

# Chapter 2

## You Are Not Your Own

### On the Nature of Faith

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#### Reformation

Saint Paul is trouble. It is simply a fact about the history of Christian dogma that the return to Paul is usually very bad news for the established church. As Adolph von Harnack pointed out more than a century ago,

One might write the history of dogma as the history of the Pauline reactions in the Church, and in doing so would touch on all the turning points of the history. (von Harnack 1894, p. 136)

This is true of Marcion's opposition to the Apostolic Fathers, Augustine after the Church Fathers through to Luther after the Scholastics and Jansenism after the Council of Trent. Von Harnack continues, 'Everywhere it has been Paul...who produced the Reformation.' (von Harnack 1894, p. 136)

So, the spirit of Paul is the movement of reformation. It is the attempt to clear away the corruption, secularism and intellectual sophistry of the established church and to return to the *religious* core of Christianity that is tightly bound up with its oldest extant documents, Paul's Epistles. The Pauline motivation for religious reformation is also true of Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Perverse as it might sound, I think it is equally true of Nietzsche, even and perhaps especially when he dresses himself in the tragi-comic garb of the Anti-Christ. Giorgio Agamben rightly sees Nietzsche's adoption of the figure the Anti-Christ from Second Thessalonians as a kind of parody of Pauline Messianism (Agamben 2005b, p. 112). Nietzsche's call for a revaluation of values is based on a sheer jealousy of Paul: if anyone brought about a revaluation of values, then it was Paul. But also, Nietzsche's revelation of the intuition into Eternal Return, '6,000 ft above

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man and time', is a kind of mimicry of Paul's road to Damascus experience. As Jacob Taubes writes, 'Paul haunts Nietzsche all the way to the deepest intimacies.' (Taubes 2004, p. 83)

To begin to turn towards my angle of entry into Paul, what goes for Nietzsche also goes for Heidegger's passionate interest in *Urchristentum*, primal or primordial Christianity, in his lectures on Paul's Epistles in the crisis years that followed the First World War. The basic intuition of Heidegger's reformation of thinking is deeply Pauline. The very gesture of attempting to recover a primordial Christianity is the desire for a repetition of the Pauline moment. We must slough off the sediment of tradition, what Heidegger called in his famous 1919 letter to his priest, Father Engelbert Krebs, 'The system of Catholicism', and reactivate the traditions' sources in the name of an originary experience (2002, p. 69). The return to Paul is the attempt, and this is Heidegger's word, at the *destruction* (*Destruktion*) or dismantling of a deadening tradition in the name of a proclamation of life.

As Wayne Meeks points out, Paul is both 'the most holy apostle' and 'the apostle of the heretics' (Meeks 1972, p. 435). Since the times of his quarrel with Peter and the Jewish Christians, Paul has been the zealot foe of tradition's authority and the opponent of any and all forms of authoritarianism. Paul is the proper name of a ferment in the history of Christianity. Indeed, it is a ferment that places even the specificity of Christianity in question. For example, what the books by Daniel Boyarin, Taubes and Agamben share is the desire to show that Paul is much better understood as a radical Jew. As Boyarin notes, 'Paul lived and died convinced he was a Jew living out Judaism' (Boyarin 1994, p. 2). Taubes goes even further, claiming that 'Paul is a fanatic, a Jewish zealot' (Taubes 2004, p. 24) and 'more Jewish than any reform rabbi' (Taubes 2004, p. 11). Agamben's governing hypothesis is to restore Paul's Epistles to their rightful place within the tradition of Jewish Messianism, a tradition reactivated through Scholem and Benjamin (Taubes 2004, p. 1).

If Paul's essence consists in anything, then it is surely constituted by activism. This spells trouble for any and every church that sees itself as founded, funded and well-defended. What usually happens when Paul is invoked is that the established church is declared to be the Whore of Babylon and its hierarchy the Anti-Christ. The fact that there is so much interest in Paul at present shouldn't therefore be seen as a conservative gesture or some sort of return to traditional religion. On the contrary, the return to Paul is the demand for reformation. It is the demand for a new figure of activism, or what Alain Badiou calls a new militancy for the universal in an age defined by moral relativism, a communitarian politics of identity and global capitalism (Badiou 2003, pp. 4–15). What is being glimpsed and groped towards in the return to Paul is a vision of faith and existential commitment that might begin to face and face down the demotivated slackening of existence under conditions of liberal democracy. The return to Paul is motivated by political disappointment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a rather different, but wonderfully detailed, account of Paul's politics, that attempts to show the extent of Paul's debt to the traditions of Hellenistic popular and political philosophy, see Blumenfeld (2001).

## Paul's Address

Written with an overwhelming sense of urgency, over a very brief period – 10 years or so (51–62? a.d.) – in a context that, at the very least, could have been described as critical and crisis-ridden, Paul's Epistles have shown themselves to be susceptible to the widest and wildest interpretations, simplifications and distortions. From the time of the subsequent writing of the Gospels, through to the Acts of the Apostles and the so-called heresy of Marcion onwards, there has seemed to be something infinitely malleable about the subtle antithetical complexities of Paul's thinking, what Luther called 'an unheard-of speech' (Meeks 1972, p. 241). To call Paul protean is to risk utter understatement.

Obviously, the most widespread and egregious distortion is that Paul was the 'Founder of Christianity'. As any reader of Paul will know, the words 'Christian' and 'Christianity' were not employed by Paul. He spoke rather of being 'in Christ', a phrase which can be understood in at least two ways:

1. Mystically, as a claim for the immanence of Christ in the soul, as when Paul says 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2 19).<sup>2</sup>
2. Politically, as what Martin Dibelius calls 'membership in the waiting community' (Meeks 1972, p. 409). I will turn below to the subtlety of Paul's critique of mysticism.

However much subsequent Christian doctrine might have tried to transform him into a more Peter-like foundation stone or *pierre angulaire*, Paul certainly didn't see himself as a founder of an organized institutional religion, whether Orthodox or Catholic, let alone Anglican.

Paul simply proclaimed the Messiah (*Mashiah*, *Christos*), whose name was Jesus, the historical *Yeshu ben Yosef*. As we will see presently, Paul's faith is not the sort of abstract belief in God famously criticized by Martin Buber, as much as a passionate commitment to the Messiah (Buber 1994). The faith in Jesus as the anointed one or Messiah was evidenced through the resurrection. Read any few pages of Paul, and one is reminded of the absolute centrality of the resurrection. Without it, all faith is in vain. It cannot simply be dismissed as a 'fable', as Badiou tries to do (Badiou 2003, p. 4). But with his faith in the resurrection, Paul sought to build up communities that in his words would be a 'remnant, chosen by grace.' (Rom. 10 5) As Taubes shows, Paul constructs a negative political theology based on the single commandment of love that is against both the Jews and the Romans. Paul writes to an illicit, secret, subterranean community, 'a little Jewish, a little Gentile' (Taubes 2004, p. 54), a bunch of rejects and *refuseniks*, the very filth of the world: 'We have become, and are now as the refuse of the world (*perikatharmata tou kosmou*), the offscouring (*peripsiema*) of all things' (1 Cor. 4 12).

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Paul, unless indicated, are to the Revised Standard Edition, given in Meeks (1972). I have also, on occasion, checked translations from the Greek using Marshall (1933 [1882]).

What is being imagined here is a political theology of the wretched of the earth, as Frantz Fanon would say, or the scum of the earth, which is the New International Version translation of *perikatharmata tou kosmou*. Paul's politics is a building up of an unwanted offscouring that belongs neither to the world of the Romans or the Jews: an unclean husk, peel or skin scale, that which is sloughed off and thrown away, the human dregs and nailclippings of the world – the shit of the earth (see Eagleton 2009, p. 23). I think Agamben is therefore justified in his critique of Badiou that what is at stake in Paul is not the simple assertion of universalism against communitarianism (Agamben 2005b, pp. 51–52). Paulinism is not Kantianism. What is at stake is a politics of the remnant, where the off-cuttings of humanity are the basis for a new political articulation.

The task of these scoured-off communities was to bear the message of the Messiah through the end-times in which Paul believed he was living, 'For the form of this world is passing away.' (1 Cor. 7 31) As Agamben shows, Paul's concern is with the time that remains, *il tempo che resta*; that is, the remaining time between now and *parousia*, between the now that is defined by the historicity of the resurrection and the futurity of Jesus' return (Agamben 2005b, pp. 62–72). Pauline time – which can be described as messianic or indeed ecstatic – is stretched between the 'already' of the resurrection and the 'not-yet' of *parousia*, a historicity and futurity that are marked in the now, the *kairos*, of Paul's address. The urgency of the address shows that he didn't think there was much time left.

It is the nature of the address in Paul that is so fascinating. Firstly, Paul writes letters that are addressed to a specific community – the Thessalonians, the Galatians – or, in at least one case, to a specific person – Philemon. But, secondly, and more importantly, Paul writes these letters because he was addressed, because he was called. So, Paul addresses letters because he was addressed. Paul never speaks of a conversion experience. The closest we get to conversion is the questionable passage in Acts when Jesus says, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?', the scales fell from his eyes, and Saul becomes Paul (Acts 9 4). Paul speaks rather of being called, *kletos*, or of a calling, *klesis*. As he writes at the beginning of Romans, Paul was called to be an apostle, a messenger (Rom. 1 1). In Corinthians 2, Paul speaks of himself in the third person, 'I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.' (2 Cor. 10 2) But whatever happens to Paul that transforms him from a persecutor of Jewish Christians into a preacher of Christ's gospel, he is the subject of a calling. Or, better, Paul's subjectivity is constituted through a call.

Who is Paul, we might ask? Paul is the called. Indeed, Paul is called Paul because he was called. Before the call, he was Saul or *Saulos*. Saul was a noble and kingly name, 'of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. . .under the law blameless.' (Phil. 3 5) Through his calling, Paul writes, 'I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse (*skubala*).' (Phil. 3 8). When Paul is called, he becomes trash, literally a piece of shit or dung as some of the earlier translations render *toskubalon*. As opposed to the nobility of Saul, a free Roman citizen, Paul becomes small. As Agamben reminds us, *paulus* in Latin means 'small, of little significance.' (Agamben 2005b, p. 7) It is linked to *pauper*, a man of poor, scanty or

meager means. The movement from Saul to Paul occasioned by the call is a switch from major to minor. *Paulos* is a diminutive, something like ‘Pauly’ or ‘Paulinho’. Crucially, Paul is a slave name and like all slave names it is a nickname – violently imposed – that superimposes itself in the place of the erased proper name. Once Paul is called, as he says at the beginning of Romans, he becomes a slave of the Messiah (*Paulos doulos Iesou Kristou*). The key to Paul’s ‘unheard-of speech,’ his delight and brilliance in multiplying antitheses, is that slavery makes us free and weakness is strength, ‘For when I am weak, then I am strong.’ (2 Cor 12 10) Christ was crucified in weakness to become powerful through the resurrection. Likewise, in becoming slaves of the Messiah, we are asked to abandon our secular, Roman life of freedom, and assert our weakness. The power of being in Christ is a powerless power. It is constituted by a call that exceeds human strength. It gives subjects a potentiality for action through rendering them impotent. We shall return to the central theme of impotence below.

Furthermore, Paul insists, ‘This is my rule in all the churches’ (1 Cor 7 17): we should remain in the condition in which we were called. If you were a slave when called, then no matter: he who was called as a slave becomes free in Christ. Alternatively, if you were free when called, like Paul, then you become a slave of Christ. A similar oxymoronic logic governs Paul’s approach to marriage: if you are bound to a wife, then ‘do not seek to be free.’ (1 Cor. 7 27) But if you are free of a wife, then ‘do not seek marriage.’ (1 Cor. 7 27) As Paul continues, ‘the appointed time has grown very short’ and marriage will lead us into worldly troubles (1 Cor. 7 29). Therefore, ‘let those who have wives live as if they had none.’ (1 Cor. 7 29) So much for so-called Christian family values. As Terry Eagleton reminds us, ‘Jesus’ attitude to the family is one of implacable hostility.’ (Eagleton 2009, p. 23)

## Troth-Plight, Faith as Proclamation

My concern here is with the nature of faith. I’d like to address this issue directly by using Paul and some of his recent philosophical interlocutors as my guides. What kind of thing is faith and – more particularly – can someone who is nominally or denominationally faithless, such as myself, still have an experience of faith? Can one speak of a faith of the faithless?

The idea I want to propose here is faith as a declarative act, as an enactment, a performative that proclaims. To this extent, I want to tie the idea of the gospel and evangelical good tidings (*to euaggelion*) to the verbal sense of ‘to proclaim’ or ‘to announce’ (*euaggelizomai*). Faith is an announcement that enacts, a proclamation that brings the subject of faith into being.

To put it telegraphically, faith is an enactment in relation to a calling. It is proclaimed in the urgent and punctual literary form of the epistle. The letter, arising out of the address of a calling, is addressed to a specific community usually at a critical moment in its existence. In other words, faith announces itself in a situation of crisis where a decisive intervention is called for. In other words, faith takes place

in a situation of struggle. At stake in the struggle is the meaning of the future and the exact extent of the shadow that the future casts across the present – eschatological struggle. So, faith is not an empty, fixed or constant state with the distant pay-off of final bliss in the afterlife. It is rather an enactment in the present that is shot through both by the facticity of the past (for Paul, the fact of the resurrection) and the imminence of the future (*parousia*). The passion that defines Paul's proclamation in his letters concerns our relation to the futurity of a redemption that we anxiously await, but for which we must prepare ourselves.

Paul's conception of faith is not, then, the abstraction of a metaphysical belief in God. Nor is Christ some Hegelian mediation to the divine or a conduit to a transcendent beyond. Faith is rather a lived subjective commitment to what I have called elsewhere an infinite demand (Critchley 2007, Chap. 2). It is the infinite demand of the risen Christ that calls Paul to proclaim. It is in relation to that demand that the subject is constituted through an act of approval or fidelity. Crucially, and we will come back to this, the subject is not the equal of the infinite demand which is placed on it. If it were, the demand would not be infinite and the structure of faith would have the same shape as autonomy, namely the law that one gives oneself, for example in Kant. Rather, the infinite demand that calls Paul requires a faith in something that exceeds my power, the *Faktum* of Jesus Messiah. This *Faktum* hetero-affectively constitutes the subject in a very specific way. Faith does not consist in the assertive strength of the subject that makes it the equal of the demand placed on it. Rather, the infinite demand confronts the strength of the subject with an essential weakness or state of wanting (*asthenia*). As Paul writes,

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are. (1 Cor. 1 27–28).

Agamben shows compellingly in his linking of Paul to Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' that messianic power is always weak (Agamben 2005b, pp. 138–45). The adjective 'weak' is not a qualification or diminution of messianic power, as Derrida seems to believe in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994). As the Lord replies to Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (Cor. 2 12 9) Faith, especially a faith of the faithless, since it lacks a transcendent, metaphysical guarantee, is a powerless power, a strength in weakness.

On 'The Sixth Day' of his reading of the ten opening words of Paul's Letter to the Romans, Agamben turns to the question of faith in a way that finds an echo in the claim that I've just tried to make. In a gesture that one finds repeatedly in his writings, usually towards the ends of his books – sometimes, indeed, on the final page – Agamben tries to keep open a space between law and life.<sup>3</sup> His governing Benjaminian thesis is that history is the creeping juridification of all areas of human life, where the law is identified with violence. For Agamben, there is an essential decline in the experience of faith from Pauline *pistis* to the forms of sacramental

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the final paragraph of *State of Exception* (Agamben 2005a, p. 88) which begins, 'To show law in its nonrelation to life and life in its nonrelation to law. . .'

faith that emerged in the centuries after Paul. The history of theology – and perhaps theology itself, the science of the divine – is the reduction of faith to creedal dogma or the articles of a catechism. When this happens, as Agamben lets slip in one of his typically elliptical asides, ‘The law stiffens and atrophies and relations between men lose all sense of grace and vitality.’ (Agamben 2005b, p. 135) In what is essentially a repetition of the reformational gesture that I noted at the beginning of this chapter – Marcionite or Lutheran – Agamben finds that vitality of faith in Paul.

Agamben links faith to the experience of making an *oath*, the domain of what he calls ‘*pré-droit*’, ‘pre-law.’ (Agamben 2005b, p. 114) Such an oath is a kind of pledge or what I called above a proclamation. It is something that one swears. In this pre-creedal, pre-judicial experience of faith, there is no split between belief in God the Father and God the Son, as in the Nicene Creed – even if they are two aspects of the same Trinitarian ontological substance. Furthermore, and crucially for Agamben, faith is not ontological at all. It is not faith that ‘Jesus *is* the Messiah’, where the latter is a predicate of the former. Rather, faith is expressed in the more compressed pledge of the *Faktum*: ‘Jesus Messiah’. Being is not something that we can predicate of Christ through a constative proposition or even Hegel’s speculative copula. Rather, Jesus Messiah is something otherwise than Being or beyond essence, to coin a phrase.

Similarly, Jesus Messiah is beyond existence, or rather he is not proven through the fact of the historical Jesus. As Paul makes clear in Galatians, when Jesus Christ was revealed to Paul in order that he might preach amongst the Gentiles, ‘I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me.’ (Gal. 1 16–17) Rather, he disappeared into ‘Arabia,’ which scholars suggest refers to somewhere in modern Syria or Jordan. Thus, the experience of faith cannot be explained with reference to the category of being, whether conceived as essence or existence. As Agamben makes clear, between the words ‘Jesus’ and ‘Messiah’ there is no elbowroom into which the copula might squeeze its way. Faith, then, is the performative force of the words ‘Jesus Messiah’ – nothing more, but nothing less. This is what Agamben interestingly calls ‘the effective experience of a pure power of saying.’ (Agamben 2005b, p. 136)

Faith is a word, a word whose force consists in the event of its proclamation. The proclamation finds no support within being, whether conceived as existence or essence. Agamben interestingly links this thought to Foucault’s idea of *veridiction* or truth-telling, where the truth lies in the telling alone.<sup>4</sup> But it could equally be linked to Lacan’s distinction, inherited from Benveniste, between the orders of *énonciation* (the subject’s act of speaking) and the *énoncé* (the formulation of this speech-act into a statement or proposition). Indeed, there are significant echoes between this idea of faith as proclamation and Levinas’s conception of the Saying

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<sup>4</sup> See Agamben (2005b, pp. 133–34) where he refers to unpublished lectures by Foucault given in Leuven in 1981 called ‘Mal faire, dire vrai.’ This is closely related to the also unpublished fourth volume of the History of Sexuality, *The Confessions of the Flesh*, which deals with the practice of confession and monastic discipline.

(*le Dire*) which is the performative act of addressing and being addressed by an other and the Said (*le Dit*), which is the formulation of that act into a proposition of the form ‘S is P’. We are dealing here with a performative idea of truth as *troth*, an act of fidelity or ‘being true to,’ rather than a propositional or empirical idea of truth (see Critchley 2007, Chaps. 1 and 2). Truth is conceived as what, in a rather nicely antiquated English, can be called ‘troth-plight,’ the faithful act of pledging or proclaiming.

Truth as troth has to be underwritten by love, where the proclamation of faith is an act of betrothal where one affiances oneself to another and where the other is one’s fiancé. This recalls the famous line of thinking from Corinthians 13, where Paul insists that if faith is not underwritten by love, then, ‘I’m a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.’ (1 Cor. 13 1) The context here, of course, is the polemic against *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues that had seemingly crept into the Corinthian congregation. But if faith is a troth-plight that proclaims the calling of an infinite demand, then the proclamation has to be supported by love, which ‘bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’ (1 Cor. 13 7) Faith without love is a hollow clanging that lacks the subjective commitment to endure. As Paul puts it in Galatians, ‘For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.’ (Gal. 5 6) This is a point that Badiou makes well in his reading of Paul. If faith is the coming forth (*le surgir*) of the subject in the proclamation of an infinite demand, then love is the labor (*labour*) of the subject that has bound itself to its demand in faith. Love is what gives consistency to a subject and which allows it to persevere with what Badiou always calls ‘a process of truth’. Love, like faith, does not allow for copulative predication, it does not assemble predicates of the beloved as reasons for love. As Agamben insists, in a curious example (given the name of Jesus’ mother), the lover says, ‘I love beautiful-brunette-tender Mary,’ not ‘I love Mary because she is beautiful, brunette, tender.’ (Agamben 2005b, p. 128) Love has no reason and needs none. If it did, it wouldn’t be love.<sup>5</sup>

## Crypto-Marcionism

In his Commentary on Galatians, Luther famously writes, ‘The truth of the Gospel is that, that our righteousness comes by faith alone.’ (Meeks 1972, p. 239) The return to Paul that defines the movement of reformation, is a return to the purity and authority of faith. As such, Luther draws the strongest of contrasts between faith and law, where ‘Law only shows sin, terrifies and humbles; thus it prepares us for justification and drives us to Christ.’ (Meeks 1972, p. 240) The effects of this radical

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<sup>5</sup> As Agamben relatedly writes in *The Coming Community*, ‘The lover wants the loved one *with all its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such* – this is the lover’s particular fetishism.’ (Agamben 1993, p. 2)



distinction between faith and law in the constitution of Christian anti-Semitism, where the Jews are always identified with law, are well-known and do not need to be rehearsed here (see Boyarin 1994, pp. 40–56).

My question here concerns the relation between faith and law in Paul and what is involved in the affirmation of a radical Paulinism that would be based on faith alone. In the history of Christian dogma, of course, this is the risk of Marcionism. It is, to quote Socrates, a fine risk, but one that ultimately has to be refused. My other concern here is with the way in which a certain ultra-Paulinism asserts itself in figures like Agamben, Heidegger and Badiou in a way that might lead one to conclude that the contemporary return to Paul is really a return to Marcion.

As Taubes writes, there are two ways out of Paul:

1. The Christian church itself in its early centuries, the tradition of Peter; and,
2. Marcionism, which posed the greatest political threat to emergent Catholic Christianity, particularly in the latter half of the Second Century.

Marcion, like Paul, was a gifted organizer and tenacious creator of churches. His followers were extremely numerous and lived in communities, in some cases whole villages, until the time of their persecution under Constantine in the Fourth Century. Marcionite communities reportedly endured here and there as late as the Tenth Century. For Marcion, Paul was the only true apostle. Marcion was his true follower. He called himself ‘Presbyteros’, leader of the true followers of the true apostle. For Marcion, the core of Paul’s proclamation is the separation between the orders of faith and law, grace and works and spirit and flesh. Marcion radicalizes the antithetical form of Paul’s thought – his only known work is called *The Antitheses*, which is roughly dated to 140 A.D. – to the point of cutting the bond that ties creation to redemption. And Marcion is surely right here: creation plays a very small role in Paul and his constant preoccupation is redemption. Therefore, as Taubes notes,

The thread that links creation and redemption is a very thin one. A very, very thin one. And it can snap. And that is Marcion. He reads – and he knows how to read! – the father of Jesus Christ is *not* the creator of heaven and earth. (Taubes 2004, p. 60)

As von Harnack shows, in the obsessive and oddly moving book – 50 years in the making—*Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, Marcion cuts the ontological link that ties creation to redemption and establishes an ontological dualism (von Harnack 1990, pp. 1–14). The God of the known world, the God of creation, whom Paul suggestively calls ‘the God of this world,’ is distinct from the God of redemption, the God who is revealed through and as Jesus Christ. In opposition to the known God of the Hebrew Bible, Christ is the unknown God, the radically new God. No word is more frequently used in Marcion’s ‘Antitheses’ than the epithet ‘new’ and any critique of Marcion can be turned against the obsession with the new and the figure of novelty in recent philosophical readings of Paul, as we will see presently. The unknown God is the true God, but an alien God. Apparently, in the Marcionite churches, Christ was called ‘the Alien’ or ‘the good Alien.’ (von

Harnack 1990, p. 80) This means that God enters into the world as an outsider, a stranger to creation.

Marcion radicalizes the Pauline distinction between grace freely given and righteousness based on works and attaches them to two divine principles: the righteous and wrathful God of the Old Testament and the loving and merciful God of the Gospel. Of course, this sounds like Gnosticism, but crucially there is no *gnosis* for Marcion. In his *History of Dogma*, von Harnack identifies *gnosis* with an ‘intellectual, philosophic element,’ namely some sort of intellectual intuition of the divine (von Harnack 1990, p. 223). When von Harnack calls something ‘philosophical’, it is hardly a word of praise. It is rather to reduce religion to the categories of Hellenistic philosophy. Marcion cannot be numbered among the Gnostics because he places the entire emphasis on faith and not on any form of *gnosis*. von Harnack writes,

It was Marcion’s purpose therefore to give all value to faith alone, to make it dependent on its own convincing power, and avoid all philosophic paraphrase and argument. (von Harnack 1990, p. 267)

The consequence of this ontological dualism is dramatic: the alien God, being separate from the God of this world, frees human beings from the creator and his creation. For Marcion, as von Harnack writes, ‘The God of the Jews, together with all his books, the Old Testament, had to become the actual enemy.’ (1990, p. 23) Marcion refused the syncretism of Old and New Testaments and all allegorical forms of interpretation that understand the latter as the fulfillment of the former. Allegorically understood – and this is the core of Marcion’s critique of the Apostolic Fathers like Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch – Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the two testaments need to be rigorously separated and this is what Marcion did in the very first attempt, allegedly completed around 144, to produce an authentic edition of the Old and New Testaments. The former was included in its entirety and treated as historical fact. The New Testament included some expurgated versions of Paul’s Epistles and one Gospel, that of Luke. Marcion writes, ‘One must not allegorize the Scripture.’ (von Harnack 1990, p. 12) For Marcion, the Christianity of the Apostolic Fathers was a Jewish Christianity, which is, of course, the criticism that Paul levels at Peter and the Jerusalem Church. Emergent Christianity had, in Marcion’s eyes, poured the new wine into old wineskins and lost the radicality of the Gospel by seeing it continually in the rear-view mirror of the Old Testament. The formation of the Christian Biblical canon is a direct response to the text that Marcion created and to that extent is directly due to his alleged heresy. This is why the very life of the emergent Catholic Church depended on showing the concordance between the Old and New Testaments – hence the centrality of allegorical interpretation.

There is a Marcionite saying,

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<sup>6</sup> For a selection of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

One work is sufficient for our God; he has delivered man by his supreme and most excellent goodness, which is preferable to the creation of all the locusts (von Harnack 1990, p. 66)

Once the thread connecting creation to redemption has been cut, the task of the Christian is no longer to love creation, but to separate oneself from it as radically as possible. The world is the prison cell of the creator God and it is full of vermin, locusts and mosquitoes. There is a story of a 90 year-old Marcionite who washed himself in the morning in his own saliva, in order to have nothing to do with the works of the evil, creator God (von Harnack 1990, p. 111). In order to loosen the hold that the creator has upon us through the body, Marcion advocated a severe ascetic ethic which forbade all marriage and sexual intercourse amongst his believers following baptism. In von Harnack's words, for Marcion marriage was 'filthy' and 'shameful.' (1990, p. 96) This is simply the radicalization of Paul when he says that because 'form of this world is passing away,' those who have wives should 'act if it they had none,' and adds that 'He who marries does well', but, 'He who refrains from marriage will do better.' (1 Cor 7 29, 31, 38) Marriage, sex and the whole business of the body are mere fleshly distractions from the urgency of the spiritual task at hand. Because, 'The appointed time has grown very short,' (1 Cor 7 29) the little time that remains should not be wasted in anything that draws the spirit back to the flesh of creation. Taubes writes of Marcionism, 'It's a church with a radical mission that can't rest on its laurels as a people's church. . .It's a church that practices, or executes, the end of the world.' (Taubes 2004, p. 58) The essence of Marcionism is constant activism: if followers are not permitted to reproduce, then the growth of the church can only be based on the continual winning of new converts.

Von Harnack – and this is the implicit agenda of his book – sees Marcion as a Second Century Luther, a powerful intellect possessed of a prodigious reforming zeal. Marcion was the first Protestant. Cutting the bond between philosophical dogma and the religious experience of faith, he accused the existing church of heresy. In Marcion's eyes, Paulinism represented a great revolution that had, already at the beginning of the Second Century, been betrayed and required reformation. The core of this reformation consisted in asserting the radicality of the Pauline distinction between law and faith and asserting that grace alone was the purest essence of the Gospel. Taubes thinks that Marcion's adoption of dualism is an error, but an 'ingenious' one that is consistent with a certain ambivalence in Paul in conceiving the relation between creation and redemption (Taubes 2004, p. 61). For von Harnack – to adapt Hegel's dying words – Marcion is the only one who understood Paul and he misunderstood him. But the conclusion that von Harnack wants to draw from his study of Marcion is dramatic: the rejection of the Old Testament. For Protestantism, von Harnack insists, the Old Testament is 'the consequence of a religious and ecclesiastical crippling.' (1990, p. 134) Von Harnack wants to defend a radical fideism, where Christianity is nothing but faith in God's revelation in Christ.

Odd it might sound, I think Agamben's reading of Paul is crypto-Marcionite in its emphasis on a radically antinomian conception of faith. For example, in the

'Fifth Day' of his interpretation of Paul, Agamben focuses on the verb *katargeo*, which he wants to translate as 'to render inoperative or inactive' or, most revealingly, 'to suspend.' (Agamben 2005b, pp. 95–96) Agamben implicitly links *katargeo* to the state of exception in Schmitt, where the sovereign is the one who suspends the operation of the law. The Messianic is characterized by Agamben as a lawlessness that, in a sovereign political act, suspends the legality and legitimacy of both Rome and Jerusalem. Agamben backs this up with a particularly willful reading of the idea of the figure of *anomos* or lawlessness in Second Thessalonians (Agamben 2005b, pp. 108–11). To my mind, it is more than simply arguable that Paul's reference to the 'mystery of lawlessness' refers back to the 'son of perdition,' the Anti-Christ, who will appear prior to the *parousia* of the Messiah (2 Thess. 2 3–7). But Agamben wants to identify lawlessness with the Messianic in order to radicalize the distinction between law and life, which is a Benjaminian theme one can find throughout Agamben's writings: if law is violence and the history of law is the history of the violence that has led to the present situation of what Agamben calls 'global civil war,' then the Messianic occurs as the revolutionary suspension of law (Agamben 2005a, p. 87). There are moments when Agamben seems to want to push Benjamin's Messianism towards a radical dualism of, on the one hand, the profane order of the created world and, on the other hand, the Messianic order of redemption. As we saw above, Agamben writes of 'law in its nonrelation to life and life in its nonrelation to law.' (Agamben 2005a, p. 88) But this is Marcion, not Paul.

Badiou gives a brief but compelling discussion of Marcion in his book on Paul. Although Badiou insists that Marcion's ontological dualism is 'an instance of manipulation' (Badiou 2003, p. 35) and cannot be based on any consistent reading of Paul, Badiou nonetheless recognizes that, 'By pushing a little, one could arrive at Marcion's conception: the new gospel is an absolute beginning.' (Badiou 2003, p. 35) But isn't Badiou's position precisely that of Marcion? In opposition to Pascal's Old Testament reliance on 'prophecies, which are solid and palpable proofs,' (2003, p. 48) Badiou asserts that, 'There is no proof of the event; nor is the event a proof.' (Badiou 2003, p. 49) For Paul, 'there is only faith' and Badiou's basic claim is that fidelity to the event in what breaks with the order of being. Badiou continues, 'For Paul, the event has not come to prove something; it is *pure beginning*.' (my emphasis, Badiou 2003, p. 49) But what is this 'pure beginning,' but the 'absolute beginning' that Badiou attributes to Marcion? Might we not conclude that Badiou's ontological dualism of being and the event, where the latter is always described as the absolutely new and where Badiou sees his project as the attempt to conceptualize novelty, is a Marcionite radicalization of Paul? In his insistence on the Pauline figure of Christ as the experience of an event that provokes subjective fidelity, is there not an essential disavowal of law and the ineluctable character of the facticity of being-in-the-world?

There is also something Marcionite in Heidegger's reading of Paul. Tertullian famously lambasted Marcion for providing no proof for his views. But that is precisely Marcion's point: to avoid all reliance on Old Testament prophecy, philosophical argument, theological conceptualization or even *gnosis*. Christianity

must be based on faith alone. In a marginal note to his 1920–21 lecture course on Paul, Heidegger suggestively writes that proof (*Beweis*) lies,

Not in having-had insight (*im Eingesehen-haben*); rather, the proclamation is ‘showing’ (*apodeixis*) of the ‘spirit,’ ‘force’ (*‘Kraft’*). (Heidegger 2004, p. 97)

That is, the proof of faith lies only in the showing of the spirit in a proclamation which is a kind of force or power. To demand a proof for faith is to misunderstand faith’s very nature. There is an ultra-Protestantism at work in Heidegger’s reading of Paul which is crypto-Harnackian in its refusal of the influence of Plato, Aristotle and Hellenistic philosophy and its attempt to recover an *Urchristentum* against the dogmatic system of Catholicism.

However, although Heidegger wants to affirm what I have identified as a Messianic experience of faith as enactment in Paul, this has to be distinguished from Agamben’s more radical antinomianism. Authenticity for Heidegger culminates in an experience of *kairos*, but it consists in nothing else but seeing inauthentic, fallen everyday life in the world in a different light. Heidegger does not believe in the possibility of a radical faith that would absolutely break with the world. Law and life always remain in a relation of *modification* (*Modifikation*) – an idea that is in many ways the key concept in *Being and Time* (p. 168). The proclamation of faith always moves within the gravity of the inauthentic everydayness against which it pulls. The ‘nothing’ of projection only projects from the ‘nothing’ of a thrown basis that cannot be thrown off – the law of facticity is inexorable.

There is an undeniable lure to Marcionism. Its ontological dualism and its separation of creation from redemption allows us to attribute all that is wrong with the world (locusts, mosquitoes, etc.) to the activity of the bad deity, rather than blaming ourselves through the standard Christian narrative of the fall, death and original sin. The idea that religion consists in faith alone, as a subjective feature that is not based in any *gnosis* or intellectual intuition and for which there can be no proof, has an undeniable power. It is the power of radical novelty, of an absolute or pure beginning. On the one hand, it fosters a conception of faith as a testing self-responsibility, while, on the one hand, holding out the possibility that we might be entirely remade, renewed and redeemed: born again.

Yet, Marcionism has to be refused. Its dualism leads to a rejection of the world and a conception of religion as a retreat from creation. At its most extreme, it encourages a politics of secession from a terminally corrupt world, a kind of mystical anarchism, the heresy of the Free Spirit and the neo-insurrectionism of the Invisible Committee. Marcionism becomes a theology of alien abduction. As von Harnack writes – half-longingly – in the final pages of his book, Marcion,

Calls us, not out of an alien existence in which we have gone astray and into our true home, but out of the dreadful homeland to which we belong into a blessed alien land. (von Harnack 1990, p. 139)

Much as we might sometimes desire it, and this desire fills so much of our cultural void, from science fiction to Hollywood’s constant obsession with aliens which finds its most consummate ideological expression in James Cameron’s

*Avatar* from 2009, it is precisely the desire for blessed alien land that has to be rejected.

## Faith and Law

For Paul, we don't escape from the law. This is also why Paul's Jewishness is essential. If the law was not fully within me, as the awareness of my fallenness and consciousness of sin, then faith as the overcoming of the law would mean nothing. If, with Marcion and von Harnack, we throw out the Old Testament, then we attempt to throw away our thrownness and imagine that we can distance ourselves from the constitutive flaw of the law, from our ontological defectiveness. If we throw out the Old Testament, then we imagine ourselves perfected, without stain or sin. If we were ever to attain such a state, faith would mean nothing. Faith is only possible as the counter-movement to law and the two terms of the movement exist in a permanent dialectic. There is no absolute beginning and the idea of life without a relation to law is a puristic and slightly puerile dream.

This, I think, is what Paul shows in the sinuous complexity of Romans 7 and 8. The question in Romans 7 is the nature of the relation between the law and sin. Paul writes, 'If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin.' (Rom. 7 7) Paul gives the example of coveting, namely that we would never have known what it is to partake in the sin of coveting if the law had not said, 'Thou shalt not covet.' (Rom. 7 7) There is only sin in relation to the law and without the law, 'sin lies dead.' Paul goes on, 'I was once alive apart from the law,' namely that there was a time prior to the law when human beings lived in paradise without sin (Rom. 7 9). 'But when the commandment came,' namely the prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we erred and fell. As Paul puts it, 'sin revived and I died.' (Rom. 7 9) Therefore, the very commandment which promised life proved to bring death. But is that to say – and this is where things begin to get nicely tangled – that the law, which is holy and by definition good, as it comes from God, brings death? 'By no means!' Paul adds. It is rather that the law reveals negatively the sinfulness of sin, in order that 'sin might be shown to be sin' and 'become sinful beyond measure.' (Rom. 7 12) For – and here we confront the extent of the antithesis between flesh and spirit – 'the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.' (Rom. 7 14)

This dialectic between law and sin has the dramatic consequence that, 'I do not understand my own actions.' (Rom. 7 15) That is, I do not do the thing that I want, namely to follow the law. Rather I do the thing that I hate, namely sin. But if I do not do the thing that I want, but do the thing that I hate, then what can we say of this 'I'? How might we characterize such a self? Such a self is a 'dividual,' radically divided over against itself in relation to the law. Sin is the effect of the law and my being is split between the law and sin. As Paul puts it, at his oxymoronic best, 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.' (Rom. 7 19) That part of the self that does what I do not want is attributed to sin, 'It is no longer I that do it,

but sin that dwells within me.’ (Rom. 7 17) The self is here radically divided between flesh and spirit. On the one hand, there is ‘my delight in the law of God,’ which belongs to my ‘inmost self.’ (Rom. 7 22) But, on the other hand, ‘I see another law at war with the law of my mind.’ (Rom. 7 23) This outermost self ‘dwells in my members.’ (Rom. 7 23) But inmost and outermost are not two selves, but two halves of the same self, which is divided against itself. Paul exclaims, *‘Talaiporos ego anthropos,’* ‘Wretched man that I am!’ (Rom. 7 24) The dialectic of law and sin is fatal and it divides the self from itself. How, then, can this dialectic be broken? Or, as Paul puts it, ‘Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ (Rom. 7 24)

The answer, of course, is ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ (Rom. 7 25) But what does that mean? Of course, what is stake here is salvation through grace, which is precisely what cannot be willed by the self. The self, by itself, cannot be delivered from the body of death and the fatal dialectic of law and sin. It is only through God sending his son in the likeness of the flesh, and therefore in the likeness of sin and death, that sin and death can be overcome. But – and this is crucial – it is not a question, for Paul, of an Agambenian *anomos*, of lawlessness against law. Rather, what is at stake is ‘the law of the Spirit (*nomos tou Pneumatou*).’ (Rom. 8 2) It is the law of the Spirit that can set me free from, ‘the law of sin and death.’ (Rom. 8 2) It is therefore a question of law against law. I think this is what Paul means when he writes later in Romans of love as the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13 10). Fulfillment does not mean negation of the law, but its completion in the single commandment: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Rom. 13 9) Fulfillment (*pleroma*) means filling up: it is a complement, not a replacement; a supplement, not a replacement.

The key thought here is that redemption is not something that can be willed: ‘You are not your own.’ All that can be willed is the dialectic of law and sin. Redemption exceeds the limit of human potentiality and renders us impotent. The appearance of the law of the Spirit in the person of Jesus is the unwilled possibility of redemption, the possibility that, with the resurrection of Christ, we receive ‘the spirit of sonship’ and might become ‘fellow heirs with Christ.’ (Rom. 8 15) If we suffer with Christ, Paul insists, then ‘we may also be glorified with him.’ (Rom. 8 16) But what is essential here is the subjunctive mood of Paul’s discourse: we *may* be glorified with Christ. The realization of this possibility is something we *may* hope for and patiently await. But there is no certainty here. Otherwise hope would not be hope. This is the deep logic of *groaning* in Paul,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8 22-24).

Corrupted by the fall but saved by the resurrection, creation groans in travail. That is, both human nature and external nature are pregnant and undergoing the pangs of childbirth. This is Paul’s understanding of the present time: it is pregnant

with the possibility of redemption and this gives us reason to hope. But hope requires patience and awaiting. This, I think, is the meaning of the phrase, 'remain in this condition in which you were called.' At the present moment, we patiently await, 'For the night is far gone, the day is at hand.' (Rom 13 12) We look at all things *hos me*, as if they were not, in a Messianic light.

Finally, this is why the seduction of Marcion has to be refused and why contemporary crypto-Marcionist renderings of Paul are pernicious. If law and sin were not within me, then freedom would mean nothing. The self is broken, impotent and wretched, but its wretchedness is its greatness: we *know* that we are broken.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, I can only hold out the hope for being put back together, the hope for 'what we do not see,' if I know I am broken. In other words, the Christians can only be Christian if they know themselves to be Jewish, at least on the father's side. On Paul's picture, the human condition is constitutively torn between faith and law or love and sin and it is only in the strife that divides us that we are defined. It is only a being who is constitutively impotent that is capable of receiving that over which it has no power: love. This is one way – the most persuasive, in my view – of thinking the relation in Heidegger between the authentic and the inauthentic, between the *kairos* of the moment of vision and the slide back into falling. It gives us, I think, a powerful picture of conscience, that most enigmatic aspect of what it means to be human: both our power and our constitutive powerlessness.

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<sup>7</sup> I owe these thoughts to conversations with Lisabeth During.



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