truth'). Herein lies, as there does in the antiphilosophical critique of philosophy's truth-pretensions, a desire to judge philosophy. Thirdly, in opposition to what antiphilosophy deems to be the abstract figment and theorization of philosophy, it invokes a non-philosophical or super-philosophical, more honest and radically ground-breaking act (e.g. Nietzsche's revaluation of values), through which the unutterable is attested. More precisely: "The antiphilosophical act consists in letting what there is be manifested, insofar as 'that which there is' is precisely that which no true proposition can say."<sup>33</sup> A

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hostile to philosophy" (Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124). Badiou also underlines that Lacan opened a new career for this word, which originally in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was used as a term for the enemies of the philosophes of the enlightenment (Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, 53). As Bruno Bosteels shows in an outstanding article, the word attains a new meaning in Badiou's work, which cannot be reduced to the meaning that Lacan gave to it (Bruno Bosteels, "Radical Antiphilosophy", *Filozofski vestnik* 29.2. (2008): 155–187.

<sup>31</sup> During a four-year period (1992-1996) Badiou dedicated his seminars to the systematic clarification of the antiphilosophy of four figures of this tradition: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lacan and Paul. This furthermore led to the publication of a number of texts which, to lesser or greater extent, deals with the antiphilosophy of these writers. Additionally, there are a number of scattered remarks in Badiou's work on antiphilosophy, also in relation to other thinkers such as Pascal, Rousseau and Kierkegaard. And in *Saint Paul* it is indeed first of all other antiphilosophers, predominantly Nietzsche and Pascal, but also Lacan, that Badiou brings Paul into discussion with.

<sup>32</sup> Alain Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (Verso, London 2001), 75-82.

<sup>33</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 80.

paradigmatic example is of course the revelation, or as in Pascal the miracle, as a testimony of God's action. To these three characteristics one could add a fourth, namely antiphilosophy's conception of the relationship between life and work as a guarantor of authenticity; contrary to philosophy's claim that it, by referencing to a universal reason, speaks in the name of all: "For an antiphilosopher, the enunciative position is obviously part of the statement's protocol. No discourse can lay claim to truth if it does not contain an explicit answer to the question: Who speaks?"<sup>34</sup> This is expressed in the way the antiphilosopher includes his biography in his work, which thus often acquires confession-like character, as is the case with, for example, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and Paul's epistles.<sup>35</sup>

The identification of the traits of antiphilosophy are to be seen in relation to Badiou's insistence, in opposition to the announcement of 'the end of metaphysics' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the need to re-actualize philosophy as an independent discipline, with a subject matter that will not be reduced to Positivist epistemology, Marxist ideology critique, or Poststructuralist deconstruction. One of the most important and original moves in this attempt to retain the uniqueness of philosophy has been Badiou's persistent assertion of the need to rethink three of philosophy's most central, but also the most problematical, concepts. As he declares in his *Manifesto for philosophy*:

I postulate not only that philosophy is possible today, but that this possibility does not take the form of a final stage. On the contrary, the crux of the matter is to know what the following means: taking one more step. A single step. A step within the modern configuration, the one that since Descartes has bound the three nodal concepts of being, truth and the subject to the conditions of philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

However, for Badiou, this endeavour to re-establish the independence of philosophy also involves an attempt to redefine the rivals of philosophy. Among this one finds, as hinted above, what Badiou considers to be the contemporary version of the sophists of the antique world. Taking his lead from Plato, Badiou underlines the need, at the same time, to listen to these contemporary sophists, since their relativism holds a warning for philosophy – not to regress to any absolutism of truth, and to delineate oneself from their linguistic devaluation of the concept of truth, in order to attain a more lucid profile of philosophy itself.<sup>37</sup> In addition

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<sup>34</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.; cf. Alan Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event II*, trans. A. Toscano (London: Continuum), 557.

<sup>36</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Badiou, *Conditions*, 3-25. Cf. Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 97-101.

to the sophists, but also partly overlapping with them, the main opponents of philosophy are the line of thinkers that Badiou groups under the term 'antiphilosophy'. Despite the fact that 'antiphilosophy', as the word implies, is in opposition to philosophy, like 'sophism', the term does not have a purely negative meaning to Badiou: "'Antiphilosophy' certainly does not offend me, since it represents the major determination, in my view, of works of the calibre of Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Lacan."<sup>38</sup> As with the sophists, it may also be worthwhile for philosophy to listen to its anti-philosophical rivals, but as a means to restoring its own independence.<sup>39</sup> The question is, however, in what does this independence consist?

According to Badiou, philosophy is always conditioned by something outside itself. More explicitly, the conditions of philosophy are the events, which occur in the fields of science, art, politics and love, and it is its task to grasp and name the truths that are created within these four areas in the wake of such events.<sup>40</sup> But Badiou also stresses the absolute necessity that philosophy keeps a certain distance from its conditions in order to avoid forming what he calls 'sutures' to these. Sutures are formed when philosophy either identifies itself completely with or surrenders its function to one or more of its conditions. In both those cases, philosophy is reduced to something else, be it science, aesthetics, political science or psychoanalysis. Philosophy is thus only philosophy if it manages to sustain a certain distance to its own conditions.<sup>41</sup> A similar ambiguity exists in philosophy's relationship towards its rivals. In order to retain its independence, philosophy needs to maintain a balance in its relationships to sophism and antiphilosophy, which, as mentioned, are not to be understood as being in absolute opposition to philosophy, but rather as something like internal tensions within the philosophical tradition. The relationship between philosophy and its rivals is moreover related to the question of the relationship between philosophy and its conditions in the sense that sophism and antiphilosophy tend to privilege one of these conditions, thereby forming sutures. For instance, in the case of Wittgenstein, philosophy is turned into what Badiou describes as 'archi-aesthetics', whereas Nietzsche's antiphilosophy is characterized as 'archi-politics'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2004), 49. Elsewhere Badiou states that: "In the end, my theory is that philosophy should always think as closely as possible to antiphilosophy" (Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy - An interview with Alain Badiou," 124).

<sup>39</sup> As Badiou declares in *Conditions*: "A contemporary philosopher, for me, is indeed someone who has the unfaltering courage to work through Lacan's antiphilosophy" (Badiou, *Conditions*, 129).

<sup>40</sup> See chapter two in *Conditions* (p. 23-25) for a short and concise sketch of Badiou's conception of philosophy.

<sup>41</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 61-67.

<sup>42</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 80 and Alain Badiou, "Who is Nietzsche?", *Pli: Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2000): 1-11, 4.

Another significant reason philosophy needs to retain a close relation to antiphilosophy is that, despite the fact that antiphilosophy includes certain religious traits (primarily the idea of a manifestation of the unutterable through a ground-breaking revelatory act), antiphilosophy constitutes a reminder to philosophy of its own religious tendencies, namely its tendency to reduce truth to a matter of opinion. This relationship between antiphilosophy and philosophy, which could be described as a relationship of 'critique of religion', is further complicated in Paul's case. As Badiou makes clear throughout his discussion in *Saint Paul* of the two antiphilosophers, Paul and Pascal, Paul distinguishes himself by displaying a critical distance from the sort of religious inclinations of antiphilosophy which are reflected in Pascal's conception of the miracle as proof of truth. Badiou accentuates this element of critique of religion within Paul's letters in the following manner: "[...] it cannot be denied that there is in him [Paul], and he is alone in this among the recognized apostles, an ethical dimension of antiobscurantism. For Paul will not permit the Christian declaration to justify itself through the ineffable."<sup>43</sup> According to Badiou, Paul refuses to justify the Christian message (i.e. the event of resurrection) through anything, but his own subjective statement, that is, solely through the declaration of and fidelity to this event. He refrains from covering the weakness this entails with the tacit authority of the miracle, which in Badiou's perspective ultimately makes Paul more rational than Pascal.<sup>44</sup> What is important in our context is that Badiou paradoxically consults Paul to produce a critical distance between the religious concept of the miracle, that Pascal advocates, and a concept of the event, which occupies a key position in Badiou's own philosophical edifice. This manoeuvre by Badiou seems even more remarkable given that Badiou proposed the following about ten years earlier in the twenty-first meditation of *Being and Event*, entitled 'Pascal': "Let us say, without preceding any further, that the miracle – like Mallarmé's chance – is the emblem of the pure event, as resource of truth."<sup>45</sup> As proposed by Bruno Bosteels, this ambiguity testifies to a continuing attempt on Badiou's behalf to balance his concept

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<sup>43</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 52, 98-99.

<sup>45</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 216. In revised version of the text "L'événement comme trans-être" which originally appeared in *Court Traité d'ontologie transitoire* published just one year after *Saint Paul*, Badiou elaborates his dissociation from any parallel between the figure of the miracle and his own concept of the event in the following way: "It is necessary to point out that as far as its material is concerned, the event is not a miracle. What I mean is that what composes an event is always extracted from the situation, always related back to a singular multiplicity, to its state, to the language connected to it, etc. In fact if we want to avoid lapsing into an obscurantist theory of creation ex nihilo, we must accept that an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a fragment of being" (Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 100-101).

of the event between two extremes.<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, a miraculous conception, in which the event assumes the character of absolute novelty, of *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, without any link to the situation in which it occurs. On the other hand, a conception in which the event is in fact not an event at all, because it is reduced to an inherent point in the situation, ultimately making it impossible to exceed the situation and therefore excluding the creation of something genuinely new. Thus, one is tempted to ask if not Badiou's reading of the antiphilosopher Paul should be understood as part of this balancing act. An attempt, in a time which – with the revolutionary disasters of the 20th century fresh in mind – categorically rejects the possibility of any real novelty, to maintain precisely this possibility, as well as an attempt to harness the latent antiphilosophical or religious inclinations toward absolute inceptions in his own philosophy. It is ironic that while Badiou's reading of Paul strives to detach Paul from his antiphilosophical basis by separating the form of his concept of truth from its mythological content, it appears that this reading of the antiphilosopher Paul also provides an opportunity for Badiou to distance himself from his own antiphilosophical tendencies.<sup>47</sup> In summary, we can say that one of the ways Badiou believes philosophy can maintain both a balance in relation to sophism and antiphilosophy and a distance from its own religious tendencies is by exploiting its opponent's virtues.

It is, in my opinion, largely against the background of Badiou's own agenda to re-establish philosophy that we should understand the above-mentioned 'subjective interest' in Paul. In the next section, I shall attempt to elaborate this in relation to the following three points. Firstly, Paul holds philosophy to a specific concept of truth, which Badiou believes to be defining for philosophy. Secondly, Paul hereby paradoxically shields philosophy from its own religious tendencies, namely the constant propensity to displace the question of truth to an issue of language or opinion. And thirdly, Paul represents at one and the same time a source of inspiration and a warning for philosophy in its relationship to politics.

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<sup>46</sup> Bruno Bosteels, "Can change be thought? A dialogue with Alain Badiou." in *Alain Badiou – Philosophy and its conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (State University of New York Press: New York, 2005), 247.

<sup>47</sup> Now, to complicate matters even more, it should be mentioned that the very attempt by Badiou to relieve Paul of his antiphilosophical affinities, i.e. the religious content of his letters, can also be interpreted as an expression of Badiou's own antiphilosophical tendencies grounded in his formalistic approach. This is, in any case, what is suggested by Bruno Bosteels: "I would argue that there is also something about the form itself – the form of the pure event – that is radically antiphilosophical, as Badiou himself shows more clearly in the case of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein" (Bosteels, "Radical Antiphilosophy," 179-180). Roland Boer has raised a similar concern: Badiou's 'purification' of the form from its content may well come under the suspicion of what Adorno has critically termed 'secularised theology' (Roland Boer, *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology II* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 179).

### III. Badiou's Use of Paul

One can of course approach the question of Badiou's subjective interest in Paul in a more direct manner than through the above detour of antiphilosophy, namely by asking: How or in what ways does Badiou more precisely utilize Paul for his own purposes in his book? I think it is possible to identify (at least) three different concerns or operations: literary exemplification, philosophical intervention and political inspiration. I will deal with them one by one.

#### (a) *Literary Exemplification*

In *Saint Paul*, Badiou proceeds by introducing a number of key terms from *Being and Event* into his reading of Paul's letters, thus making them appear in a very distinct way.<sup>48</sup> This is obviously a mutual process. And so, it is no surprise that *Saint Paul* is widely used as an explication of central parts of Badiou's philosophy, originally developed in the far more demanding pages of *Being and Event*.<sup>49</sup> However, this raises the question of whether Badiou's reading of Paul should basically also be read as an illustration, and in that case, as an illustration of what. The most obvious suggestion would be to read the book on Paul as Badiou's exemplification of what he calls a 'truth-procedure'. Indeed, this is a suggestion that has been implied by a number of Badiou's interpreters.<sup>50</sup> Now, the question is of course whether this is a justifiable exemplification or not. In my opinion, the answer is both yes and no. But before I explain this ambiguity, let me briefly recapitulate what Badiou understands by a 'truth-procedure' by paraphrasing Badiou's detailed presentation of this matter in *Being and Event* (parts IV-VIII).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> From a New Testament exegetical point of view this is of course a completely anachronistic and thus deeply problematic approach. But as I have already implied Badiou is not particularly concerned by such hermeneutical or (as he would more likely term them) 'historicist' considerations.

<sup>49</sup> In their introduction to the translation of a collection of Badiou's texts on Samuel Beckett, Alberto Toscano and Nina Power argues that "[...] Badiou's writings on Beckett function to some extent as occasions for the rehearsal or mise-en-scène of principal components of his philosophy [...]" (Alberto Toscano and Nina Power, "Editor's Introduction - Think Pig!" in Alain Badiou, *On Beckett* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2003), xii). I suggest that Badiou's reading of Paul can be understood in somewhat similar terms, that is, as a 'staging' of certain elements of Badiou's philosophy.

<sup>50</sup> E.g. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 141-143; Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, meme combat - The Philosophy of Alain Badiou", *Radical Philosophy* 93 (1999): 6-13, 11; Simon Critchley, "Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou", *Radical Philosophy* 100 (2000): 16-27, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Badiou presents a short usefully paraphrase of this matter in: Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans.

According to Badiou, a truth always occurs in the wake of an event, an unexpected incident, which is the precondition if anything truly new is to arise in a given situation. The new that comes into existence in the wake of an event is a truth. The truth is not something that is attained through contemplation or in terms of knowledge; on the contrary, a truth arises through a break with the established knowledge of the situation, enabled by the event's interruption of the situation, and it persists only by commitment to this evental break. Thus, a truth, from Badiou's perspective, is to be perceived along the lines of the logic of 'holding something true' or 'being true to something', such as a cause or a person. In this sense, the truth is a process which is constituted and sustained only in the course of the individuals who through their intervention in a given situation, declare, name and maintain a continued fidelity to an event, and whom Badiou therefore describes as the 'subject' for this event. In other words, a 'truth-procedure' is the operation and the process through which the continuation of an event, in either the field of science, art, politics or love, produces a truth and a subject of this truth.<sup>52</sup> In short, it is the organization of the consequences of an event.

At first glance, it seems quite reasonable to view Badiou's account of Paul as a concrete exemplification of such a 'truth-procedure': Following the resurrection of Christ, Paul declares and names this as an event, which he – through his letters and travels – maintains fidelity towards and unfolds the consequences of, resulting in the inauguration of a subject in the form of Christian congregations. However, if this is the case, then it seems reasonable to ask in which of the four mentioned domains this apparent Christian truth-procedure belongs. Is Paul a scientist, an artist, a politician or a lover? Or, is it, as suggested by Slavoj Žižek, rather the case that the truth-procedure which *Saint Paul* seems to exemplify belongs to a fifth and in Badiou tacit truth domain, namely, religion?<sup>53</sup> Yet, such an interpretation is explicitly and categorically rejected by Badiou himself:

Paul is not at all in the same field as my examples of truths in politics, art, science and love. Religion is simply not in the same field. There is something in my friend Slavoj's consideration that is not completely precise because the comparison is not between political revolutions, artistic creations, new theories of science, new experiences of love

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Peter Hallward (London Verso, 2001), 40-44, and Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 58-68.

<sup>52</sup> Obviously, *Saint Paul* can thus also be read as an illustration of Badiou's theory of the subject or his notion of the event, but that is merely a matter of words.

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "An interview with Slavoj Žižek: On Divine Self Limitation and Revolutionary Love", *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture* 1.2 (2004): 32-38, 32.

and Paul. The comparison is between philosophy and Paul; that is, between my conception of truth and the Pauline conception of truth. So religion does not make a fifth on the list of politics, science, art and love.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, Badiou's rejection does not preclude his reading of Paul being seen as an exemplification; it is just not an example of a concrete, historical truth-procedure, but rather an exemplification of a theoretical *conception* of truth.<sup>55</sup> This account is confirmed by Badiou in another interview where he emphasizes that: "What I show is that Paul's line of argument is entirely based on a conception of truth which, it seems to me, in its most general aspects, is perfectly acceptable to me as a philosopher who, in this case, and in many others, can learn something from the antiphilosopher."<sup>56</sup>

However, to complicate matters, the specific conception of truth that Badiou extrapolates from Paul's writings overlaps with his own conception of truth; that is, truth conceived as the process of a 'truth-procedure'. This is quite clear from the summary presented by Badiou of Paul's conception of truth in four points on pages 14-15 in *Saint Paul*. This summary matches Badiou's conception of truth in terms of a truth-procedure almost perfectly. Most importantly, Badiou states under the third point of his summary that Paul conceives of truth as a process (I will elaborate on the specific parts of this process in a moment). Yet, and this is the first point of the summary, for Paul the starting point of this process is, according to Badiou, always an event in so far that the subject that declares this event only comes into existence as a result of this event. The second point concerns the subjective character of truth. In Paul's conception, truth is, in Badiou's reading, always subjective in the sense that it involves a declaration, and thus a decision, in relation to the event that inaugurates the truth-process. The fourth point concerns how Paul conceives the relationship between the process of truth and the situation in which this process takes place. In Paul's account, again as presented by Badiou, the process of truth is always a process of subtraction from the way that the situation in which it unfolds normally organizes itself. It thus creates a distance or a break with what Badiou terms the

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<sup>54</sup> Badiou, "An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion," 40; see also Alain Badiou, "Paul the Saint - interview by Jacques Henric", *Art press* 235 (1998): 53-58, 55.

<sup>55</sup> However, there is, as demonstrated by Roland Boer, some quite 'incriminating evidence' elsewhere in Badiou's work which suggests that he, at least in an earlier stage of his authorship, did consider religion to be a domain of truth on a par with art, politics, science and love (Boer, *Criticism of Religion*, 163-165). This is, for instance, clearly indicated in the following sentence from *Being and Event*: "Saint Paul for the Church, Lenin for the Party, Cantor for ontology, Schoenberg for music, but also Simon, Bernard or Clair, if they declare themselves to be in love" (Badiou, *Being and Event*, 393; cf. 392).

<sup>56</sup> Badiou, "Paul the Saint - interview by Jacques Henric," 55.

'state' of and the common opinions within this situation. This distance is the first step in the reorganization of the elements of the situation, enforced by the process of truth creating what Badiou calls a 'generic multiplicity'.<sup>57</sup> Under the third point of his summary, Badiou identifies in Paul the three concepts, which according to him are required in order to think of truth in terms of a process beginning with an event, entailing a subject and producing a generic multiplicity, such as 'faith', 'love' and 'hope'. Or in Badiou's terms, 'nomination', 'fidelity' and 'forcing' (Badiou elaborates on these three concepts particularly in chapters 8-9 of the book). Against this backdrop it seems quite reasonable to describe Badiou's reading of Paul's letters as a sort of 'literary' exemplification of his own conception or theory of truth and subjectivation.<sup>58</sup>

In the conclusion of *Saint Paul*, Badiou introduces another and somewhat more complicated argument against the depiction of Paul's letters as an example of a concrete truth-procedure, implying that religion should be considered a fifth domain of truth. The argument goes to show that since the event that Paul declares and to which he is faithful (i.e. the resurrection of Christ) is 'of the order of a fable', Paul can be regarded as neither an artist, a scientist, a lover nor a political activist.<sup>59</sup> In other words, what also precludes the claim advanced by Žižek and others, that Christianity seems to constitute a concrete truth-procedure within the framework of Badiou's own philosophy, is that the event in which Christianity is founded does not qualify as a genuine event in Badiou's view. This raises two questions. Firstly, how can we distinguish an event, not only from an ordinary occurrence, but also from what presents itself as being, but isn't really a genuine event (i.e. a false event)? And secondly, what does Badiou more precisely mean by his statement that the Pauline event (i.e. the resurrection) is 'of the order of a fable', and why does this disqualify it?

Unlike an ordinary occurrence, according to Badiou, an event always arises without cause or purpose; it is unforeseeable and incalculable. That is, an event cannot be deduced from or reduced to the situation in which it happens, rather it supplements this situation – not as something added, but on the contrary as something vanishing. Or, in Badiou's words: "I call 'event' this originary disappearance supplementing the situation for the duration of a lighting flash; situated within it only in so far as nothing of it subsists [...]"<sup>60</sup> An event can, therefore, never be objectively determined, nor can it be predicted. Since the event "[...] has no place other than the disappearance of the having-taken-place, it would be futile to ask, using the realist categories proper to the situation, whether it is accurate or merely represents a fiction." From

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<sup>57</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 98.

<sup>58</sup> In this respect, *Saint Paul* is evidently a prolongation of the meditation (twenty one) on Pascal in *Being and Event*.

<sup>59</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 108.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 124; cf. Badiou, *Ethics*, 72.

within the situation an event is, as Badiou puts it, 'undecidable'.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, an event is always only manifested as an event retroactively in the form of a subjective declaration of and fidelity to a specific event.<sup>62</sup> On this basis alone it is hard to see why the resurrection of Christ should not pass as an event. However, Badiou's criterion of a genuine event does not concern the inherent qualities of the event, rather, it concerns its effects. More precisely, it concerns the way the event relates to its conditions, to the situation in which it took place. To put it in more technical terms: for an event to be a genuine event, according to Badiou, this event must make manifest and name what he calls the 'void' of the situation, which is normally unrepresented and foreclosed.<sup>63</sup> What makes an event a genuine event is that it is related to the concrete situation for which it is an event only through the unplaceable void that grounds the situation. By being related only to the void of the situation the event is addressed universally, rather than to a particular group, community or people, which would divide the situation in favour of that particular element, instead of affirming its generic equality. So, in plain words, the criterion proposed by Badiou is that if an event is not universally addressed, if it is not an affirmation of the generic equality of the situation, then it is simply not a genuine, but rather a false event.

Badiou offers an illustration of this point in his short book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* with reference to Nazism as an example of a false event. Here he explains why he considers the rise of Nazism to be a pseudo-event in the following way: "[...] the striking break provoked by the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, although formally distinguishable from an event [...] since it conceives itself as a 'German' revolution, and is faithful only to the alleged national

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 124, 114-115; Badiou, *Being and Event*, 182; Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 124; Badiou, *Being and Event*, 178-183; Badiou, *Ethics*, 40-44. As a consequence of the strong emphasis that Badiou gives to the subjective declaration and naming of the event along with the exceptional nature of the event, a number of critics, among others Jean-François Lyotard, have accused Badiou of harbouring a sort of decisionism à la Carl Schmitt. A comparison originating in Schmitt's famous dictum that: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." This comparison is of course not less interesting considering Schmitt's likewise famous claim that: "The exception in jurisprudence is analogous the miracle in theology" (Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 5, 36). However, the question of how deep the similarities between Badiou's concept of the truth-event and Schmitt's logic of exception really run requires a more thorough discussion than the present context allows for. See instead Hallward for a detailed discussion of this matter (Hallward, *Badiou*, 285-291).

<sup>63</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 72-73. 'The void of the situation', which is one of the most important - and elusive - terms in Badiou's philosophy, is an integral part of and should be understood against the background of the ontology that Badiou presents in *Being and Event*.

substance of a people, is actually addressed only to those that it itself deems 'German'.<sup>64</sup> Nazism is thus not a genuine event because it grounds its rupture with the situation in which it arises, not in universality (the void), but precisely in the particularity of the German people. The fact that the event is a false event naturally implies that the truth and the subject emerging in its wake must be rejected as well. Although the truth and the subject of Nazism appropriate essential parts of its vocabulary from genuine modern political events, they are in Badiou's vocabulary merely a 'simulacrum'.<sup>65</sup> So, is the resurrection of Christ a pseudo-event and Christianity a simulacrum of truth according to Badiou? This is indeed the conclusion drawn by Žižek in his reading of *Saint Paul*: "[...] Christianity, based on a fabulous event of Resurrection, cannot be counted as an effective Truth-Event, but merely as its semblance."<sup>66</sup> Badiou himself, on the other hand, does not, at least not explicitly, say so.

This brings us back to the question of what more precisely Badiou means when he depicts the Pauline event as 'of the order of a fable'.<sup>67</sup> As Badiou makes perfectly clear on the very first page in the first chapter of *Saint Paul*, he considers the event in which Paul compresses Christianity (i.e. the resurrection of Christ) to be a fable.<sup>68</sup> Succeeding this statement of his position, Badiou offers the following (very) short specification of the term fable: "A 'fable' is that part of a narrative that, so far as we are concerned, fails to touch upon any Real, unless it be by virtue of that invisible and indirectly accessible residue sticking to every obvious imaginary."<sup>69</sup> In other words, Badiou's claim basically seems

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<sup>64</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 73; cf. Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 167-181).

<sup>65</sup> From the time of the publication of *Ethics* and *Saint Paul*, Badiou has developed his theory of the subject beyond this binary logic of a genuine subject versus a simulacrum of the subject towards a more complex and nuanced understanding of the process subjectivation. Thus, in *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou operates with a 'typology of the subject' that enables him to explain the different subjective reactions to the event, also reactions which he previously simply refused to identify in terms of the category of the subject (reserved solely to fidelity) including what he in *Logics of Worlds* describes as an 'obscure' subject, exemplified by religious orthodoxy or fundamentalism. In short, this 'obscure' subject is characterized by its substantialization of truth, for example by enfolded in the structure of state-power. It should be noted, however, that, if the Christian subject is to be comprehended within the scope of this 'typology of the subject' (something Badiou has not attempted to do, his example is Islam), then it seems to presuppose that he would have to concede to regard the event, to which the Christian subject is a reaction, as a mere fable. Because a subject, even if it is an 'obscure' subject, presupposes that a (genuine) has taken place.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 143.

<sup>67</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 108, 4-6, 58, 76, 81. For a thorough discussion of Badiou's depiction of the resurrection-event as a fable, see Roland Boer "On Fables and Truths", *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 11.2 (2006): 107-116.

<sup>68</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 4; cf. 58.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

to be that resurrection is not a genuine event (but a fable), because it 'fails to touch upon any Real'. But what does Badiou mean by the phrase 'to touch upon any Real'? Is it just another way of saying that what disqualifies the resurrection as a genuine event is that, apart from the implicit remainder left in every imaginary, it has no anchorage in reality, that it is just a fiction?

As I have already mentioned, according to Badiou, an event is only an event if it is 'undecidable' from within the situation in which it takes place. This means, as Badiou underlines, that "[...] it would be futile to ask, using the realist categories proper to the situation, whether it [the event] is accurate or merely represents a fiction."<sup>70</sup> Thus, if what Badiou intends to say when he characterizes the resurrection-event as a fable is that it is a fiction, then it indicates that he thinks that this event is not 'undecidable', that it *can* actually be decided 'using the realist categories proper to the situation' whether the resurrection of Christ is 'accurate or merely represents a fiction'. If this in fact is the implicit argument underlying Badiou's characterization of the resurrections as a fable, it would become him well to account more precisely for how it can be decided from within the situation that the resurrection is a fiction. Furthermore, if all Badiou wants to say by characterizing the resurrection as a 'fable', is that it is a fiction, why doesn't he just say that the resurrection is a fiction instead? Perhaps we need to take another look at Badiou's specification of a fable.

As mentioned a moment ago, Badiou in brief describes a fable as "[...] that part of a narrative that [...] fails to touch upon any Real [...]"<sup>71</sup> The fact that Badiou here uses the word 'Real' in a capitalized form in the English translation clearly indicates that he refers to the term in its Lacanian sense. Although Badiou's understanding of this notion differs from the way Lacan understands it, he does nevertheless concur with Lacan on the point that the Real is not just another term for reality. On the contrary, the Real needs to be distinguished from the latter, although not in terms of the classical metaphysical representational opposition between appearance and reality. Rather, the Real is the point of impasse in any given situation (reality).<sup>72</sup> As such the Real is a term that, as least in certain aspects, overlaps with another of Badiou's most important terms, namely the 'void'. Now, if we return to Badiou's specification of a fable (as 'that which fails to touch upon any Real') with this overlap between the Real and the void in mind, then what Badiou seems to be saying is that the resurrection-fable is a not a genuine event because it fails to touch upon, that is, relate to, the void of the situation, which, as we saw in the above, is precisely Badiou's criterion for a pseudo-event. Although he does not put it in so many words, that Badiou apparently considers the resurrection to

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<sup>70</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 124.

<sup>71</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124.

be a pseudo-event in this precise sense is also indicated by the fact that he depicts the truth succeeding the Pauline (pseudo-)event in the same vocabulary as when he in *Ethics* describes what he calls 'truth as simulacrum'. This is indicated, for example, in the following statement from an interview on the book on Paul: "[...] the history of Christianity has amply proved that it was not a matter of truth (in the sense I give that word), but of state power [...]."73

Let me just end this discussion by pointing out that these indications of the resurrection as a pseudo-event are not very consistent with the fact that Badiou, not only in *Saint Paul*, but also on a number of other occasions, emphasizes Paul's message of universality as a model to follow. For example, in the aforementioned interview he underlines that: "As Paul declares, if Christ really did rise again, then there are no more Jews or Greeks, no more males or females, no more slaves or freemen."74 The obvious question is if the concrete Pauline idea of universality is based on a pseudo-event, and thus merely a simulacrum, why refer to it as normative? Nevertheless, Badiou's main message is still that since Paul's event does not count as a genuine event, then neither does Christianity inaugurate a new truth-procedure.

#### *(b) Philosophical Intervention*

This, however, does not imply that Paul's letters do not represent anything new. Quite the contrary, as the subtitle of Badiou's book suggests, he actually regards Paul as representing an innovation, to be exact, as nothing less than 'the founder of universalism'. Indeed, a rather pretentious claim, which Badiou moderates and clarifies in the conclusion of *Saint Paul*. At this point he enjoins that the title should not be taken to imply there did not exist a concept of universalism, or rather universal truths, before Paul. Badiou's point is rather that Paul represents a rupture and new stage in the history of the concept. Paul is the first to establish universalism in a singular event: the resurrection of Christ addressed to all mankind. That this event, the resurrection, in fact isn't an event at all, according to Badiou, does not have the slightest effect on the substance of what Paul has to say to us: "That the event he points to is a fable [...] does not invalidate in any way the body of utterances in which Paul places his conception of what a truth is."75 Paul is

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73 Badiou, "Paul the Saint - interview by Jacques Henric," 55.

74 Ibid., 55. See also Badiou, *Polemics*, 108, 162-63, 236 and Badiou, "An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal truth and the Question of religion", 39.

75 Ibid., 55. Hereby Badiou also rejects, contrary to what Žižek maintains, that there is a problem concerning the fact that what seems to be the best example of his theory of truth (and subject) does not itself constitute a truth. As an interesting twist, it should be mentioned that Žižek argues that regarding this problem there is a relationship between Badiou and Heidegger, and that this relationship has to do with a shared formalist approach: "An unexpected additional link between Heidegger and Badiou is discernible here: they both refer to Paul in the same ambiguous

path breaking, not because he initiates a new scientific, artistic, political or amorous truth, nor because he is the founder universalism as such, but because his letters contain the elements of a new theory of truth in terms of what Badiou describes as 'universal singularity'. In other words: A theory that illustrates the formal conditions of a universal truth and the singular subject that arises (at a singular point in time) in the wake of an event. As Badiou puts it in an interview: "I read Paul as a text about a new and provocative conception of truth and, more profoundly, about the *general conditions* for a new truth."<sup>76</sup> But this does not, as I have emphasized, make Paul himself a subject of truth. Paul is not a scientist, an artist, a politician, or lover; he is a theorist of truth. Nevertheless there is something blatantly paradoxically about Badiou's claim: While Paul's letters does not contain a particular truth, they do seem to say something true about truth in general.<sup>77</sup> It is the same ambiguity that can be detected in Badiou's endorsement in *Being and Event* of Lacan's suggestion that 'if no religion is truth, Christianity comes closest to the question of truth', which, as Badiou elaborates, he takes to mean the following: "[...] in Christianity and in it alone it is said that the essence of truth supposes the evental ultra-one, and that relating to truth is not a matter of contemplation – or immobile knowledge – but of intervention."<sup>78</sup> If Christianity, as presented by antiphilosophers such as Paul, Pascal and Kierkegaard does not constitute a truth in Badiou's terms, Badiou does nevertheless acknowledge that it presents an 'entirely militant theory of truth'.<sup>79</sup> Badiou's concern is to extract,

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way. For Heidegger, Paul's turn from abstract philosophical contemplation to the committed existence of a believer indicates care and being-in-the-world, albeit only as an ontic model of what *Being and Time* deploys as the basic transcendental-ontological structure; in the same way Badiou reads Paul as the first to deploy the formal structure of the Event and truth-procedure, although for him, religion is not a proper domain of truth. In both cases, the Pauline experience thus plays the same ex-timate role: it is the best exemplification ("formal indication") of the ontological structure of the Event – albeit, in terms of its positive content, a "false" example, foreign to it" (Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 172-174).

<sup>76</sup> Badiou, "An interview with Alain Badiou – Universal truth and the Question of religion", 38. This point is also confirmed by Badiou in another interview: "What I say is that we can find in Paul a very complete theory of the construction of a new truth. Allors! Why so, the theory of the construction of a new truth. The beginning of the truth is not the structure of a fact but it's an event" (Alain Badiou, "A Discussion of and around Incident at Antioch: An Interview with Alain Badiou", *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 3.2 (2010), 1-10, 7).

<sup>77</sup> A point also emphasized by Žižek on several occasions, maybe most clearly in the following passage from *The Ticklish Subject*: [...] the problem remains of how it was possible for the first and still most pertinent description of the mode of operation of the fidelity to a Truth-event to occur apropos of a Truth-event that is a mere semblance, not an actual Truth" (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 143).

<sup>78</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 212.

<sup>79</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70; cf. *Being and Event*, 222 and Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 426.

through his own philosophical concepts, this (true) Pauline theory of truth as universal singularity from the mythological context in which it is embedded, so that it comes to appear in a completely 'secular' form.<sup>80</sup> While he is thus very careful to make clear that he does not recognize the (theoretical) break that occurs with Paul as grounded in an event, it seems as if Badiou, perhaps because of this, ends up diminishing the consequences of this Pauline break. Or to put it in other words, Badiou does not exactly overstate the interesting fact that the origin, and hence the historical condition, of what he claims to be the *philosophically* adequate conception of truth, i.e. truth as universal singularity, is indeed *antiphilosophical*. However, this does not necessarily, as suggested by John Milbank, entail the failure of philosophy to grasp this concept of truth altogether, rather it says something important about the close and constructive relationship between philosophy and antiphilosophy.<sup>81</sup>

Since Paul's message is based on a fable it does not constitute a truth that we can be faithful to in the same manner as Badiou insists that we still can (and should) be faithful today to the truths that came to exist in the wake of genuine events, such as the French Revolution and the revolts of May 1968. What Paul can offer instead, according to Badiou, is theoretical inspiration for contemporary philosophy to rethink the concept of truth. In Badiou's view, it is crucial to the continued existence of philosophy to maintain and to reform its key concepts, including the concept of truth. With this as impetus, and in light of the tension between philosophy and its rivals, I think that Badiou's reading of Paul can be regarded as a kind of philosophical intervention. The question is, precisely what it is that philosophy can learn from Paul when it comes to the concept truth. In a way, the whole book on Paul can be read as an answer to this question, to which Badiou relates more explicitly in the conclusion of *Saint Paul*. Here he emphasizes Paul as a warning to the philosopher not to try to reduce the conditions of truth to a purely conceptual matter; a warning that applies both to the origin and the destination of truth.<sup>82</sup> Philosophy should realize that it must take an event as its

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<sup>80</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70. A matter, which Badiou can be said to anticipate, albeit deploy in a much lesser extent, in the meditation on Pascal in *Being and Event*, in the end of which he (in contrast to the secularist tradition running from Voltaire to Valéry who regret that Pascal wasted his genius on the religious nonsense of Christianity) justifies his interest in Pascal in the following way: "It is too clear to me that, beyond Christianity, what is at stake here [in Pascal] is the militant apparatus of truth [...]" (Badiou, *Being and Event*, 222). Badiou understands his reading of Kierkegaard in *Logics of Worlds* in a similar way as beyond Christianity, as 'secularized' (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 401).

<sup>81</sup> John Milbank, "Materialism and Transcendence" in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, eds. C. Davis, J. Milbank and S. Žižek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 401. It is noteworthy that most of the philosophical thinkers referred to in the sections on the concepts of truth, subject and event in *Being and Event*, is actually antiphilosophers (Pascal, Rousseau and Lacan).

<sup>82</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 108-109.

starting point, if it is to think truth adequately in its singularity as well as in its universality, as something which applies to everyone at the same time, but without the constraint of transcendence. Regarding the designation of truth, Paul can, according to Badiou, offer philosophy the following lesson: "There is no authority before which the result of a truth procedure could be brought to trial. A truth never appertains to Critique. It is supported only by itself and is correlate of a new type of subject, neither transcendental nor substantial, entirely defined as militant of the truth in question."<sup>83</sup> Philosophy must at once both maintain the universality of truth and recognize the radical commitment that it involves.

To try and think truth in this manner is, in Badiou's opinion, a very urgent task today. Why? The short answer is because our present situation is characterized by a pacifying relativization of truth. We are in a situation that, in Badiou's view, is dominated by a false universalism in terms of the abstract homogenization of capitalism on the one hand, and an escalating process of fragmentation of identity in terms of 'identity politics' and 'multiculturalism' on the other hand. This is a situation in which not only politics, but all four domains of truth and their truth procedures are at risk of being relativized or even perverted. That is, a situation in which art is reduced to 'culture', science to 'technology', politics to 'management' and love to 'sex', the result being that any creation of universal truths is excluded.<sup>84</sup> Precisely in such a situation, devoid of any real commitment and universal pretensions, philosophy could learn a lesson from the conception of truth sketched in Paul's writings. In a rather programmatic formulation in *Saint Paul*, Badiou puts it like this: "To sharply separate each truth procedure from the cultural 'historicity' wherein opinion presumes to dissolve it: such is the operation in which Paul is our guide."<sup>85</sup> Or as he writes, after having outlined in four maxims the requirements related to the conception of truth as 'universal singularity' and therefore dictating Paul's fundamental problem: "There is not one of these maxims which, setting aside the content of the event, cannot be appropriated to our situation and our philosophical task."<sup>86</sup> It is in this sense that Badiou's book can be said to constitute a philosophical intervention; a philosophical intervention, which, as I have already suggested, therefore also has a political dimension. I will elaborate more on this issue below, but first a very brief intermezzo on critique of religion.

As noted above, Badiou points out an aspect of critique of religion in his reading of Paul, namely the latter's distance to a certain religious idea in antiphilosophy of revelation of the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 6-13. See also Badiou's *Ethics* (p. 23-27) for a further elaboration of the contemporary situation in which, according to Badiou, any genuine idea of universalism has been abandoned in favour of the a hypocritical 'respect for differences.'

<sup>85</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 15.

ineffable through a ground-breaking action, for instance, as in Pascal's case, in the form of a miracle. This interest, on the part of Badiou, in Paul as a 'critique of religion' should be perceived in relation to the ambivalent relationship between philosophy and antiphilosophy outlined earlier. Antiphilosophy may assist philosophy by shielding it from its own religious tendencies. Or, as Badiou puts it in relation to Nietzsche: "Anti-philosophy puts philosophy on guard. It shows it the ruses of sense and the dogmatic danger in truth. It teaches it that the rupture with religion is never definitive. That one must take up the task again. That truth must, once again and always, be secularised."<sup>87</sup> The anti-hermeneutic concept of truth that Badiou produces through his reading of Paul's letters may, in light of this remark on the warning-function of antiphilosophy, paradoxically, be seen as a secular corrective to philosophy's own religious-hermeneutic tendencies to reduce truth to a matter of meaning. We can thus say that there are two types of 'secularization' that can be identified in Badiou's reading of Paul, because Badiou also understands his formalistic reading of Paul as a secularization or perhaps rather de-mythologization of the latter's theory of truth.

(c) *Political Inspiration*

That brings us to the third and last dimension of Badiou's subjective interest in Paul, namely what we might term 'political inspiration'. If one is to believe one of Badiou's most competent commentators, Justin Clemens, there is a clear connection between Badiou's secularization understood in the latter sense, and the political potential of Paul's writings:

One must not underestimate this aspect of Badiou's work, which, having pure reason as a paradigm, induces him to repudiate all forms of religious and theological thought. This does not mean that he does not engage with examples of such thought. On the contrary, he makes committed intervention into such thought, by essaying to detach what he *de facto* treats as the pure thought of such thinkers from the 'religious' impurities in which they have become enmired. In this approach, somebody like Saint Paul becomes an exemplary *political* militant and thinker, who ought to be extracted from his religious envelope, including from the history of the church.<sup>88</sup>

While a number of commentators argue that the political dimension of Badiou's reading of Paul is best understood by enrolling it in a comprehensive trend within the Marxist tradition – from Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky through

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<sup>87</sup> Badiou, "Who is Nietzsche?," 10.

<sup>88</sup> Justin Clemens, "Had we but worlds enough, and time, this absolute, philosopher..." in *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, Paul Ashton et al. (Melbourne: Re.press, 2006), 116.

Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin to Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton – that emphasizes a certain similarity in the ‘revolutionary’ aspects of Marxism and Christianity (usually in terms of a shared utopian, eschatological or messianic dimension),<sup>89</sup> what makes Paul political in Clemens’ presentation of Badiou’s reading, is certainly not the religious or theological aspect. On the contrary, the point of the citation seems to be that Paul will only be political the moment that his letters are purified through Badiou’s formalistic reading of their theological and religious influence. Thus, Clemens’ comment raises the following very interesting question: If *Saint Paul* can be read as an indication that Badiou considers Paul as a resource for political renewal in the current situation, in which Marxism seems to be in profound crisis, how then should this indication be understood more precisely? Does it imply that Badiou endorses the idea that there exists a connection between Christianity and Marxism in terms of a shared utopian or messianic dimension? Or does Badiou’s reading of Paul rather involve a critical encounter, not only, as has already been hinted with religion, but also with the Marxist tradition? Moreover, does the underlying question concerning the issue of whether Marxism is seen as a break with, or rather a sort of secular continuation of, Christianity, involve an unspoken judgment on the validity of the theorem of secularization? These questions are obviously important for our understanding of not only of Badiou’s (political) interest in Paul, but also his apprehension of the relationship between religion and politics.

There is little doubt that there is a widespread conviction according to which Badiou along with several other thinkers (more or less) attached to Marxism, primarily Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri, are taken to be the latest branch of a trend within Marxism towards a more sympathetic approach to religion and Christianity in particular. Such a reading has moreover been reinforced by particular circumstances in the reception of *Saint Paul* and perhaps especially through Žižek’s part in this reception. Although Žižek himself candidly, and indirectly through his many references, confirms the pervasive influence of *Saint Paul* on the books in which he deals with theological themes, it is nevertheless the case that there is a certain tendency to read Badiou in continuation of Žižek (who has a considerable part in the growing interest in Badiou’s work) rather than vice versa. Besides, there is little doubt about Žižek’s opinion as to where Badiou stands on the issue of the relationship between Marxism and Christianity. This is quite clearly indicated, for example, in the introduction to *The Fragile Absolute*. Here Žižek suggests the following strategy in response to the well-known polemical portrayal of Marxism as a mere secularized version of Christianity

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<sup>89</sup> For an exhaustive survey of the role of Christianity and the Bible in 20th century Marxism, see Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) and *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology II* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

reproducing the same messianic or eschatological conception of history: "Following Alain Badiou's path-breaking book on Saint Paul our premise here is exactly the opposite one: instead of adopting such a defensive stance, allowing the enemy to define the terrain of the struggle, what one should do is to reverse the strategy by *fully endorsing what one is accused of*; yes, there is a direct lineage from Christianity and Marxism [...]."90

If we turn to Badiou himself, it does appear at first glance as if there is quite substantial support for the kind reading that Žižek proposes. Not only does Badiou refer to Marx, Lenin and Mao in *Saint Paul*, but on several occasions throughout the book he also mobilizes the standard Marxist rhetoric; especially in his characterization of Paul's biography and his doings, as when he speaks of the church as 'party', or the brothers as 'comrades' in the second chapter of the book. Thus, Paul is described as a staunch leader who through his personal commitment and his written interventions organizes a political faction;<sup>91</sup> a description, which fits quite well with the parallels between Paul and Lenin proposed by Badiou.<sup>92</sup> The reflections in *Saint Paul* on Pier Paolo Pasolini's never realized script for a film about Paul, in which Pasolini, according to Badiou, 'reflects on communism through Paul', also seem to support the idea that Badiou agrees with the presumption of a sort of revolutionary kinship between Christianity and Marxism.<sup>93</sup> However, the most substantial basis for asserting that Badiou proposes a parallel between Marxist politics and Pauline Christianity is perhaps his remark in the introduction of *Saint Paul* that:

If today I wish to retrace in a few pages the singularity of this connection [between an event and a subject] in Paul, it is probably because there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure – even if it takes the form of denying its possibility – called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can be said to have been that of the party militant.<sup>94</sup>

Is not what Badiou says here exactly that *Saint Paul* should be read as an attempt to outline, using the example of Paul, a post-Leninist version of political militancy? Is the point not precisely that, if Marxism is to reinvent or reform itself after the violent failures of the 20th century, there is an important lesson to be learned from Paul and the Christian tradition? The obvious answer is of course: Yes! But, if we take a closer look at the issues supporting such a reading – in particular

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<sup>90</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or why the Christian legacy is worth fighting for?* (London: Verso 2000), 2.

<sup>91</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 20-21.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 31.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Badiou's use of the term 'militant' – the picture might become a little less clear. Before we turn to these matters, let us begin with a brief clarification of Badiou's view on the underlying issue linking Christianity and Marxism, that is, the issue of eschatology and messianism.

Whether the aim has been to discredit Marxism as a pseudo-religion or legitimize Christianity as a progressive social movement, the numerous parallels drawn throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century between Marxism and Christianity have almost always had the issue of eschatology and messianism as their fulcrum. While this issue is also at the very centre of recent engagements with the Judeo-Christian tradition by Marxist or left-wing philosophers like Jacob Taubes, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri, it is not at all a concern in Badiou's book on Paul. When Badiou, in chapter nine of *Saint Paul*, enters into the discussion of how he understands the theme of hope (ἐλπίς) in Paul's letters, and mentions eschatology, it is only to dismiss the notion.<sup>95</sup> According to Badiou, there is no such thing as a Pauline eschatology in terms of hope in a future event in which ultimately justice will be done, separating the saved from the condemned.<sup>96</sup> As Badiou sees it, the Pauline conception of hope is the concrete and patient work for the universality of a truth, not the projection of an abstract ideal of justice to come. For Paul "[...] hope has nothing to do with the future. It is a figure of the present subject [...]."<sup>97</sup> This distinction between present and future is also what is at stake in a short passage from *Polemics* in which Badiou – in contrast to *Saint Paul* where he does not even use the term – comments upon the issue of messianism in Paul. Here Badiou argues that: "With Paul, for example, we have a notion that is not contained in the idea of messianism, since at issue is the process of coming of God himself, such as *it has taken place*."<sup>98</sup> This distinction between present and future is, as Žižek emphasizes, also the decisive difference between a Christian and a Jewish messianism, between the Messiah as someone who has already arrived and the Messiah as the one who is always to come.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, these two different conceptions of the messianic event also imply two different forms of politics: a (Jewish) 'politics of perpetual postponement', in which it is never really the time to act, versus a (Christian) politics, in which the key problem is the organization of post-evental discipline and fidelity. According to Badiou, this is, as we shall see now, exactly the problem shared by Paul and Marxism.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 93-95.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>98</sup> Badiou, *Polemics*, 207.

<sup>99</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Verso, 2001) 126.

<sup>100</sup> Let me just note in passing that Clayton Crockett and Catherine Malabou places Badiou (along with Benjamin, Agamben and Derrida) within a 'messianic paradigm' arguing that despite Badiou's claims that his understanding of Paul is not messianic, the reading of Paul he presents in the above quote from *Polemics* fits precisely Agamben's definition of Christian messianism (the

Taking a closer look at the way Badiou employs Marxist vocabulary in *Saint Paul* it shows that he primarily uses it in the context of his description of Paul as an organizer of the congregation or what is to become the church.<sup>101</sup> Indeed his juxtaposition of Paul and Marxism is precisely (as suggested in the above quotation on Lenin) aimed at a shared organizational feature; or rather, a common organizational problem. Namely the problem of how a subject of truth can be organized so that its militant fidelity towards an event can be sustained, while avoiding the same organization turning into a rigid dogmatic form, and thus a substantialization of the truth that pacifies the militant engagement of the subject, the way that it has happened to the communist parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and several times throughout the history of the church). The juxtaposition made by Badiou is therefore not intended to highlight a common revolutionary potential (in terms of a shared utopian-eschatological or messianic dimension), but rather to suggest an alternative (political) organizational form. This issue of (political) organization is also, according to Badiou, a main concern of Pasolini in the latter's reading of Paul.

Nevertheless, this organizational issue is not the primary concern of Badiou himself. Rather, as we have already seen, in his reading of the Pauline epistles, Badiou is primarily interested Paul as a 'theoretician of truth'. And it is also in the context of this interest in the Pauline conception of truth that we should understand the word 'militant', which Badiou uses frequently in *Saint Paul*. Apparently, and especially in light of the above quotation, it seems obvious to take the term 'militant' to be synonymous with 'political activist', that is, as a designation of a 'political subject'. Such an interpretation clearly supports the idea that Badiou's main concern in reading Paul is to be understood in terms of political inspiration, upholding the thesis that Paul is an important political resource for Badiou. And from there on it is a short step to fully enrolling him into the circle of other contemporary Marxist philosophers and intellectuals who praise Christianity for its revolutionary potential. It can of course not be denied that Badiou uses the word 'militant' as a term to explain what he means by a political subject. But, as it is clearly stated in the following passage from the preface to the English translation of *L'être et l'événement*, Badiou uses the word 'militant' as a more general term for the 'subject of truth' in every one of the four domains truth: "The militant of truth is not only the political militant working for the emancipation of humanity in its entirety. He or she is also the artist-creator, the scientist who opens up a new

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event has taken place, but has not yet been brought to an end) (Clayton Crockett and Catherine Malabou, "Plasticity and the Future of Philosophy and Theology", *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010): 15-34, 23).

<sup>101</sup> In *Being and Event*, Badiou describes the church precisely as the post-evental 'operator of faithful connection to the Christ-Event' (Badiou, *Being and Event*, 392).

theoretical field or the lover whose world is enchanted.”<sup>102</sup> Thus in short, being a ‘militant’ does not necessarily have anything to do with being politically engaged but, rather, it has to do with being a subject to truth.

As to the aforementioned parallels drawn by Badiou in *Saint Paul* between the militant figures of Lenin and Paul, this is not a new idea, but has its precedent in *Theory of the subject* from 1982. Here Badiou explicitly compares Christianity and Marxism. However, the comparison he makes does not refer to a presumed common revolutionary or utopian aspect; it rather refers to a specific characteristic concerning the origin of these two movements. Both movements, Christianity and Marxism, are, according to Badiou, characterized by having a twofold beginning. Marxism began of course with Marx (and Engels), but it was only with Lenin’s organization of the party that an actual Marxist subject was instituted. In the same way, Christianity began with Christ, but only with Paul was it organized as a church.<sup>103</sup> In a comment on Lenin’s writings, Žižek resumes this parallel – though without any explicit reference to Badiou – in an intriguing way, inviting us to return to the question of whether Paul’s letters can be understood as a kind of formalization. Žižek writes:

We should introduce the key dialectical distinction between the founding figure of a movement and the later figure who formalized this movement: Lenin did not just adequately translate Marxist theory into practice – rather he ‘formalized’ Marx by way of defining the Party as the political form of its historical intervention – just as St. Paul ‘formalized’ Christ and Lacan ‘formalized’ Freud.<sup>104</sup>

In other words, Paul’s letters constitute a sort of formalization, in the sense that the church represents the form of the intervention Paul pursues following Christ. Whether Badiou in a similar matter conceived of Paul’s letters as a kind of formalization, the way that Žižek

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<sup>102</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, xiii. As the passage suggests Badiou has previously reserved the word ‘militant’ for political subject for the simple reason that he (as late as in *Theory of the Subject*) was of the opinion that: “Every subject is political. That is why there are few subjects and rarely any policy” (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 28). Following the conceptual framework developed in *Being and Event* and *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou extends his uses of the word ‘subject’, and hence also the term ‘militant’, to all four areas of truth.

<sup>103</sup> Badiou’s analogy between Paul and Lenin is probably (once again) inspired by Lacan, who in his Seminar XX suggests that he himself is for Freud what Lenin was to Marx. Or, as Badiou writes in *Theory of the Subject* referring precisely to this particular seminar of Lacan’s: “Lacan is the Lenin of psychoanalysis” (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 126).

<sup>104</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s choice”, in *Revolution at the gates: a selection of writings from February to October 1917*, Vladimir Il’ich Lenin (London: Verso, 2001), 191.

obviously does, is not quite so clear. Badiou does not use the word 'formalizing' a single time in *Saint Paul*, but he comes close. For instance when he describes Paul's letters as a reduction in which "everything is brought back to a single point: Jesus, Son of God, died on the cross and was resurrected"; and as a "forceful extraction of an essential core of thought."<sup>105</sup> In the same paragraph he concludes that: "The result of all this is that Paul's epistles are the only truly *doctrinal* texts in the New Testament"<sup>106</sup> This is a phrase that naturally raises connotations to Badiou's description of his own formalized theory of truth as a 'doctrine of truth'.<sup>107</sup> In any case, Badiou's juxtaposition of Lenin and Paul, Marxism and Christianity, obviously does not refer to a shared emancipatory or revolutionary aspect, but is once again rather a question of an organizational parallel. But despite these common organizational concerns, it appears that Badiou is of the opinion that there is actually much more that separates Marxism and Christianity than unites them. For instance, in an interview from 2007 he comments on the relationship between religion and Marxism (or rather Communism) in the following manner:

In this case, religion presents itself as the surrogate for something else that has not been found, something that should be universalizable, should be able to uproot itself from the particularity of the religious. It is for this reason, I think, that Marx still seems so current. Communism, according to Marx, is essentially internationalist in character.<sup>108</sup>

Religion, including Christianity (at least as it has evolved after Paul) and Marxism/Communism is, in Badiou's view, obviously not positively related through a common revolutionary aspect. On the contrary, they seem to be in stark opposition to each other, since religion is merely an imitation of or substitute for the real thing, namely communism. The crucial difference here is that while religion, at least in practice, is always bound to some kind of particularism, then communism has in Badiou's view a truly universalistic character. If indeed Badiou can be said to agree with Žižek in that Paul represents a universalistic legacy which is still worth fighting for, then it seems that Badiou, in

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<sup>105</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>107</sup> Alan Badiou, "On a finally objectless subject", *Topoi* 7 (1988): 93-97, 94.

<sup>108</sup> Alan Badiou, "'We Need a Popular Discipline': Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative - Alain Badiou Interview by Filippo Del Lucchese and Jason Smith", *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2007): 645-59, 655. For an enlightening clarification of Badiou's rather complex relationship to Marxism, see Alberto Toscano: "Marxism Expatriated: Alain Badiou's turn" in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, eds. Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2007, 529-548). Unfortunately, Toscano does not relate his discussion of Badiou's Marxism to the question of the relationship between Marxism and religion.

contrast to Žižek, who clearly connects this legacy to Christianity, assumes a somewhat more ambiguous position in regard to this connection. Badiou is happy to refer to Galatians 3:28 as an example of a universalist way of thinking, yet it is not Christianity, but rather the trans-historical configuration, stretching from Spartacus through Thomas Müntzer to Saint-Just, which Badiou terms 'invariant communism', with which he associates the idea of universalism, and that for Badiou therefore constitutes the legacy worth the fight.<sup>109</sup> The obvious contradiction that consists in referring to Paul as a representative of universalism, while rejecting religion, including Christianity, with reference to its particularism, can only be dissolved if we take Badiou at his word when he refuses to associate Paul with religion. Pushed to the limit, we can say that what is truly provocative about Badiou's reading of Paul is not that he suggests that the founder of Christianity is a militant communist, but that he asserts that the militant Paul is not at all religious.

By this Badiou has, if not in any other way, clearly signalled where he stands in regard to the normative question about the relationship between religion and politics. Let us in conclusion quote – from an interview in *Libération* – his response precisely to the question of whether he believes that there is a close relationship between religion and politics: "My position on this matter, reinforced by a recent trip to Palestine, is that today it is absolutely imperative to separate politics from religion, just like it should be separated, for example, from racial or identity questions. Religions can and must coexist in the same country, but only if politics and the State are separate."<sup>110</sup> In view, not only of this rather unequivocal statement, but also the above discussion of Badiou's standpoint on the relationship between Marxism and Christianity, there is little evidence to suggest that Badiou sees any positive political potential either in the Christian tradition or religion as such. Quite the contrary.

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<sup>109</sup> Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l'ideology* (Paris: Francois Maspero 1976), 60-75, (see also, Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 131-132). In the pamphlet, *De l'ideology* from 1976, Badiou and his co-author Balmès mentions Thomas Müntzer and the German peasant revolt as an example of what they call an 'invariant communism'. However, from the rest of the names on the list of 'invariant communists' you get the feeling that Müntzer is included in this category not so much because of his Christian affiliation, but rather in spite of it.

<sup>110</sup> "C'est le communisme qui est une idée neuve en Europe" – interview par Alain Badiou, in *Libération* 26-01-2009 <http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/120186-dialoguez-avec-alain-badiou>. Published in English on the website of the journal *Lacanian Ink*: <http://www.lacan.com/oncommunism.html> (entered August 20 2016).