

JEFFREY W. ROBBINS
Lebanon Valley College

THE POLITICS OF PAUL

Whatever a theologian regards as true, must be false: there you have almost a criterion of truth.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*

What we are getting today is a kind of “suspended” belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. Against this attitude, one should insist even more emphatically that the “vulgar” question “Do you really believe or not?” matters—more than ever, perhaps.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*

A review of “Saint Paul Among the Philosophers: Subjectivity, Universality and the Event;” Conference held at Syracuse University April 14-16, 2005.

NO RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE SEEMS COMPLETE without its own critical reappraisal of the Apostle Paul. Martin Luther’s debt to, and supposed recovery of, the theology of Paul has been well documented. This Pauline-Augustine strand of Christian theology, transmitted by way of Luther, not only sets the historic movement of the Protestant Reformation in motion, but also helps to establish a distinctively modern state of mind and strategy of thought. For instance, Paul’s claim to apostolic legitimacy set a pattern that was mirrored by Luther’s stand before the emperor and Pope alike, and that became the theological basis for the German Evangelical church’s repudiation of Nazism in the famous Barmen Declaration written by Karl Barth. Paul’s account of himself as a divided and conflicted self from his letter to the Romans is mirrored in Augustine’s *Confessions*, and still remains remarkably contemporary when read in the light of psychoanalytic theory. Additionally, the story of Paul’s blinding vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, the archetypal story of Christian conversion, remains a turning point for many historians of Christianity, as the early Jesus movement transitioned from living in the memory of Jesus the man to reflecting on Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, and the subsequent formation of Christianity as its own religion, separate and

distinct from its historic roots in Judaism. Such, in any case, is the historic tradition, if not the myth, of Paul.

So too is it the source for Nietzsche's critique of, and contempt for, Paul. For Nietzsche, Paul was the true founder of Christianity, and as such, the ultimate betrayer of Jesus' spirit. But Nietzsche goes further in his antagonism, for it was Paul as the first Christian theologian that engendered what Nietzsche calls a "theological instinct" within the heart of Western thought. For Nietzsche, a genealogy of Western thought that begins with Paul and that includes Augustine and Luther, finds its culmination in Kant, the preeminent "Protestant philosopher" who, as Nietzsche described in *The Anti-Christ*, is "the backstairs leading to the old ideal," and "one more impediment to German integrity."¹ From Kant the moralist and the purveyor of a religion of decadence back to Paul again, Nietzsche saw a common theological instinct that had "a vital interest in making mankind sick." This Pauline Christianity was a reversal of Jesus, who remains of course the only true Christian.² What stands for Christianity, on the other hand, is "simply a psychological self-delusion," and "a grand example of world-historical irony"³ through which the ultimate insult occurs – namely, Jesus was "turned into a Pharisee and a theologian himself."⁴ Indeed, Nietzsche agrees with Paul's own self-account by seeing Paul as a Pharisee among Pharisees. But whereas for Paul this was a statement of the freedom he enjoyed in the gospel, for Nietzsche this was the grand irony of Paul's successful reversal of Jesus' love for life into "the relentless logic of hatred." Paul, the priest among priests, and what he wanted, according to Nietzsche, was power which "served the purpose of tyrannizing over the masses and organizing mobs."⁵

Nietzsche's Paul is chiefly an object of contempt that reflects the modern philosophical antagonism not only towards Paul himself, but towards religion in general (the latter or which, ironically, was an invention of modern Enlightenment thought in the first place). At the same time, however, this modern contempt for Paul can also be seen to have produced its peculiar form of religious reformation as the radical disjunction that Nietzsche bluntly asserts between Jesus and Paul has become the guiding motif for successive generations of historical Jesus scholars. If Nietzsche was correct that Paul was the inventor of Christianity as we know it (and thus, the betrayer of Jesus' spirit), then perhaps the integrity of Jesus' vision could only be restored by returning to a Jesus *sans* Paul. In the words of the Jesus Seminar founder Robert Funk, perhaps "It is time to reinvent Christianity, complete with new symbols, new stories, and a new

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. H.L. Menchen (Tucson: See Sharp Press, 1999), p. 27.

² As Nietzsche writes in *The Anti-Christ*, "at bottom there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross." Ibid., 56.

³ Ibid., 53.

⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵ Ibid., 60.

understanding of Jesus.”⁶ But what if, as Slavoj Žižek writes in *The Fragile Absolute*, “there is no Christ outside Saint Paul,” then, the contemporary resurgence of interest in the historical Jesus is caught in a paradox. Again in the words of Žižek, by saying “yes to Christ, no to Saint Paul,”⁷ which is the basic pattern exemplified in both Nietzsche and the quest for the historical Jesus, we find ourselves cut off from the only means of access to Jesus through the proclaimed Christ. Thus, rather than the reinvention of Christianity that Funk has in mind (or the transvaluation of values that Nietzsche has in mind), we are left instead with its absolute dissolution.

This presents us with one of the many ironies of the relationship between contemporary continental thought with Pauline thought – namely, to borrow a phrase from Alain Badiou, the contemporary “reactivation of Paul,” far from obfuscating (or ‘ossifying’) “true Christianity,” is instead its revaluation, and even in some cases, an effort to save it from its own dissolution. This even by those such as Žižek and Badiou who do not identify with Paul as a saintly figure; indeed, as Badiou explains, Paul’s ‘religion’ is almost entirely beside the point.⁸ The Apostle Paul is of interest to Badiou in spite of the fact that Badiou is “irreligious by heredity.” Badiou continues, “Basically, I have never really connected Paul with religion. It is not according to this register, or to bear witness to any sort of faith, or even antifaith, that I have, for a long time, been interested in him.”⁹ Therefore, what we have with Žižek and Badiou is a reactivation of Paul without religion, but not, as in the case with Nietzsche, against religion or as an expression of an anti-theology.

As such, this renewed philosophical interest in Paul belongs to the broader cultural movement that has been termed the “return of the religious.” Like so much of the literature about this so-called return, it has been transmitted not primarily by theologians, but more by philosophers and cultural theorists, which has contributed to a further blurring of the boundaries between philosophy and theology, and which makes possible perhaps for the first time a genuinely secular theology. What is new, however—that is, what the discussion of Paul brings to the theoretical reflections about the return of religion—is that much of the interest in Paul has centered on the political dimension of his thought. Therefore, in contrast to Nietzsche and the modern antagonism towards religion that he represents, Paul is not the priestly figure who reins in the revolutionary

⁶ As cited in Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 73.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), 2.

⁸ “For me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him. . . . No transcendence, nothing sacred . . .” In Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 1.

⁹ Ibid., 1.

and liberative spirit of Jesus. On the contrary, Paul is every bit Jesus' equal as a social and political revolutionary, standing to Jesus as Lenin does to Marx.¹⁰

The importance of this is at least threefold: First, this recovery of Paul is a repoliticization of Christianity – or, more precisely, the *realization* of the intrinsically political nature that was and is at the very heart of the Christian identity. Second, as a politicized religion, this Christian legacy (which is distinctively Pauline, if not Paul's own creation) establishes the conditions of Western thought. Again in the words of Badiou, Paul is a “subjective thinker of primary importance,” regardless of one's faith or antifaith, religion or irreligion. It is in this light that the return of religion must be thought through the reactivation and reformation of Paul, who provides for contemporary Continental philosophy of religion a more politicized and programmatic path of religious philosophy. Third, Paul's relevance for both the religious and irreligious alike provides a surprising point of convergence between the historians and the philosophers, as they have each in their own way successfully demythologized the image of Paul as chief inventor of Christianity. This is at once both a radicalization of Paul in the sense that Paul's identity and legacy is being fundamentally rethought, and at the same time a cleansing or decontamination in the sense that Paul can now be safely approached by the Christian or non-Christian alike, and not as the stand-in for all that is right or wrong about the Christian identity, or not, as Žižek writes, “the very symbol of the establishment of Christian orthodoxy.”¹¹

* * *

All of this was in evidence at the first bi-annual “Postmodernism, Culture, and Religion Conference” held at Syracuse University on “Saint Paul among the Philosophers.” In addition to the aforementioned Žižek and Badiou, the conference also included Richard Kearney, who was a late replacement for Giorgio Agamben, and Pauline scholars Daniel Boyarin, Paula Fredriksen, Dale Martin, and E.P. Sanders (as well as the best-selling religious author Karen Armstrong, who was clearly out of her element). The conference not only began with presentations from Žižek and Badiou, but the conversation throughout clearly revolved around their respective philosophical appropriations of Paul. As such, this marked a turning point not only in the highly influential Religion and

¹⁰ As Žižek writes, “What these followers of the maxim ‘yes to Christ, no to Saint Paul’ ... do is strictly parallel to the stance of those ‘humanists Marxists’ from the mid-twentieth century whose maxim was ‘yes to the early authentic Marx, no to his Leninist ossification’. And in both cases, one should insist that such a ‘defence of the authentic’ is the perfidious mode of its betrayal: *there is no Christ outside Saint Paul*; in exactly the same way, there is no ‘authentic Marx’ that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin.” In *Fragile Absolute*, p. 2. And from Badiou: “I am not the first to risk the comparison that makes of him a Lenin for whom Christ will have been the equivocal Marx.” In *Saint Paul*, 2.

¹¹ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 9.

Postmodernism conferences that have been hosted by John Caputo over the past decade, but more significantly in the field of religion and postmodernism as there has been a shift from the preeminence of Derrida's deconstructive philosophy to an emerging interest in political ontology and its relevance for religious and theological thought.

But while Žižek and Badiou might claim Paul as our contemporary, the historians lined up against this apparent philosophical naiveté reminding those in attendance that there is an intractable gap between the past and present, or as Fredriksen quipped, between Paul's Philippi and Badiou's Paris. Indeed, as Fredriksen described the contention, there is a fundamental difference between the philosopher's question, which is "What does Paul mean?" and the historian's question, which is "What *did* Paul mean?" Boyarin's concerns were similar, but more nuanced and self-aware. His concern with the claim that Paul is our contemporary as a militant subject was that rather than exemplifying the singularity of the event through the inauguration of something new, this dehistoricization and decontextualization of Paul, which renders his importance as militant subject independent from his message, changes nothing. For Boyarin—in contrast with Žižek and Badiou—all militants are not the same, so the point of contestation is a question of which militant and whose politics?

Whether Jew or Christian, whether convert or apostate, whether theologian, philosopher, or sophist, there is much to disagree on when it comes to Paul. But simply the fact that it is Paul around whom these conversations are again revolving—and not necessarily by theologians or biblical exegetes, but by philosophers and cultural theorists—says something important about the state of contemporary religious thought. Namely, as Derrida long since has demonstrated, though the return of religion is always already political,¹² it is only now that Continental philosophy of religion is developing its own political consciousness. This realization is part and parcel of the much broader and more highly charged cultural realization that the idea of religion and the legacy of religious traditions are too important to leave to religious scholars alone. Correlatively, it is a moment of opportunity for theologians and religious theorists to seize upon, not as the *voice of authority* in the tradition of theological dogmatics, but as the *question to authority* in the cultural and religious spheres, for clearly theology and religion are too important to leave in the hands either of politicians courting public favor or religious leaders seeking political sway.

The epoch for the cultural despisers of religion has passed, and with it has passed the self-indulgence of theology. How else to explain the ascendancy of the religious right and the idiocy and virtually unchecked belligerence of its literalism? While no theology worth its salt would endorse such ignorance, critical theorists such as Žižek still remain the exception to the rule by his

¹² See Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), 40-101.

insistence that we fight back—that it is not enough that we change the way we speak and think about religion, but that the religious itself must change, or more accurately, *be changed*.

With Paul, therefore, we can *and must* proclaim the time is at hand and to begin living and acting as if we believed.

JEFFREY W. ROBBINS is Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, PA, and Associate Editor of the *JCRT*. He is the author of two books, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), and *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology* (Davies Group, 2004).

©2005 Jeffrey W. Robbins. All rights reserved.
Robbins, Jeffrey W. "The Politics of Paul." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 89-94. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.2/robbins.pdf>