

# PLURALISM, RELIGION & THE LAW: A CONVERSATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF IDENTITY, FAITH AND LEGAL REASONING

“Separated Unto the Gospel of God”: Political Theology  
in Badiou and Agamben

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## I. CONTEXT

This paper begins with a fairly obvious comparison of two texts. My hope, however, is that out of this comparison a supplement will emerge—an excrescence that is contained by neither and that exposes the limits of both. The texts under consideration are Alain Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* and Giorgio Agamben’s *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. These two works have taken center stage in a recent, and until recently largely unpredictable, Pauline revival among social and legal theorists. Neither author makes any claim to being a Paul expert, and neither, it should be made clear at the outset, do I. I am an interested amateur at best; but what I take from Badiou and Agamben is less a new erudition with respect to Biblical exegesis, than a new—sometimes exhilarating, sometimes perplexing—effort to think through the problem of “political theology.”

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Political theology is a term coined, to the best of my knowledge, by Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin used the term in the pejorative sense, after the manner of the Left Hegelians of the *Vormärz*—the period in German history “before March,” or before the Berlin riots of March 1848 that signaled the beginning of the 1848 revolution. By “political theology,” Bakunin meant any effort to understand the human relations in regressively theological or religious terms. Bakunin’s term “political theology” was adopted and utterly transformed a few generations after the *Vormärz* by the archconservative jurist Carl Schmitt, whose use of it was anything but pejorative. Schmitt’s thesis concerning political theology is once again well known today, but it bears repeating nonetheless: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state,” Schmitt declares, “are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>1</sup> For Schmitt, the whole history of politics and law can be understood in relation to, and read indirectly through, the history of metaphysical systems. Understood correctly, Schmitt proposes, theological disputes should be seen, not as empty speculation about the ineffable mysteries of life, but as pitched battles and hand-to-hand combat over the most basic, and most materially significant, aspects of legal and political order. Moreover, whether we know it or not, when we in the modern world debate politics and law, we incorporate a collection of tropes that are derived from, and ultimately comprehended by, theological disputation.

Thus, to recall two of Schmitt’s favorite examples, the modern concept of political sovereignty is a transformed and disguised concept of God, and the modern concept of the juridical decision is a transformed and disguised concept of the miracle. From Schmitt’s perspective, then, the notion that we might be able to construct a purely secular understanding of politics and law—something that grew up among the civil philosophers of the seventeenth century and took root during the eighteenth—is not an Enlightenment advance over previously theological approaches to these issues. On the contrary, secular political thought consists largely of a certain forgetfulness of its own conditions, or a blindness towards the theological principles that it unwittingly invokes and requires.

Whether or not Schmitt’s diagnosis of political modernity is valid, there certainly seems to have been a revival of “political theology” in our postmodern world—or at least the postmodern university. The books by Badiou and Agamben that I want to address are but cases in point. While I am sure that modern scholars have always *written* books about the rela-

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1. CARL SCHMITT, *POLITICAL THEOLOGY: FOUR CHAPTERS ON THE CONCEPT OF SOVEREIGNTY* 26 (George Schwab trans., Univ. of Chicago Press 2006) (1923).

tionship between politics and theology, and even the political implications of Paul's letters, I suspect that it is only recently that so many of us have chosen to *read* them. Or at least, it is only recently that a certain *kind* of scholar has chosen to read them. I don't want to speak for everyone, but I think I can say with some assurance that if a young student had come into a seminar a decade ago when I was starting graduate school—after the eras of deconstruction, new historicism, cultural studies, post-colonialism, and queer theory—and said they were interested in Saint Paul, and especially Paul's articulation of a universal and messianic truth, they would have been met with either dumbfounded silence or vicious intellectual assassination.

On the other hand, and with the benefit of retrospect, I guess we might have seen it coming: this return to theology among scholars in the postmodern world. For after we spent so much energy dismantling the pretensions of Enlightenment reason, undermining the rational subject, and exposing the flimsy nature of so-called neutral, objective, or scientific truth, and after so many of our philosophers had noted that the only knowledge of interest is knowledge of the incommensurable, the undecidable, or even the sublime, one wonders where else we might have turned if not to theology. For, if nothing else, theology gives us a fairly consistent language for talking about our relationship with the unknowable—what cannot be contained in any system, and yet makes every such system possible.

Either way, however we got here, here we are in an age when it makes sense for great thinkers to speak confidently about political theology, and to read with passionate intensity the epistles of Saint Paul. So “we must begin wherever we are,”<sup>2</sup> as Derrida says, quoting Nietzsche. And this is where we happen to be. Time, therefore, to begin.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Both Badiou's and Agamben's interpretations of Paul seek to overturn a long history of scholarship that treats Paul as the institutionalization or pragmatic corruption of Christ's essentially liberating and revolutionary message—a reading that reached its apex, perhaps, with Nietzsche, especially “Section 42” of *The Anti-Christ*, which is blistering in its condemnation of Paul. Against this line of thought, both Badiou and Agamben prefer to consider Paul, not as a believer in Christ the person, but as an apostle of the Christ-event, and specifically Christ's death and resurrection.

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2. JACQUES DERRIDA, OF GRAMMATOLOGY 162 (Gayatri Spivak trans., The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 1998) (1967).

Thus, they maintain that Paul's letters can and should be read independently of the Gospels, which tell the story of the life of a man who was the Son of God. In a certain sense, for both Badiou and Agamben, the life of Christ, and the whole familiar debate over the historical Jesus that raged throughout the nineteenth century and continues to this day, is more or less irrelevant. Both treat Paul as someone who speaks, not of the life of another man, but of a singular experience of his own. Both read Paul, not as someone who sought to institutionalize a miraculous event in a Church, but as someone who uses the Christ-event to articulate a new philosophy, or more accurately a new political understanding of being with ourselves and with others in the world—that is to say, in *this* world, not a world hereafter.

More germane to the topic of this conference, both Badiou and Agamben are interested in Paul as an antinomial thinker, or as someone who wants to transform entirely his reader's relationship with the law. And finally, for both Badiou and Agamben, Paul's work is thoroughly relevant to our own relationship with the law today. For both Badiou and Agamben, it is largely Paul's attack on the law that makes his work relevant.

On the other hand, their agreements aside, the basic difference between Badiou and Agamben can be summed up quite perspicuously: For Badiou, Paul's epistles or letters constitute "the foundation of universalism," whereas for Agamben, they represent "the fundamental messianic text" in our intellectual tradition. That is to say, for Badiou, Paul is a political militant, or one who states axiomatic, universal political truths irrespective of all circulating opinions and interests. For Agamben, on the other hand, Paul is much more a philosopher of time and someone who understands politics, less in terms of the statement of truths, than in the experiences of hope and redemption.

What I would like to do now is, perhaps, a little bit pedantic, and I apologize for that. Nonetheless it is, I think, necessary. In Parts III and IV, I will summarize in very broad terms the details of Badiou's and Agamben's respective appropriations of Paul. Within each of these Parts, I will speak a little bit about the implications of these various claims for contemporary legal theory—at least as I understand it, and I am no expert. Finally, in Part V, I will discuss briefly an alternative reading of Paul, one provided by Hannah Arendt, which, while far less fashionable, might have something important to contribute to this conversation.

For the sake of clarity, and so I don't lose my audience too quickly, I will explain each of these points briefly: First, Badiou treats Paul as a source for a new or renewed political militancy—one based on universal,

axiomatic truths or what he calls “truth-events” rather than struggles over a plurality of opinions, identities, or subject positions. In comparison, Agamben reads Paul as a theorist of time, and locates him in a tradition of Jewish mysticism that culminates in the work of Walter Benjamin. In both Parts III and IV, regarding the ways in which Badiou’s and Agamben’s respective interpretations of Paul relate to contemporary legal theory, I argue that they both use Paul to reject the notion that law is a necessary condition of human social relations, or that law constitutes social order. To put matters far too crudely, they both use Paul to suggest that law is dispensable, and that it is possible to image a social world or social relations without law. Finally, we have Arendt’s occasional reading of Paul. Arendt proposes that Paul invents the concept of the will—the difference between what I want to do and what I actually do. She further proposes that, while this distinction is of crucial importance in private life, it is of less importance in public life. Thus, for Arendt, Paul’s rejection of the law is best understood as a mode of living with ourselves, and doesn’t really work as a way of living with others—the latter being something for which we need law.

When I break my argument down like this, I feel as though my point becomes obvious. But by “obvious,” I mean the word in the precise etymological sense of something that is *ob via*, something that is “against” or “in” the “way.” Regardless, just because it is obvious does not mean that it is false. And, the more I think about it, the more I think all I want to do in this paper is attach a thin, wispy tether between what is obvious—what is in the way—and what is true.

### III. BADIOU’S UNIVERSALISM

#### A. Badiou and the Event

Let’s start, then, with Alain Badiou. I don’t know how many people are familiar with Badiou’s work, but his seminal text, his *magnum opus* really, is a colossal book called *Being and Event*. I won’t pretend to have time to do anything like justice to its argument. Suffice to say, that in *Being and Event*, Badiou seeks to construct an entirely new ontology—one based on mathematics and set theory rather than semiotics, culture, or language.

Basically, Badiou proposes that existence is shot through by singular events that bear no relationship with other elements of reality, but emerge spontaneously, as it were, out of the void. Although utterly discrete and non-relational, events rely nonetheless on militant subjects who attach themselves to those events, or more accurately, who are created along with them, and who maintain what Badiou calls a certain “fidelity”

to them. To be struck by an event, to be swept up in its sudden appearance, is also to reject everything that would allow you to make sense of it from a particular perspective. It is to reject what Badiou calls “communitarian particularism,” and, in simple terms, to be born anew.

Two things are perhaps becoming apparent: First, the reason for Badiou’s fascination with Paul, who, through his famous experience on the road to Damascus, is swept up in the Christ-event; and second, Badiou’s contempt for pluralism or the politics of identity and difference, and everything that was so well established by the field called “cultural studies.” When I say that Badiou has “contempt” for pluralism, I am using my words advisedly, even sparingly. Badiou thinks of cultural studies—or what he calls “culturalist ideology”—as an “extreme” relativism that renders “equivalent” statements of truth on the one hand, and “obscurantist and symbolically trivial apparatuses”<sup>3</sup> on the other. He believes that the pluralistic celebration of cultural identity and the production of new capitalist markets are completely symbiotic, “perfectly intertwined”<sup>4</sup> processes.

So we know what Badiou is against. Let’s explore a little bit just what he supports, or what he proposes as an alternative to the politics of modern pluralism. And let’s do that by addressing his book on Saint Paul. Badiou reads Paul, not as a father of Roman Christendom, but as “a subjective figure of primary importance,” “a poet-thinker of the event,” and a “militant figure” who can contribute to what Badiou calls “a widespread search for a new militant figure” today.<sup>5</sup>

The problem Badiou sets before himself in his book on Saint Paul is linking the theme of subjective freedom with that of a subject subordinated or utterly faithful to an event that cannot be predicted, contained, or reduced to calculable knowledge in any fashion. It is a question of what Badiou calls a “singular universal,” an event that addresses a universal truth the universality of which can exist only to the extent that a singular subject is interpellated by it and publicly declares it. “A truth procedure is only universal,” Badiou writes, “insofar as it is supported, at that point through which it indexes the real, by an immediate subjective recognition of its singularity.”<sup>6</sup> What Badiou means by “universal” here is more than a little unusual and thus requires some explanation. The universality of a truth-event does not rely on knowledge that can verify it

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3. ALAIN BADIOU, SAINT PAUL: THE FOUNDATION OF UNIVERSALISM 6 (Ray Brassier trans., Stanford Univ. Press 2003) (1997).

4. *Id.* at 10.

5. *Id.* at 1–2.

6. *Id.* at 22.



in an objective fashion. Indeed, it is a truth-*event* precisely to the extent that it breaks with all forms of established knowledge and all established modes of the law. Therefore, its universality paradoxically depends on a singular subject who is willing to renounce within her or him self all previous markers of identity, all, as Badiou calls them, “communitarian particularisms,” all structural or political “interests” and “opinions,” in the name of fidelity to the event itself.

Badiou therefore sketches out two elements of a truth-event or truth-procedure: (1) “[E]very truth procedure breaks with the axiomatic principle that governs the situation and organizes its repetitive series,” or breaks with established knowledge; and, for the same reason, (2) a truth procedure “cannot take root in the element of identity. For if it is true that every truth erupts as singular, its singularity is immediately universalizable.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, we have the paradox of the singular universal: It is universal to the extent that it is an axiomatic, unquestionable truth that requires no verification, and cannot be ensnared within the logic of any particular situation. It is singular to the extent that it must be articulated by a subject who is radically disinterested in their own location within a situation, or who has nothing to gain, and perhaps much to lose, by declaring it.

### B. Badiou and Legal Theory

I know this all sounds a little strange, but I think Badiou’s principle claims—at least as they relate to theories of the law—can be understood quite simply if we focus on two elements of his reading of Paul: (1) his interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of grace, which he calls “senseless superabundance”; and (2) his broad outline of what he calls “the four discourses,” or four different ways of relating to the law: the Jewish, the Greek, the obscurantist, and, from Badiou’s perspective at least, the properly Christian.

For Badiou, Paul’s doctrine of grace or *elapsis* is crucial to understanding his antinomianism. If law is understood in terms of *nomos*, which is to say sharing, allotment, and measure, or a kind of parceling out of established goods, the Christ-event represents for Paul the end of any such distributive conception of justice. “For Paul,” Badiou maintains, “the Christ-event is heterogeneous to the law, pure excess over every prescription, grace without concept or appropriate right.”<sup>8</sup> I am not sure that Badiou would put it this way, but for our purposes we might say that Christ’s sacrifice, in its overwhelming pointlessness, or its over-

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7. *Id.* at 11.

8. *Id.* at 57.

whelming one-sidedness, wipes clean the need for any further sacrifices, or any future effort to balance our relationship with either God or one another. It is absolute grace, an absolute gift, and as such it renders immediately irrelevant the established or recognizable differences between subjects and addresses or calls out to each subject in their utterly disinterested singularity.

Law is, as Badiou puts it, “the cipher of finitude”<sup>9</sup> and hence death. It is what allows us to distribute what we already have or what is available within a finite situation. Grace, on the other hand, is the gift of the infinite. It need not be distributed among us as a finite good, as it is available to each one of us as a singular individual in infinite measure. It “is not strained,” it is not limited, but “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven”<sup>10</sup> as Shakespeare says of mercy, which is for Paul the twin of grace.<sup>11</sup>

To further explain Paul’s antinomial proclamation, Badiou traces out what he calls “four discourses” operative in the epistles—four potential “regimes of discourse” or “subjective dispositions.”<sup>12</sup> The Jewish discourse is that of “the prophet” and “the sign,” or what legal theorists call the exception. It views law as something that must issue from an ineffable or unknowable “outside,” like the word of God. The Greek discourse is that of “the wise man” and “the natural totality,” or what in legal theory we might call natural law. It characterizes law as a function of some identifiable natural order—something any rational creature can deduce from within any given situation.

The properly Christian or soteriological discourse, Badiou maintains, rejects law in both its exceptional and its normative modes, and attaches itself exclusively to an event. Badiou writes:

Paul’s project is to show that the universal logic of salvation cannot be reconciled with any law, be it one that ties thought to the cosmos, or one that fixes the effects of an exceptional election. It is impossible that the starting point be the Whole, but just as impossible that it be an exception to the Whole. Neither totality nor sign will do. One must proceed from the event as such, which is a-cosmic and illegal, refusing integration into any totality and signaling nothing. But proceeding from the event delivers no law, not form of mastery, be it that of the wise man or the prophet.<sup>13</sup>

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9. *Id.* at 81.

10. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *MERCHANT OF VENICE* act 4, sc. 1.

11. *See Ephesians* 2:4–9.

12. BADIOU, *supra* note 3, at 41.

13. *Id.*



Paul's project speaks to neither fact nor norm, neither exception nor order, but a pure event that transforms all relations and leaves behind no new arrangement. At the same time, Badiou is certain to distinguish this new Christian discourse from any obscurantist or radically individualistic revelation. It is not what Badiou calls a "ravishment of the unutterable,"<sup>14</sup> or being overtaken by something one can only experience in isolation. While it is thoroughly dissociated from all law, indeed precisely because it is dissociated from the law and all established forms of knowledge, the truth-event thoroughly relies on a subject who will declare it, and declare it publicly.

#### IV. AGAM BEN'S MESSIANISM

I am not sure I have done a very good job of clarifying Badiou's work, but perhaps it is time to turn to Agamben, who is undoubtedly better known in North America than Badiou, largely because of his theories of sovereignty and biopower, *homo sacer*, bare life, and the state of exception. Agamben is also a very different kind of scholar than Badiou—more of a reader of texts, especially mysterious, arcane texts, than an inventor of philosophical or ontological systems. To the extent that we can say Agamben has a "politics," it would be very different from Badiou's as well—less a call for militancy and statement of axiomatic truths than a kind of studied, phlegmatic, stoical reserve, in line I suppose with Bartleby's famous "I would prefer not to."

Agamben's approach to Paul is also distinct from Badiou's, although they are clearly in conversation with one another on the topic. While Badiou reads Paul as a militant figure and the foundation of universalism, Agamben reads him as a messianic thinker, even a philosopher of time. Time is, of course, one of the oldest and most complicated of philosophical problems—vexing us from at least Aristotle's *Physics*, with its loaded metaphor of potentiality and actuality, to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, with its rejection of the "series of nows" in favor of an ecstatic relation of what is no longer and what is still yet to come.

Essentially, Agamben reads Paul as a thinker of "the time that remains" or the hidden time that it takes to think anything at all about time itself. This "time that remains" is, for Agamben, everywhere present but everywhere absent. It is the presupposed but concealed condition of time as such. Paul's messianism is not concerned with the apocalyptic "end of times," but with what Agamben calls the "time of the end." In short, to be messianic is not to imagine a certain end to history, but to experience time in a certain way—as spontaneous creation of the new and mel-

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14. *Id.* at 54.

anachronic loss of the past. In terms of political and legal theory, Agamben's book on Paul is somewhat less obtuse. It contains two important elements: (1) a theory of the subject on the one hand; and (2) a theory of the law on the other. What does it mean to be a person, or more specifically, a Christian in Paul's sense? And how does a person or a Christian relate to law?

### *A. Agamben and the Subject*

*The Time that Remains* is framed as a microscopically close reading of the opening salutation of Paul's Letter to the Romans, which Agamben renders: "Paul slave of [the] Messiah Jesus called emissary separated unto [the] announcement of God."<sup>15</sup> Each word is addressed in elaborate detail, but the two that seem most significant are "called" (*kletos*) and "separated" (*aphorismenos*), addressed in the second and third chapters of Agamben's book respectively. First, what does it mean for Paul to be "called"? What is a "calling"? Here Agamben takes issue with Max Weber's well-known interpretation of Paul as someone who understands a "calling" as a kind of personal vocation coupled with worldly indifference—what becomes the "protestant ethic." For Agamben, the messianic calling to which Paul attests is neither a personal destiny nor a worldly indifference. It is instead a moment, an experience, which situates the called one immediately in the world. It commands the use of what is available, not the accumulation of possessions.

Second, and more importantly, what does it mean for Paul, who proclaims the Christian faith as universal, to say that he has been "separated"? What is universal about separation? Agamben's point here is related to Badiou's reflections on the "singular universal," but it is, nonetheless, considerably more finessed. For Badiou, every truth or truth-event is only universal insofar as it is supported by a singular subject who declares it publicly. Agamben, on the other hand, thinks that the Christian subject is "separated" as a certain excess or incommensurable element that remains incoherent after every act of separation or every separation between plural identities. Put simply, whenever humans are divided into separate categories or identities, there always remain some humans who fit within none of the established categories. These "separated" ones are, for Agamben, the truly universal or messianic subjects—the ones whose proper place is no place at all. The paradigmatic example is the young Marx's conception of the proletariat, who are not an

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15. GIORGIO AGAM BEN, *THE TIME THAT REMAINS: A COMMENTARY ON THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS* 149 (Patricia Dailey trans., Stanford Univ. Press 2005) (2000).

identifiable economic “class,” but precisely those who fit within no classification or who remain separate after every act of classification.

It is on this later point—the messianic subject as the remains, the remnant, or the separated—that Agamben stakes the political significance of Paul’s letters. He writes:

If I had to mark out a political legacy in Paul’s letters that was immediately traceable, I believe that the concept of the remnant would have to play a part. More specifically, it allows for a new perspective that dislodges our antiquated notions of a people and a democracy, however impossible it may be to completely renounce them. The people is neither the all nor the part, neither the majority nor the minority. Instead, it is that which can never coincide with itself, as all or as part, that which infinitely remains or resists in each division, and, with all due respect to those who govern us, never allows us to be reduced to a majority or a minority. This remnant is the figure, or the substantiality assumed by a people in a decisive moment, and as such is the only real political subject.<sup>16</sup>

To simplify Agamben’s point, “the people” is never something that can be quantified or divided into majority and minority for the purposes of calculation and regulation. “The people” is only that which acts in what Agamben calls “a decisive moment.” I am sure that some of us hear in this passage strains of mass democracy, revolutionary workers’ councils, and the constituent power of the multitude. But I don’t think that is what Agamben has in mind.

#### *B. Agamben and the Law*

It is here that Agamben’s reading of Paul’s antinomianism becomes informative. Badiou’s analysis of Paul’s antinomianism is, we will recall, fairly cut and dried: law is the figure of death; grace is the figure of life. Grace abounds as an alternative to law. It wipes clean our need for the law. Agamben, on the other hand, tries to take seriously Paul’s claim that the Christ-event both completes and transcends, both fulfills and destroys, the law. There is actually a moment in *The Time that Remains* where Agamben tries to prove that the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, or the notion that something might be cancelled out and preserved at a higher level, is directly derived from Hegel’s reading of Martin Luther’s translation of Paul’s word *katargesis*, which means to abolish, preserve, and fulfill. Whether or not we wish to accept this textual assertion, it does get us closer to what Agamben wants to say about law. For Agamben’s messi-

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<sup>16</sup>. *Id.* at 57.

anic tendency suggests, not that we can do away with law as such, but that, in treating law as a pure means, rather than an instrumental means to an end, we might preserve it while rendering it inoperative—preserve, we might say, the “form” of law without its force or its content.

Perhaps this aspect of Agamben’s juridical thought is most succinctly explained in a different text, namely *State of Exception*, where we find the following messianic prophesy: “One day,” Agamben proclaims there, “humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use, but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law,” he continues, “is not a more proper and original use value that precedes the law, but a new use that is only born after it.”<sup>17</sup> Here it might be possible to “sever the nexus between violence and law,” as Agamben says, and imagine instead a “‘pure’ law [. . .] that does not bind, that neither commands nor prohibits anything, but says only itself.” Such a pure law would “correspond [to] an action as pure means” that “would show itself, without any relation to an end.”<sup>18</sup> This new law would further require “a new and coherent ontology of potentiality” that was not “founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality.”<sup>19</sup>

Paul’s antinomial, messianic promise, then, is of a law hollowed out of its force and its violence, separated from its punitive function. Instead, the law is the object of infinite, almost infantile play without purpose or aim—a pure potentiality or “means without end,” as Agamben puts it in the title of another one of his works. Here we find, not a break with nor a breaking of the law, but rather the law’s recapitulation or repetition, almost a parodic reiteration—a doubling that also annuls its strength and severs its ancient link with violence and force. Agamben’s privileged examples of such a messianic experience of the law in our existing world come from religious festivals: carnivals and feasts, holidays and bacchanalia, where the generic forms of law remain in place while the content is scrambled and destroyed.

This explains the simplest but most far reaching difference between Badiou’s and Agamben’s respective appropriations of Saint Paul—the universalism of one and the messianism of the other. For if Badiou is utterly serious, demanding militant fidelity to an event and the public statement of axiomatic truths, Agamben is sufficiently melancholic about

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17. GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *STATE OF EXCEPTION* 64 (Kevin Attell trans., Stanford Univ. Press 2005) (2003).

18. *Id.* at 88.

19. GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *HOMO SACER: SOVEREIGN POWER AND BARE LIFE* 43 (Daniel Heller-Roazen trans., Stanford Univ. Press 1998) (1995).

the present to imagine the possibility of careless joy in the future, or in a certain futurity that conditions every now, provided we attend to the calling without vocation and acknowledge the promise of grace.

#### V. ARENDT'S REPUBLICANISM

An alternative approach to Paul's epistles might be found in Arendt's far more occasional, but I think more insightful, references to them in her work. For Arendt, Paul is the thinker who first discovers the will, which is a kind of capricious and uncontrollable arbiter that stands between intention and action, or what I want to do and what I actually do—the “split subject” of psychoanalysis. In Arendt's estimation, it is this private, internal faculty that our intellectual tradition, or the Christian intellectual tradition at any rate, comes to associate with freedom, for it seems to be constrained by neither a desire that comes before it nor a goal that it seeks to accomplish. Without purpose or aim, the will simply decides.

At the same time, Arendt continues, this means that Paul discovers the will in its impotence, or its inability to alter the world and engage with the plurality of human others. For its freedom relies on its purity. It cannot be tainted by any difference, and it cannot be subjected to any law, without ceasing to be, precisely, a will. That such a solitary, internal, impotent faculty would become the basis for our conception of legal and political freedom is, for Arendt, one of the greatest mysteries and one of the greatest tragedies of all human experience. What speaks properly to the agony of being a human individual alone with oneself, Arendt continues, or what speaks properly to the complexity of attempting to be in agreement with oneself, somehow becomes the standard for our relations with others—as if the plurality of human affairs could be reduced to the non-contradictory purity of a human will.

Here, then, Paul's antinomianism makes perfect sense as a private experience or as an effort to suspend the law when relating to oneself, but it makes no sense at all as a political mandate. For in the public world, humans are never unified around a “general will”; rather, and as the French verb *partager* captures quite well, they share what divides them. Arendt's favorite metaphor for this sharing and dividing is the table, which brings us together around the very thing that holds us apart.

Perhaps law in the sense of *nomos* is also such a sharing and dividing, such a common coming together for the sake of being taken apart. For the plurality of human affairs relies, not on an event that speaks the truth, but on the endless fictions, fantasies, and illusions that we generate as ways of bridging, however briefly and however tendentiously, the incommensurable differences that separate us.

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