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The Great Temptation of “Religion”: Why Badiou has been so important to Žižek

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The primary objective of this essay is to illuminate why the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou has become so important to the work of Slavoj Žižek. Those intimately familiar with the works of both thinkers will probably find nothing new here with the exception that I exhort other Badiou and Žižek commentators to attend more seriously to the roles played by philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in shaping current debates about the possibility of a leftist politics today. The primary audiences include new or relatively new readers of Žižek and Badiou, especially those readers slightly confused by Žižek and Badiou’s recent “religious” interests and why these men of the left so often seems to criticize things like multiculturalism’s respect for the “other” or the concept of “human rights” – in short, things near and dear to the heart of the, well, *more standard* academic left.

I am tempted to say to those interested in the question of why Badiou is so important to Žižek that they should simply spend a couple of hours with the first two hundred pages or so of Badiou’s great work of philosophy, *Being and Event* (2005), and Peter Hallward’s excellent discussion in *Badiou: a Subject to Truth* (2003).¹ Badiou is nothing if not clear (and forceful!), even in dealing with mathematics. And, to a certain extent, I am tempted also to say simply that Žižek explains his own relationship to Badiou quite well in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999) and elaborates on this relationship in his

recently published self-described “magnum opus” *The Parallax View* (2006). Even closer to home, Adrian Johnston’s “There is Truth, and there are truths – or, Slavoj Žižek as a Reader of Alain Badiou” -- posted in Volume 1 of *IJZS* -- offers a much more sophisticated rendering of many of the issues I present here, particularly when it comes to sorting out the differences between the two. In addition, Marc de Kesel’s “On Alain Badiou, Saint Paul: La foundation de l’universalisme,” posted in this volume of *IJZS*, addresses crucial issues in a broad and introductory fashion in his opening pages.

But such “go read the book” professorial gestures are never really that helpful. In fact, things are particularly complicated at the moment in that at the same time “Badiou and Žižek” are becoming linked in the academic consciousness, Žižek is actually distancing himself from Badiou’s “evental politics” in a fairly forceful manner. If, for example, a truly novice reader has just picked up *The Parallax View* they would find there that Žižek calls Badiou’s an “idealist” and therefore an (unknowing) enemy to the materialist thought Žižek advocates and continually refines (2006: 56). And careful readers of Badiou like Hallward and, more forcefully, Bruno Bosteels, whose work also appears in this volume of *IJZS*, are noticeably responding in kind to Žižek (Hallward 2003: 150-151). The novice reader should know these charges and countercharges are meant to be provocative; Badiou, like Žižek, is a materialist thinker through and through. There is, in short, still room for introductory commentary.

So: let me begin by outlining quickly the relationship between the two thinkers as it presents itself on a superficial level. Badiou is important to Žižek because Badiou has been an important philosopher and political activist in France since the 1970s (when he was a committed Maoist) and, as they say, a “major” thinker since the publication of *L’être et l’événement* in 1988. It was not translated into English until 2005, and in part for that reason it has yet to be fully appreciated by the critical community. At the moment, though, one would not be inaccurate to say simply that Badiou is one in the pantheon of thinkers that Žižek addresses, often rapid fire, in his work. This list, of course, is long and extensive, including thinkers in the tradition of continental philosophy like Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Lacan – with Hegel and Lacan playing the principal roles -- and more contemporary writers – in addition to Badiou, for example, Balibar, Butler, Deleuze, Laclau, Ranciere and, most recently perhaps, Kojin Karatani, whose brilliant analysis of Kant and Marx in *Transcritique* provides Žižek with the title and much of the conceptual direction of *The Parallax View*.²

Žižek's primary interest in all these thinkers is to develop an "engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to formulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal – democratic multiculturalism" (Žižek 1999: 4). The problem at hand is figuring out how a person of the left today can resist global capitalism when capitalism saturates everything, even our own efforts to resist it or mitigate its deleterious effects. And when I say "everything" I mean everything, including those things someone on the academic left would instinctively cherish, like "diversity" or "democratic debate." Here is Jodi Dean writing in Volume 1 of *IJZS* on the problem:

Diversity becomes multiculturalism: parents can buy colorful multilingual; producers can make action films with global appeal; educators can buy multicultural teaching kits designed to insure that their students are well-prepared to compete in a global economy. Likewise, democratic debate is easily capitalized: citizens seeking information are ready eyeballs for advertisers; politician can champion the role of the Internet in keeping their constituencies connected, while telecoms, ISPs, chip, hardware, and software providers wisely nod their heads and pocket their vastly increased revenues.

Žižek and Badiou are particularly concerned that old forms of resistance to capitalism and phenomena of the academic left (e.g., multiculturalism) are, paradoxically, something of an impediment to "true" resistance and often simply energize capitalism. Correspondingly, they are particularly concerned that the left has abandoned particular concepts – such as an active, forceful subject and the very concept of "truth" itself – that would enable a successful materialist politics. How does one act when the *truth* of the matter is that every act sustains what one would resist? It is telling that the figure Žižek turns to at the end of *The Parallax View* is Melville's character Bartleby (here he follows Hardt and Negri), whose constant refrain – "I prefer not to" – enacts an (anti-capitalist) preference *without* acting ("not to") or via a certain kind of withdrawal.

While Badiou is seemingly only one of many thinkers that Žižek engages in this effort to "formulate a Leftist, anti-capitalist project," Žižek's attention to Badiou has thrust that philosopher to the forefront of Anglo-American thought. Badiou's rather sudden prominence has to do with his own work, of course, in particular two short amazing books for general, academic audiences – *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*

(2001) and *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003) – that were unusually successful and, in fact, translated into English before *Being and Event*. But it was Žižek's attention that paved the way for these publishing successes. In particular, one could argue that Žižek's reading of Badiou's take on St. Paul in *The Ticklish Subject* introduced Badiou to much of the English speaking world (Žižek 1999: 127-170).

With St. Paul let me begin to move to the more substantial nature of the relationship and, to the extent I could be said to have one, my thesis: Badiou captured Žižek's attention in particular because Badiou provided the most potent solution to the contemporary manifestation of the problem of "religion" that has confounded materialist politics since Marx and that has confounded philosophy since (at least) Parmenides. At the very moment Žižek was wrestling with the threat of religion as manifested in particular in the form of the work of Levinas and Derrida, Badiou's *Being and Event* came into being.

Now explaining what I mean by the problem or threat of Levinasian/Derridean religion to historical materialism and philosophy will take up a significant part of this essay, but let me say here that the lingering threat of religion is perhaps more precisely described as an "idealist" threat to materialist thought in general than it is an actual or immediate political threat. The names Levinas and Derrida may have tipped the reader off to this, but in discussing the threat of religion and ethics I am not referring, for example, to George W. Bush and the evangelical movement in the United States, nor am I referring to "radical" Islam, nor any other religious practice that may stand or seem to stand in opposition to "leftist" political rivals. I am referring instead to what some consider a much more pernicious and insidious enemy, an enemy from within, an enemy to thought itself, what Badiou calls – with what strikes me as good old fashioned, anti-religious humor – the persistent and "Great Temptation of philosophical ontologies" (2005: 26). This threat could also be termed the threat of "anti-philosophy" ("the difference between religion and antiphilosophy is slight," Hallward notes [2003: 20]), but inasmuch as there is so much in the air about a "turn to religion" I chose to focus on this term.

II – "The One is Not."

Let me try to explain this "temptation" of religion by first tracing Badiou's mathematically oriented ontology in the opening pages of *Being and Event*. I won't try to

explain Badiou's most striking claim – “mathematics is ontology, and ontology is mathematics” – straight off, but simply try to begin using his language in the hopes this will better help the reader. While “Being” – what there is – always presents itself as “essentially multiple” or infinitely complex, the study of Being, ontology, has tended to imagine what lies beyond or beneath this presentation as “essentially one” (Badiou 2005: 23). For example, a standard, straightforward materialist view of the world seems to insist on the existence of the “one”: *there is what there is in the world* and we must address that (one). To think otherwise is to engage in potentially dangerous idealism because we will be led to consider something other than the one, something *other* than or outside Being – a prelude to political mystifications of all. To take a basic example, if we believe in a “heaven,” we will not attend closely enough to the fact that capitalism determines our lived experience.

Looking at the “reality” of things, however, is much more difficult than we tend to assume. If we assume Being is one -- or that there is simply what there is in the world -- Badiou explains, “then one must posit that what is *not* one” – that is, the “multiple” complexity and contingency of existence that we experience in some form everyday, that which presents itself to us – “is not.” And to suggest that what in fact *presents itself* is *not* is just “unacceptable for thought” because that involves the perversity of doing what we are trying to avoid: positing an “access to being outside all presentation” (Badiou 2005: 23).

In brief, if historical materialism ignores the (obvious) presentation of the multiple to instead just go ahead and insist on the totality of the “one” (“there is only what there is”), then we actually insinuate something of the very idealism materialist thought seeks to jettison into the discussion before we even get started. We would be suggesting we know something for certain (“there is only what there is”) that we in fact do not know for certain because we don't have “an access to being beyond all presentation.” In simply insisting on our “one” materialist universe, then, we are also actually saying that what presents itself as multiple *is not* and that there is, instead, something “other” that we really cannot access directly. The “other” that we insist on in this context is, perversely again, the material or real world. And, again, to construct a material ground haunted by such otherness is not sufficient for critical political work – and, Badiou might add, it is not true.

What we have here, then, Badiou writes succinctly, is an “impasse” – perhaps *the* impasse for materialist thought (2005: 23). If the one of Being “is not” or

indeterminate the only material ground we have to stand on is, well, groundless. No serious materialist thinker worth his or her salt can avoid this impasse. Accordingly, Žižek gets right to the matter in *The Parallax View*. Žižek, however, relies not on mathematics, but on the psychoanalytic insights of Jacques Lacan to get at these ontological issues.

Materialism is not the direct assertion of my inclusion in objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); rather it resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I myself am included in the picture constituted by me – it is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both outside and inside my picture, that bears witness to my ‘material existence.’ Materialism means that the reality I see is never ‘whole’ – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.”(2006: 17)

Here, perhaps, is the fundamental link in Badiou and Žižek’s thought so let me rehearse this Lacanian ontology in Badiou’s ontological language: the one is not (“the reality I see is never whole”), but this infinite multiplicity can not be interpreted as something other (“the reality I see is never whole – *not because* a large part of [reality that] eludes me”).

We must keep in mind, however, the crucial differences between Badiou and Žižek even when they appear to share something. As Hallward writes, it is because “Žižek’s own perspective is so close to Badiou’s that their differences emerge with such striking and suggestive clarity” (2003: 150). As suggested, Žižek’s solution to this impasse draws mainly on Lacanian psychoanalysis. There is no big Other that eludes us; there is a Real. This “Real,” however, is not the “inaccessible Thing” that we must ultimately discover or that has been concealed from us somehow

But the *gap* which prevents our access to it, the ‘rock’ of the antagonism which distorts our view of the perceived object through a partial perspective. And, again, the ‘truth’ is not the ‘real’ state of things, that is the ‘direct’ view of the object without perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism which causes perspectival distortion. The site of the Truth is not the way ‘things really are in themselves,’ beyond their perspectival distortion, but the very gap, passage, which

separates one perspective from another, the gap . . . which makes the two perspectives radically incommensurable . . . There is a truth, everything is not relative – but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion *as such*, not the truth distorted by the partial view from a one-sided perspective. (2006: 281)

This Lacanian solution is related to Badiou's, I will try to show, but different. It can be said here, however, that the solution to the ontological impasse for *both* thinkers is neither to simply posit a materialist truth without adequate grounds, nor is it to hint in a utopian way at materialist truth out there some place waiting to be discovered, nor is it to leave that "truth" as unknowable other, nor is it to consider the truth relative (perhaps the most common failing in our "postmodern" academic world). The solution for both thinkers, again, is to attend *first* to this impasse or gap "*as such*."

To begin understanding the differences is a bit harder. We must first consider Žižek's primarily Lacanian "ontology" in relation to Badiou's philosophical/mathematical ontology. Badiou resists Žižek's "Lacanian ontologization of the subject," a notion that places the "I" at the (empty) center of things, at the empty center of what is. We recall Žižek's description of "materialism" just cited above: "Materialism means that the reality I see is never 'whole' – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which *indicates my inclusion in it*" (2006: 17). In this formulation, the materialist truth is this Lacanian subject, this blind spot. Badiou resists this Lacanian ground for materialist truth in part because, as Carsten Strathausen writes, it leaves is "no possibility of a radically new beginning . . . taking place within a given Order or historical situation" (2006: 25). This Lacanian version of things leaves the subject not a potential political actor but as something that only becomes aware of itself, of its truth, in flickers, an awareness that allows only for the "endurance of radical abjection" (Hallward 2003: 21). If Lacan is right the subject is always just this rather transhistorical flicker. Nothing new ever happens and Badiou is very much interested in the possibility of the new, the radically new. From time to time he says that he is interested in nothing but the new.

Even a novice Žižekian won't be surprised to hear that Žižek disagrees with this interpretation of the Lacanian subject and its possibility for political action. Strathausen is, again, very useful here:

According to Žižek, Lacan's subject is not simply a structural void (as Badiou and Laclau claim), but emerges at this place only as the retrospective effect of its failed representation in language. Indeed, once this temporal paradox of Lacan's 'future anterior' is taken into consideration, Žižek argues, the very 'opposition between the subject qua ontological foundation of the order of Being and the subject qua contingent particular emergence is [exposed as] . . . false: the subject is the contingent emergence/act that *sustains the very universal order of Being.*' (2006: 25).

For Žižek, Strathausen continues, "every authentic militant act" changes something. Even a seemingly unethical act can realign the categories of the ethical in the order of Being. Here, perhaps, Žižek's recently refined "Bartleby" politics emerge. His subject doesn't just stand in awareness of his or her own "radical abjection," but acts ("prefers") in this very non-act of withdrawal ("not to"). Žižekians also tend to reverse the charges against Badiou at this point, putting the question to him: how does your ontology of infinite multiplicity allow for anything to happen?

III—The Event in *Being and Event*

I should begin the introduction to Badiou's "event," perhaps, by pointing out that Badiou disagrees with Žižek's "Lacanian ontologization of the subject" not just because it leaves us with a "quietist" subject but because it is not consistent with his notion of mathematics as ontology or ontology as mathematics. In other words, Badiou rejects the ontologization of the subject not simply because it isn't politically to his liking, but because, from his perspective, it simply is not true. Let me explain. If the one is not, we must insist that approaching infinite multiplicity, rather than the veiled or hidden one (that is, in fact, *not*), is *the* task of ontology, the path to understanding what there is. This task is particularly tricky, though, because to think infinite multiplicity in a strict sense we have to avoid counting "infinite multiplicity" itself as one – *the* infinite. Conceptually speaking, a simple statement – "there is infinite multiplicity" – *counts* infinite multiplicity as one.

Some quick reflection on the reader's part might help here. Try to grasp infinite multiplicity *without* counting "it" as one. You quickly sense why infinite multiplicity can be and has been understood as infinite difference, infinite alterity, an absolute Other, or God (we are still moving towards identifying "The Great Temptation" of ontologies). Not

thinking infinite multiplicity as one seemingly presents us with an impossibility. In our attempts to think “it” (infinite multiplicity) without counting it as one, infinite multiplicity recedes from us *like* the God of the negative theologies, the God who cannot be known, the God who is inscrutable, etc. If the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart prayed to God “to rid him of God” lest he sully his devotion with a false image of God, those grappling with Badiou’s ontology strain to rid themselves of infinite multiplicity as a distinctive signifier lest they think it or count it as “one” and contradict themselves already.

Badiou points out that Georg Cantor, the modern founder of the set theory that Badiou will employ to disable a notion of divine otherness, was in fact himself something of a “theologian,” locating God at this impossible moment. “If some multiplicities cannot be totalized, or ‘conceived as unity’ [counting them as one] without contradiction, [Cantor] declares, it is because they are absolutely infinite rather than transfinite (mathematical)” (Badiou 2005: 41). But in a brilliant deconstructive (or *counter-deconstructive!*) move, Badiou also sees in Cantor’s theological “infinite” the means to “laicize” rather than deify “the infinite.” While Cantor locates God at the impasse, Badiou realizes that

One could also argue that Cantor, in a brilliant anticipation, saw that the absolute point of being of the multiple is not its consistency – thus its dependence upon the procedure of the *count-as-one*—but its inconsistency, a multiple deployment that no unity gathers together.

Cantor’s thought thus wavers between onto-theology – for which the absolute is thought as a supreme infinite being, thus as transmathematical, innumerable, as a form of the one so radical that no multiple can consist therein – and mathematical ontology, in which consistency provides a theory *of* inconsistency, in that what proves an obstacle to it (paradoxical multiplicity) is its point of impossibility, and thus, quite simply, *is not*. Consequently, it fixes the point of non-being from whence it can be established that there is a presentation of being. (2005: 42)

In other words, the “point of non-being” (or the wholly Other) can actually be located within being or, at least, a *presentation* (mathematically speaking) of being. It may not be possible in language, but Set Theory allows for the means to “count” the multiple without

one, to attend to the “count” as operation rather than the instantiation of the One of Being: “By the uniformity of its variables, the theory indicates, without definition, that it does not speak of the one, and that all that it presents, in the implicitness of its rules, is multiple” (Badiou 2005: 45).

As a practical matter, then, being *qua* Being initially might be thought as an infinite “set of sets,” or a multiple of multiplicities. However, this is problematic. We never access being *qua* Being in this way; it is “present only in single elements, single insofar as they do not (or no longer) belong to one of the existing particular sets and, in that sense, float unsubstantially about being *qua* Being’s ‘empty set’” (de Kesels 2006: 6) Marc de Kesel’s provides a useful description:

Imagine...several elements from different sets that come to leave off representing their particular sets. Imagine that they begin to function on their own. In such a case, something happens. An ‘event’ takes place, and disturbs the existing order, the collected sets representing being’s totality. At that moment, the order comes to realize that it does not rest upon its representations, upon distinctions and particularities constituting its supposed identity. In the final analysis, it is only based on radical contingency, on being *qua* Being, on a presentation that cannot be locked up in the infinite totality of ‘representations,’ ie. of sets representing being. It is the moment when nothing is safe and secure, and everything is on the verge of changing. In such moments, truth can emerge. (2006: 6)

Truth can emerge – not in the sense that we get direct access to infinite multiplicity or being *qua* Being as such – but in that the current order of Being is revealed as contingent, relative, open to a new symbolization, a symbolization that seizes on this event that in itself revealed only the “void” of infinite multiplicity.

Differences between Žižek and Badiou begin to emerge again here. Inasmuch as the multiple is still in some sense inaccessible, Žižek recently has argued that Badiou’s ontology retains an ambivalent relation to Kant’s noumenal – the thing in – itself which can not be known -- as opposed to the phenomenal reality we experience. From this perspective Badiou inadvertently instantiates a Kantian split. And it is this (Kantian) inaccessibility of the multiple that leaves Badiou open to the charge of “idealism” that Žižek presses against him (2006: 324). Whether this charge is legitimate or not constitutes, as I said, much of discussion in this volume (a discussion that really may be

subsumed by a larger ongoing discussion about Kant and modernity – but that is another paper).

We can also begin to see more clearly here in the relation between Badiou's "Being" and "Event" differences on the matter of subjectivity. For Badiou, contra Žižek, the subject does not sustain the universal order of Being but is a product of the event. The event determines the subject, the subject does not determine the event. But the subject founded by the event should not be thought as a miraculous creation. A subject does not emerge fully formed, for example, out of the event but is constructed piece by piece out a persistent *fidelity* to the "truth" of event, the truth of which is really best understood, again, as the void of infinite multiplicity presenting itself in the mathematics of set theory.

IV – St. Paul as Subject of the Event

In St. Paul, Badiou sees an exemplar that clings radically to a "Truth-Event" – the Resurrection of Christ – an event that has already happened and thus establishes a particular, active, and new subject that shapes the world. Badiou *replaces* the divine grace (Christ's Resurrection) that forms the historical Pauline subject for the Truth-Event that forms *his* Pauline subject. For Badiou, of course, the resurrection is a "fable." His is a Paul truly absent what the Christian tradition would consider grace, in that the "Truth-Event" that forms this subject is not the singular event that a devout Christian would identify, but one of other Truth-Events. Badiou's Paul remains a very familiar Paul nonetheless. Paul, or, I should say, Saul, the Jewish persecutor of Christians, was "born again" on the road to Damascus when confronted by Jesus (Acts 9:1-5). From that moment forward, Paul urges the "way of the spirit," not the "way of the flesh," urging everyone else to be born again in Christ or, as Badiou would have it, to follow with absolute fidelity the Truth-Event of Christ's Resurrection. The Truth-Event of the Resurrection thus determines Paul at his conversion, and Paul's extraordinary fidelity to the Truth-Event constitutes the Badiouian subject Paul. Badiou follows much Pauline scholarship in acknowledging that Paul "invented" much of Christianity based solely on the event of the Resurrection.

Badiou clearly outlines the relationship between Pauline subjectivity and his notion of the subject determined by the Truth Event in a manner that illuminates his concept of the Truth-Event itself.³ The "Christian subject does not preexist the event he

declares (Christ's Resurrection)." This subject is therefore "neither Jew, nor Greek" (Galatians 3:16), not bound to explain his "truth" by Jewish Law or Greek Wisdom. The Truth Event of Christ's Resurrection creates a new discourse outside these preconstituted levels of "Being" in the world as it creates a new subject aspiring to a certain universalism.

"Being," in this context, "stands for the positive ontological order accessible to Knowledge, for the infinite multitude of what 'presents itself' in our experience."⁴ In other words, Being does not stand for being qua Being here, but is merely the name for the current symbolization of the void that constitutes the multiplicity of existence. It is what we know and recognize, the sense we have made of the "void." To say, then, that the "Truth-Event" comes from outside or beyond Being is most distinctly here not to say it comes from the divine or someplace "other," but from the void out of which the current order of Being is constituted. Given that the current order of Being at any time is not a thorough stabilization of the void, it can be broken apart by an event that "in a wholly contingent, unpredictable way, out of reach for Knowledge of Being . . . takes place that belongs to a wholly different dimension – that, precisely of non-Being" (Žižek 1999: 129-30). Non-Being here, I should stress, refers to the void before the symbolization of Being, not something "other."

The apparent cyclical exchange here between "Being" as it is and occasionally emergent "Truth-Events" that subverts current order of Being might lead one to argue that this analysis simply replicates the assertion of postmodern contingent truths Badiou ostensibly challenges. To a certain extent it does. "Truth is contingent" for Badiou. "It hinges on a concrete historical situation: it is the truth of this historical situation." But, and here is the difference between Badiou and the "deconstructive" relativists he challenges, "in every 'concrete and contingent historical situation there is one and only one Truth which, once articulated, spoken out, functions as the index of itself and of the falsity of the field subverted by it" (Žižek 1999: 131). That is, once a "Truth-event" emerges it is a universal truth, not a contingent truth competing with others. One would be hard pressed to find any kind of historical "relativist" thought that thinks the French Revolution wasn't a good thing, the true thing, the right thing, in a very absolute way. The truth of the French Revolution was, in this sense, a "universal" truth. This is in part, Badiou would contend, because we judge the French Revolution "as the index of itself". Its "truth" sets the standards of "truth" we use to evaluate it. It completely subverted the

truth of the French monarchy. “The French Revolution was good” is not, then, a “subjective” statement, but a universal truth.

This last is important. The break with the structure of Being that constitutes the “Truth-Event” creates a “universal”: the new Christian subject that stays faithful to this Truth Event, for example, is not bound by pre-existing class, ethnic or sex determinations (“neither Jew, or Greek”, etc.). The new subject is “indifferent to the [current] state of the situation.” Indeed, “the subjectivity corresponding to this subtraction [from the current state of Being] constitutes a necessary distance from the State and from what corresponds to the State in people’s consciousness” (Badiou 2003: 15). Badiou’s Paul is a militant subversive interested in total revolution, not (at all) in arguing with or reforming this world. He is, also, we must insist, a radically new subject with nothing like what we would recognize as a historical lineage. And, to begin to mark a crucial distinction between Badiou and Žižek, Badiou’s Paul has no descendants.

Not surprisingly, Badiou’s selection of Paul as the exemplar here has raised many questions. In *Being and Event*, one notes, Paul is not discussed (although Pascal fills a comparable role). In one sense, of course, the answer is simple: there is a delicious irony in taking the inventor of Christianity – now largely a tool of the political right, especially in America – and turning him into a militant leftist. But the reader should have surmised by now that Badiou is always after more important things than delicious ironies. Why does Badiou choose Paul?

Žižek himself provides a fairly direct answer in the opening pages of *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy worth fighting for?* one of his first noticeable forays into “religion.” There he sees Paul, and particularly Badiou’s Paul, as a means for a “fighting materialist” to “counter” a “massive onslaught of obscurantism” (2000:1). The obscurantists he seeks to confront might strike some as rather wide ranging: “Christian and other fundamentalisms,” “New Age Spiritualisms,” deconstruction, and “post-secular” thought. But to really understand what Žižek means by obscurantists we have to recall the discussion above about those idealist thinkers, those who in some form suggest a position of the “other” through which material reality can be known. As I said in the introduction, what Žižek finds so compelling about Badiou is the solution he offers to dealing with the “Great Temptation” of philosophy. Badiou and Žižek differ about ontology, subjectivity, and political acts, but they agree about certain common threats. With St. Paul, Badiou finds the means to draw a distinctive line between him and those who would stay open to the possibility of the other. The desire to confront “the

captivating grandeur” of the religious and certain “anti-philosophical” positions is what motivates Badiou in *Being and Event* (2005: 27). And Žižek, to a limited extent, follows suit.

IV – Confronting the Great Temptation of Religion in Philosophy -- Levinas

To back up a bit then and return to the problem of “religion” and the Great Temptation of philosophical ontologies: Because the one is not, and the infinite or inaccessible in some sense becomes the issue, many have been tempted by the notion that only an experience of the altogether other can provide us the access to Being’s presence we seek. It was, in fact, the position of Levinas that western philosophy had missed the point entirely when it came to ontology; if infinite alterity or difference, absolute Otherness is in fact what *there is* or what presents itself, again, more precisely, if absolute Otherness is somehow *anterior* to what there is, that which we must address, then western philosophy has wrongfully and permanently excluded this other from thought in its concentration on the same or self of the one. Levinas argued that crucial problem was the “Greek” origins of philosophy. Here is Badiou in *Ethics* summarizing Levinas who, for Badiou, is the most problematic and influential of thinkers who has given into “The Great Temptation”:

Levinas maintains that metaphysics, imprisoned by its Greek origins, has subordinated thought to the logic of the Same, to the primacy of substance and identity. But, according to Levinas, it is impossible to arrive at an authentic thought of the Other . . . from the despotism of the Same, which is incapable of recognizing this Other. The dialectic of the Same and the Other, conceived ‘ontologically’ under the dominance of self-identity, ensures the absence of the Other in effective thought, suppresses all genuine experience of the Other, and bars the way to an ethical opening to alterity. So we must push thought over to a different origin, a non-Greek origin, one that proposes a radical, primary opening to the Other conceived as ontologically anterior to the construction of identity. It is in the Jewish tradition that Levinas finds the basis for this pushing over. What the Law (understood according to Jewish tradition as both immemorial and currently in effect) names is precisely the anteriority, founded in being-before-the-Same(Badiou 2001: 18-19)

I need to note here – and this is critical in tracing Badiou’s ultimate response to Levinas – that Levinas’s notion of otherness or alterity while quite clearly connected to his own Judaism also draws distinctly from Descartes’s understanding of the “infinite.” In that Levinas leaves the “infinite” – like Cantor – so close to God, he is a clear target of Badiou’s mathematical ontology which desires above all else, again, to *laicize the infinite*.

In insisting on this openness to the Other as anterior to Being, Levinas thus adopts a quite radical “anti-Ontological” or what could be called a religious and/or ethical stance in response to the impasse of infinite multiplicity. We are obliged to respond to the other first, Levinas argues, even before we think. Indeed, our response to the other calls thinking into being. Responsibility to and for the other precedes all else. Consequently, *ethics* or the *ethical*, not ontology, becomes first philosophy. Levinasian ethics is not synonymous with what we normally think of as “ethics” – prescriptive answers to such questions as what should I do? What is the right way to act?, etc. – although his concern with ethics is connected to our everyday interest in the term. Our encounter with the “Otherness” of Being, that which we can not truly think but that we do experience, can not be described as ontology, but is better understood by the word ethics, best described to the non-specialist perhaps as a sense of complete (read: absolute) vulnerability and responsibility to that which we can not master.

The exclusion of the other of Being by Greek philosophy corresponds to our understanding of the exclusion or marginalization of “others” that we see and discuss *ad nauseum* in a host of political or academic situations. There is good reason for this correspondence. While the model for Levinas’s anti-ontological stance may be located in the Jewish tradition and religion the philosopher has always insisted, as Hent de Vries points out, on the “trans-descendence” of alterity (*Philosophy* 2002: 147). This means that the “other” for Levinas always involves the other individual in a “face-to-face” encounter not the other as absolute Other -- God. His emphasis on the face to face encounter does not negate the infinitely other, the absolutely other, the religious other – “God, for example” – but for Levinas that absolutely other always leaves its trace in the “other” as other individual. This is why for Levinas ethics – not religion *per se* -- overtook ontology. “Respecting the other” individual became the manifestation of approaching the otherness of Being in his anti-ontological gesture.

This “ontological” shift to ethics has been profoundly influential in post World War II thought, extending well beyond the proper name “Levinas” whose own work is still,

given its enormous implications for the second half of the twentieth-century, rather understudied. Indeed, there is some irony in the fact that one cannot perhaps fully appreciate the force of Badiou's innovation in *Being and Event* without first fully appreciating the how thoroughly Levinasian gestures have insinuated their way into twentieth century thought (one could argue that Badiou was motivated by this problem in the conception of his book *Ethics* which specifically explains and then targets Levinas). Quite simply, Levinasian "respect for the other" has become "commonsensical discourse" even for those with little or no knowledge of the name Levinas, let alone Badiou, and for those those with no recognizable "religious" beliefs:

Whether they know it or not, it is in the name of this configuration [a Levinasian turn to ethics away from ontology] that the proponents of ethics explain to us today that it amounts to 'recognition of the other' (against racism, which would deny this other), or to 'the ethics of differences' (against substantialist nationalism, which would exclude immigrants, or sexism, which would deny feminine-being), or to 'multiculturalism' (against the imposition of an unified model of behaviour and intellectual approach). Or, quite simply, to good old-fashioned 'tolerance' which consists of not being offended by the fact that others think and act differently than you." (Badiou 2001: 20).

This ethical turn, Badiou argues forcefully, still much beloved and embraced by much of the academic left – including, I suspect, some readers here -- is actually an "ethical ideology" and, moreover, the "principal (albeit transitory) adversary of all those striving to hold fast to some true thought, whatever it be" (Badiou 2001: 90).

If the be all and end all of political activity (and much academic study) is the respect of the other -- and some quick, *honest* reflection on the ultimate aim of any number of academic work will reveal this characterization as accurate -- we are not in position to discover truth. This emphasis on truth rather than ethics may sound reactionary, but only because the term truth has become associated with a certain absolutist or essentialist perspective. As Žižek makes clear, for example, our attention to ethics tends actually to "depoliticize" those we would be ethical towards, leaving them only at the depoliticized mercy of some vagaries we call human rights: "Today's 'new reign of ethics' . . . relies on a violent gesture of depoliticization, of denying the victimized other any political subjectization" beyond our mercy (2006: 341). Badiou includes in his

critique of this ethical ideology all its “socialized variants,” things near and dear to the academic heart: “the doctrine of human rights, the victimary conception of Man, humanitarian interference, bio-ethics, shapeless ‘democratism’, the ethics of differences, cultural relativism, moral exoticism, and so on” (2001: 90). Žižek will come to say towards the end of *The Parallax View* that “withdrawing” from global capitalism also involves withdrawing from these sorts of things, global capitalism’s more palatable supplements.

The reason our attention to ethics can be considered an ideology is two-fold. First, much of the academic world and, in particular, the academic “left” does not recognize its attention to the “other” as ethics as such and, indeed, recoils from the notion that they are engaged in primarily ethical pursuits. They are even more horrified when presented with the notion that this ethics, *our* ethics, is connected somehow to religion. We are, in short, ethically interpellated subjects that can not see our own ideological constitution clearly. Second, as the remarks from Žižek quoted above suggest, our ethics actually functions in a conservative fashion, preserving the neo-liberal status quo under the guise of challenging hierarchical power structures. As Badiou puts it, “the price paid by ethics is a stodgy conservatism. The ethical conception of man, besides the fact that its foundation is either biological (images of victims) or ‘Western’ (the self-satisfaction of the armed benefactor), prohibits every broad, positive vision of possibilities....what ethics legitimates, is in fact the conservation by the so-called ‘West of what it possesses” (2001: 24). We respect the other Badiou points out, but only inasmuch as that other conforms to our vision: “Respect for differences, of course? But on the condition that the different be parliamentary-democratic, pro free-market economics, in favour of freedom of opinion, feminism, the environment...” (2001: 24). For this reason Badiou shockingly proposes that “the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned” (2001: 25).

When the contradictions in our ethical ideology are disclosed there is a common tendency to simply try harder, to argue or think we should be *more* ethical. But it is important to point out that the problem here is not that we are not trying hard enough to respect the other. Trying harder only plunges us deeper into an ideological mist. The problem originates not in volition, but in the original Levinasian philosophical gesture. Levinas’s suggestion that the “other” is there from the very beginning – in some sense originary or foundational in a way that necessitates a rupture in western ontology -- ultimately tends only to reconstitute the “other” as another name for being, something we

count as “one” – and, again, the one is not. The other never remains other *enough* for Levinas’s gestures to be intelligible. Rather than solve the impasse of infinite multiplicity Levinas simply becomes trapped in it. The other itself becomes a sort of false ontological ground, another failed attempt to address infinite multiplicity by counting is as one – in this case, paradoxically, the name of the one is “the other.”

V- Confronting the Great Temptation of Religion in Philosophy – Levinas/Derrida

Because the name of Jacques Derrida is now so casually vilified by the left, it may surprise some that in this critique of Levinas, Badiou actually follows this supposed philosophical nemesis of materialist thought. Derrida pointed out in 1967 in *Violence and Metaphysics* that knowing or responding to the “other” is impossible, and thus the impasse must remain an “impasse,” or, as Derrida would have it, an aporia that we approach and respect, not solve. When Derrida explained years ago, for example, in response to Levinas “that alterity had to circulate at the origin of meaning” and that “in welcoming alterity in general into the heart of the logos, the Greek thought of Being forever has protected itself against every absolutely surprising convocation” he was, in fact, saying the thought of the “other” of Being is always already included in Being in the same way that any attempt to think infinite multiplicity ultimately involves some count as one (1978: 153).

The difference between Derrida and Badiou on this critical point is that Derrida is *fascinated* by Levinas’s attempt to think the other, he is fascinated by Levinas’s quasi-religious anti-ontology which *almost* gets outside the Greek thought of Being and its possibilities for political progress, while Badiou becomes ultimately horrified by the mystifications it allows for intellectually and the neo-liberal political structures it can help sustain. The problem with staying open to the other, again, from Badiou’s perspective, is that the other is never “other” enough or, perhaps, one could say “non-being” is not “non” enough. “Non-being” always has some “minimal participation” in being which is, quite simply, *to be* non-being. We can not escape the impasse of the one to locate something other, something different, more just. The only realm in which this sort of thinking is even remotely intelligible, Badiou insists, is the “religious.”

Because Levinas’s efforts to locate alterity in the other individual--the face-to-face--always returns to the same or self:

The phenomenon of the [Levinasian] other (his face) must then attest to radical alterity which he nevertheless does not contain by himself. The Other, as he appears to me in the order of the finite, must be the epiphany of a properly infinite distance to the other, the traversal of which is the originary ethical experience. This means that in order to be intelligible, [our Levinasian] ethics requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience. Levinas calls this principle the ‘Altogether-Other,’ and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. . . . To put it crudely: Levinas’s enterprise serves to remind us, with extraordinary insistence, that every effort to turn ethics into a principle of thought and action is essentially religious. . . . ethics is a category of pious discourse. (2001: 22)

In this critique, Badiou is actually aligned with much Anglo-American analytic philosophy that saw the Levinasian/Derridean attention to the other as, at best, pseudo-religious, and, at worst, simply non-sensical: *the minute you talk about non-being or other than being you are already included in being!*

Derrida’s very different (from Badiou) fascination with Levinasian “religious” gestures was particularly visible in his later years, a matter evidenced institutionally by the attention he garnered from the country’s theology and religious studies departments. The efforts of Levinas suggested to Derrida a certain messianism, a way to stay open to the “other” yet to come, the infinite, the other of Being that haunts philosophy, without conceding philosophy to the traditional, religious messianisms *and* without conceding the Levinasian desire to stay open to the other strictly to the realm of the “religious” – at least as we traditionally understand the term. It is ultimately Derrida’s efforts to explicate how this was possible that led Badiou to St. Paul and, as suggested, it was St. Paul that led Žižek to Badiou.

In 1992, in between the publication of Badiou’s *Being and Event* and his 1997 St. Paul book, Derrida published *Donner la mort in L’ethique du don, Jacques Derrida et la pensee du don*. The work was translated in 1995 as *The Gift of Death* and is largely an extended reading of Soren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, itself, of course, the most famous and influential modern interpretation of Genesis 22 – an increasingly important text in our times in that it ultimately unites Judaism, Christianity, and Islam around the common figure of Abram/Abraham/Ibrahim. As Derrida hinted as long ago as 1967, *Fear and Trembling* can be read as an attempt on Kierkegaard’s part to stay open to the

other, the absolute other, in the figure of certain Abraham. Kierkegaard locates in the Genesis 22 description of Abraham a figure who eludes “the ethical,” which is to say the “universal” of Hegelian thought. For Hegel, identity and difference, self and other, pass into one another, and thus ultimately there is no difference, there is no “other” -- no “justified incommensurability” -- in his dialectical logic. In Abraham, Kierkegaard identifies a figure who responds to the absolutely other in a way that suspends the Hegelian ethical or universal (for Kierkegaard the two are the same thing) if only for an instant. In other words, he locates in Genesis 22 a rupture or cut in Hegel’s ontological framework, a “teleological suspension of the ethical.”

Derrida, in turn, identifies a “messianic” structure in Kierkegaard’s philosophical gesture, a messianic structure that may determine, but is not equivalent to, the traditional messianisms. For Abraham to respond to God’s demand to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham must kill Isaac without believing he will get anything in return – salvation, for example. Abraham must move towards the absolute other, God, without any sense of a deal having been struck. The exchange relationship implied in any reading that emphasizes obedience for salvation also implies some level of equality and thus negates the “otherness” of the absolute other, the distinction of divine from human. To distinguish Abraham’s aneconomic movement from the economy of sacrifice or exchange, Derrida identifies in Kierkegaard the figure of “the gift.” The gift is “the impossible,” the instant when the economic circle of exchange is interrupted and Abraham “gives” death (or almost gives death) without expecting anything from God in return. The gift identifies that which is not an exchange, that which stands outside even a sacrificial economy – that which is absolutely other.

The Abrahamic gift thus suggests a way to think the religious *without* the religions, pointing simultaneously to a founding messianic gesture for all three monotheisms that is not specific to one tradition *and* a potential obliteration of differences – something “other” – yet to come. The “to come” is critical here, particularly as it works its way into Derrida’s more explicitly political writings like *Spectres de Marx* (1993) where he begins talking about a “democracy to come,” a concept and phrase that still draws the comic ire of Žižek.

Like Kierkegaard, Derrida is above all else interested in keeping the “possibility of the impossible” open. However, Derrida does not simply dispense with a general obligation toward others to fulfill the obligation toward the absolute Other (God), the *tout autre*. Instead he seeks to “weaken the distinction” between the other individual and the

absolutely Other. Derrida admires Kierkegaard's reading of the Abraham story in its insistence on the difficult sacrificing of general ethics, but he is more truly tracing and refining the work of Levinas who, again, insists on the ethical, the call of the other as manifested in (other) individuals. The call Abraham hears to sacrifice Isaac is not from some extraordinary "other," but something we all confront everyday when we protect our own children at the expense of others, an infinite number of others whom we, in some sense, "sacrifice." To put this another way, in this impossible contradictory instant Derrida seeks to find a relationship between religious obligation and everyday ethical obligation, an absolute obligation and a calculated, rational one. Quite simply, like Badiou, Derrida seeks to confront the problem of divine alterity in Levinas's other and, quite provocatively, he does this by juxtaposing Levinas to Kierkegaard. The Derridean hope, I would suggest, is that if one positions Levinas next to Kierkegaard the "transcendence" or materialist aspects of the Levinasian position becomes more distinct to critics who would dismiss him as simply "religious."

Indeed, when Derrida begins talking about a "democracy to come" he is trying to maintain the very same "Abrahamic" relation between the absolute and the everyday, the impossibly an-economic and the calculated or rational, the idealist and the materialist. Rather than simply expose or demystify the gap between an "ideal" democracy and neo-liberal democracies as they actually exist, Derrida wants to concentrate on the "failure" of the actual to achieve the ideal; not unlike Žižek, he wants to concentrate on the "gap" between the ideal and the factual because "this failure and this gap" characterizes

A priori and by definition, all democracies, including the oldest and the most stable of so-called Western democracies. At stake here is the very concept of democracy as concept of a promise that can only arise in such a *diastema* (failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being "out of joint" [here Derrida employs *Hamlet*]). That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy *to come*, not of a *future* democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of utopia – at least to the extent that their inaccessibility would still retain the temporal form of a future present, of a future modality of the living present.

[Even beyond the regulating idea in its classic form, the idea, if that is still what it is, of democracy to come, its "idea" as event of a pledged injunction that

orders one to summon the very thing that will never present itself in the form of full presence, is the opening of this gap between an infinite promise (always untenable at least for the reason that it calls for the infinite respect of the singularity and infinite alterity of the other as much as for the respect of the countable, calculable, subjectal equality between anonymous singularities) and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise. (1994: 64-65)

Derrida suggests that his “democracy to come,” then, involves a “spirit of Marxism, a desire for justice.

To this extent, the effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event and of singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated. (1994: 65)

In some sense, for those who know Derrida, this is a reworking of *differance* in a specifically political context. But like *differance*, Derrida’s “democracy to come” was destined to be interpreted, despite his continual rebuttals, as “deferral, lateness, delay, postponement” and thus politically it suggested, at best, quietism, at worst, complicity.⁵

There has been some rapprochement between and Derrida and Marxism in the making, a rapprochement that became more explicit with his death (as such things tend to go) in 2005. Badiou, for example, in a recent talk titled as “Homage to Derrida,” talks of Derrida not as the messianic, waiting for something other, at odds with materialist thought figure that many know, but as someone captivated by the problem of “inexistence” as the “extreme of existence.” Similarly, in the opening pages of *The Parallax View*, Žižek is even willing to concede some relationship between his notion of addressing the “gap” as such and Derridean *differance*.

Since I have written many pages in which I struggle with the work of Jacques Derrida, now – when the Derridean fashion is fading away – is perhaps the moment to honor his memory by pointing out the proximity of this ‘minimal

difference' to what he called *differance*, this neologism whose very notoriety obfuscates its unprecedented materialist potential. (2006: 11)

But like any rapprochement, this one is complicated, partial at best. In discussing his "rapprochement" with Derridean thought Žižek ultimately offers this line of distinction:

This reappraisal [of difference] is intended to draw an even stronger line of demarcation from the usual gang of democracy-to-come deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects. So . . .as usual, I would like to point out that, as usual (and, as usual, several sensitive people I like will look huffy), the democracy-to-come delegation has not been invited. If, however, a resolute democrat-to-come manages to slip in, he or she, should be warned that a number of cruel traps have been set here and there throughout the book." (2006: 11)

One is never quite sure what to do with this brand of Žižekian humor.

The problem, again, is that even Derrida's materialist refinements of Levinas were not sufficient for Badiou (or later Žižek). In the figure of Abraham and the "messianic" openness of "democracy to-come" there lingered a hint of the absolute Other, the deified – rather than thoroughly laicized – infinite. Even more, in the figure of Abraham – the common patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – there was the hint of the universalism of the "one," a totality of Being to come, a totality of Being that had once been accessible somehow and would be again.

In presenting St. Paul in the context of *Being and Event*, then, Badiou made a decisive cut between the "Abrahamic Levinasian crowd" and himself. In the figure of Paul Badiou quite simply identifies the most striking contrast possible to Derrida's "Abraham," a distinctive gesture of immanence to counter Derrida's "messianic" openness. The historical Paul argues Abraham's covenant with God has been supplanted by the resurrection of Christ. In so arguing, he helps invent the tradition of Christian typology, the practice of reading the Hebrew Bible as *only* a foregrounding for what happens in the Christian New Testament. That is, Paul marks not a relation to Abraham, but a point of non-relation, absolute difference. Paul is an apostle, not a prophet, announcing that the event has already come – not that it is perennially "to-

come.” Indeed, for Paul, a certain notion of Judaism *never was at all*. Badiou knows this biblical scholarship well.

One can detect notes of the forthcoming Paul book in *Being and Event*. There Badiou suggests that not only is Levinas’s path of thought “religious,” it is – somewhat ironically – a religious path of thought that always ultimately follows a certain “Christian” route: “From the point of view of experience, this path consecrates itself to mystical annihilation; an annihilation in which, on the basis of the interruption of all presentative situations, and at the end of a negative spiritual exercise, a Presence is gained, presence which is exactly that of the being of the One as non-being, thus the annulment of all functions of the count of One” (2005: 26).

Badiou begins to suggest here that the Levinasian “Jewish” openness to the other will always lead to some “Christian” presence or immanence. The Other (God) never stays sufficiently Other; he always becomes some version of the same or self (man). Here we need to tread carefully because we risk occluding the larger discussion with the ancient divide between Jew and Christian. Badiou is not criticizing Judaism or the role Judaism played in Levinas’s intellectual life. He is, again, illustrating the “Great Temptation” of philosophical ontologies and, in particular, the fundamental flaw of beginning thought with a “deified” notion of the infinite. Badiou’s “materialist” point, again, is that there is no “one,” there is no God, and certainly no “other” (again, only a masquerade for God); there is only a multiple *without* one, an infinite multiplicity with which we somehow need to come to terms -- mathematical terms. Consequently, the sooner we give up altogether on “The Great Temptation of “religion” to stay open to the other and the suggestion of non or “otherwise” than Being the better off we will be. Thus he begins to foreground in *Being and Event* the way in which the “other” always moves from the transcendent beyond of Being to the imminent. *Infinite multiplicity is what there and is there is nothing else (other) and there never has been anything else (other)*.

How is emphasizing this certain “Christian” turn in thought giving up on religion, this desire for or engagement with something other? The larger logic can be most neatly traced back to Hegel. As Todd McGowan summarizes neatly in Volume One of *IJZS*

For Hegel, Christianity has a privileged position among the world’s religions because it is the only one to do away with the idea of God as a transcendent being existing in a realm beyond that of the subject. Through Christ, God descends to earth and becomes identical, in the speculative sense, with humanity. This act

brings the absolute back from the beyond, while at the same time sustaining it as absolute. The otherness of the absolute becomes an immanent otherness . . .
 .(2006: 63)

And certainly on one level Badiou would be happy to turn Christianity back against itself by reminding the faith of its own “inner truth” that it involves abandoning the transcendent (a notion most Christians, of course, depend on).

In fact, I would suggest it is this “Hegelian” strain in Badiou’s efforts to reinvent Paul that truly attracted Žižek in the first place. As suggested, Žižek frankly and fully acknowledges “following Alain Badiou’s path-breaking book on Saint Paul” on the second page of *The Fragile Absolute*, seeing in Badiou’s Paul a means to confront the “obscurantism” of deconstruction, et. al. Note, however, that at that crucial “Pauline” encounter with Badiou how Žižek quickly turns from confronting obscurantism to his own Hegelian framework. There “is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism” in that the former as understood in its Hegelian form presses toward a materialism the latter theorizes and embraces (2000: 2). Thus, as Žižek sees it, Badiou’s Paul offers an opportunity to challenge the “old liberal slander” that Marxism – because of its supposed “Messianic” notion of history – is actually a “secularized religion.” If one sees Paul as a militant subversive as Badiou allows us to do, Žižek contends, one can cleverly “endorse what one is accused of.” In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, to take another example, Žižek offers this conclusion as its last line, a darkly comic suggestion that Christianity commit suicide: “That it the ultimate heroic gesture that Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself – like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge” (2003: 171). Badiou’s work thus inspires Žižek’s now frequent but still provocative suggestion that one must go through the Christian experience to be a true materialist.

My point: while Badiou’s “counter-strategy” to religion has ties to a certain Hegelianism (hence Žižek’s attraction), we must remind ourselves continually that Badiou offers a radically different ontology than Hegel’s (hence Žižek’s subsequent differences with Badiou). Badiou sees in St. Paul a way to sever any and all ties between the “infinite” and a Levinasian “Other,” a way to finally laicize the infinite rather than collapse it into a Hegelian (or Lacanian) “one.” Unlike Žižek, for example, he has no real interest in establishing any transhistorical link between Christianity and Marxism. Badiou’s Paul, again, is a radically new subject with no ancestors and no descendants. He is merely an exemplar, a demonstration of the relationship of “Being” to “Event.”

The thesis here, again, has been that Žižek's struggles with the "democracy-to-come deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness" crowd has been most specifically informed by Badiou's own struggle, a struggle that ultimately took the name of "Paul." But if Badiou's St. Paul drew Žižek and Badiou together I hope the reader can begin to see that St. Paul also marks *the point of difference between Žižek and Badiou* – just as he initially marked the difference between Levinas-Derrida and Badiou. For Žižek, Paul can still be read as a transhistorical Hegelian link between Christianity and Marxism, while simultaneously standing as a transhistorical split Lacanian subject if there ever was one. For Žižek, Paul suggests a Lacanian way to read "the break itself" or gap *as such*, and to establish that irreducible gap of the Real as the grounds of materialist thought. For Badiou, however, Paul is an entirely new subject with no such "historical" connections (St. Paul 2). His only relation is to the "truth" of the "event" he clings to with such remarkable fidelity. And the event Paul clings to *presents*, in turn, the laicized infinite multiplicity of the void, Badiou's solution to the impasse of materialist thought. The totally radically nature of Badiou's Paul, it seems to me, still eludes most us, including Žižek -- and it might do so for some time to come.

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¹ Alain Badiou's *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil) was published in 1988. The English translation by Oliver Feltham – *Being and Event* (London and New York: Continuum) – was published in 2005. The “Author’s Preface” to the English translation offers this:

“Soon it will have been twenty years since I published this book in France. At that moment I was quite aware of having written a ‘great’ book of philosophy. I felt I had actually achieved what I set out to do. Not without pride, I thought I had inscribed my name in the history of philosophy, and in particular, in the history of those philosophical systems which are the subject of interpretations and commentaries throughout the centuries.

That almost twenty years later the book is to be published in English, after having been published in Portuguese, Italian and Spanish, and just before it is published in German, is certainly not a proof of immortality! But even so, it is proof of consistency and resistance; far more so than if I had been subject to immediate translation – which can always be a mere effect of fashion” (xi).

² Karatani, Kojin. (2005) *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, Trans. Sabu Kohso Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

³ This paragraph summarizes Badiou’s introductory framing of his argument. *Saint Paul*, 14-15.

⁴ See Žižek’s summary of St. Paul in Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 128.

⁵ See *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*. Ed. Michael Sprinkler. London: Verso. (1999) for a sampling of responses to Derrida on this matter. Fredric Jameson’s essay is exceptional for its willingness to grapple seriously and not simply antagonistically with Derrida’s position.