

# The reactivation of Paul: A critical dialogue on Giorgio Agamben

JOSÉ TOLENTINO MENDONÇA

Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP), Lisboa

Straus Fellow 2011/12 – New York University

«Expanse cannot be lost...»

EMILY DICKINSON

## I

The first objection to arise may be to the title: *The Reactivation of Paul*. Paul of Tarsus is certainly one of the fundamental authors of humanity's mental heritage, with a complex and transversally disseminated posterity (we recall that there exists the Paul of Marcion and of Origen, but also the Paul of Victor Hugo and Bossuet, of Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt, of Pasolini and George Steiner...). What does it mean to speak of *The Reactivation of Paul*? In the religious field, and well beyond the Christian field as such, there is an endless library of books about Paul, and one which is continually being added to. The phenomenon has reached such proportions that very few theologians nowadays will venture to present an overall or global vision of Paul, since it becomes increasingly difficult to tackle the

intimidating bibliographical mountain that has accumulated. The current trend in theological studies of the Pauline *corpus* is, so to speak, defensive: the emphasis is essentially on erudition and on the hyper-specialisation of themes<sup>1</sup>. We ask: is there any justification for a topic such as *The Reactivation of Paul* when there are very few authors of whom it can be said that they are so alive and so aggressively vital even after twenty centuries?

Clearly, *The Reactivation of Paul* must be read as a coded expression that seeks to describe a specific phenomenon, namely the recent *political turn* in the approach to Paul brought about not so much by theology, but rather by philosophy and the Theory of Culture. The ironic commentary that Mark Lilla wrote in *The New York Review of Books* is symptomatic of this alteration in the landscape which, to a considerable extent, has yet to be assessed: «If you wander into an American religious bookstore today (and from this point of view, the situation in Europe would not be very different) you will find many self-help books but very few on St Paul's epistles, and fewer still worth reading. But if you stroll the aisles of a secular university bookstore you will discover a surprising number of works about him... The new books on Paul are, of course, not devotional, they are political. How the students of "theory" found themselves rummaging around in the Pauline epistles is itself an interesting story...»<sup>2</sup>.

### An interesting story...

In an attempt to give a brief summary of the story, we might describe it as the impact of an unaccustomed editorial boom which links «Atheists and Catholics, Jews and Protestants, and the odd Lacanian»<sup>3</sup> with the reinstatement of Paul. In 1987, over the space of four days, the Jewish philosopher, Jacob Taubes presented an extraordinary hermeneutic of the Letter to the Romans in the Evangelical Institute in Heidelberg. The recordings made at the time were eventually published, five years later, and were given a title

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jean Noël Aletti, «Où en sont les études sur Saint Paul? Enjeux et propositions» in *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 90/3 (2000), 329-352. Stanislas Breton writes along the same lines in the prologue to his essay, to be discussed below: «For the bold, the immense literature on the apostle Paul is inspiring. It also provokes a certain unease; the one who dares to add to it risks contributing a discourse in which a sense of awe combines with discouragement». In *A radical philosophy of Saint Paul* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Lilla, «A New, Political Saint Paul?» in *New York Review of Books*, October (2008).

<sup>3</sup> John Durham Peters, *Courting the abyss: free speech and the liberal tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 30.

which amounts to a programme: “Paul’s political theology”<sup>4</sup>. In 1988, Stanislas Breton, a Catholic, published in *Presses Universitaires de France* a straightforward philosophical essay on Paul, with the comment: «I hope to identify a set of elements in the Pauline *corpus* that might be of some interest to the philosopher»<sup>5</sup>. Even greater surprise was caused by the 1997 essay of an *enfant terrible* of the French Academy, Alain Badiou, who declared that he was, by heredity, irreligious, and at the same time called on the Left to re-discover the radical universalism of Paul. And he went on to explain: «If today I wish to retrace in a few pages the singularity of this connection in Paul, it is probably because there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure»<sup>6</sup>. In the year 2000, Giorgio Agamben brought together the Pauline materials on which he had worked in a number of universities in America and Europe. The opening sentence of the book, which he published under the title “Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani”, clearly defines the shape of project: «First and foremost, this seminar proposes to restore Paul’s Letters to the status of the fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition»<sup>7</sup>. In the same year, Slavoj Žižek wrote “The Fragile Absolute” declaring that «the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to one side» (on the contrary, «Christianity and Marxism *should* fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms»). But in order to understand Christianity, it is necessary to go beyond the preconceived idea that says «Yes to Christ, No to Saint Paul».<sup>8</sup>

I would say that these five authors (Taubes, Breton, Badiou, Agamben and Žižek) represent the decisive nucleus of this phenomenon called *The Reactivation of Paul*. Other names could be added, such as that of Bernard Sichère<sup>9</sup>, for example, but they are much more contextual and had nothing like the impact of the others. A concluding note to sum up what is clear: it would be impossible to embark on this contemporary phenomenon with-

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Taubes, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Stanislas Breton, *Saint Paul* (Paris: PUF, 1988). I cite from the recent American edition which, symptomatically, has altered the title of the work to *A radical philosophy of Saint Paul* (translated by Joseph N. Blanton, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l’universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta: un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), 9 [The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans (translated by Patricia Dailey, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005)].

<sup>8</sup> , *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), xxix.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Sichère, *Le jour est proche: La révolution selon saint Paul* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003).

out taking into consideration the intense philosophical and theological production of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to Paul (Nietzsche died in 1900; Karl Barth published the first edition of his *Der Römerbrief* in 1919; Heidegger dedicated the first part of his 1920-21 seminar to Paul, etc., etc.).

...or not....

At the same time, there is no lack of people who raise important objections to this remarkable return to Paul. As I see it, those that spring immediately to mind are objections of a methodological nature, and for this reason we will not, at this point, enter into the intense and necessary theological discussion. There are essentially two methodological objections:

1. Even when considering legitimate positions such as that of Alain Badiou («my intention, clearly, is neither historicizing nor exegetical. It is subjective through and through»<sup>10</sup>) or those of Agamben («this work consists not so much in conserving, but in destroying something»<sup>11</sup>), one cannot disregard the elementary scientific requirements inherent in dealing with an author of two thousand years ago and a widely differentiated textual criticism, which in some cases is particularly intricate. Giorgio Agamben, along the same lines as Taubes, is undoubtedly the one who displays greater awareness of this problem, particularly when he declares that «the task thus remains of creating a Pauline lexicon of technical terms»<sup>12</sup>. But a legitimate criticism of all of these new readings is that they run the risk of approaching Paul as if he were a contemporary, discovering in the Christian Apostle an unlooked-for key for resolving deadlocks that have nothing to do with Paul, but rather with our own Modernity<sup>13</sup>. The theologian Benoît Bourguine, for example, perceives, behind this return to Paul, the current need to respond to the crisis of multiculturalism and the universal<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 129.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Nathalie Frogneux, «Une traversée contemporaine de Paul» in *Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale*, 255/September (2009), 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Benoît Bourguine, «Saint Paul et la philosophie: Crise du multiculturalisme et universel chrétien» in *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 40(2009), 78-94.

There is no need to say that what for some is a danger to be avoided (somewhat sarcastically, Mark Lilla says, for example, that the patron of this *Reactivation* is not St Paul but Emma Bovary), for others constitutes precisely the opportunity or the seductive point (while expressing his reservations, Bourguine does not fail to write that theology receives here from philosophy a vigorous reactivation of its real significance).

2. Another conflictual aspect consists in the way in which these recent works either ignore or nearly ignore the hermeneutic patrimony which Theology and Exegesis have assembled around Paul. It is true that Pauline studies today have reached a high degree of specialisation and fragmentation which threaten to make them totally unintelligible for the ordinary reader. Moreover, in a secularised cultural context, they are often reduced to a kind of archeology of western civilisation. But in the name of the reactivation of Paul, it is not possible to simplify, to the point almost of caricature, the complexity of the questions which the history of religions (namely of Christianity and Judaism) has been exploring, including in recent years. There is food for reflection in the opinion expressed by Shmuel Trigano, who says: «It is pathetic to see thinkers who claim to be atheists carelessly restating ways of thinking that the [Catholic] Church tried to go beyond quite a few years ago»<sup>15</sup>.

## II

### **Giorgio Agamben and the «small door through which the Messiah enters»**

Within this heterogeneous and effervescent movement which the expression *The Reactivation of Paul* seeks to describe, the work of Giorgio Agamben, described by Paul Ricoeur as «vigorous»<sup>16</sup>, seems to us to be the one that offers the greatest and most original challenge to a contemporary reflection on *Religion and Public Reason*. Its aim is nothing less than «to in-

<sup>15</sup> Shmuel Trigano, «La “Question Juive” du retour à Paul. La politique de l’Empire» in *Controverses*, 1/Mars(2006), 108.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, «Paul apôtre, proclamation et argumentation» in *Esprit* 2 (2003), 93.

terpret messianic time as a paradigm of historical time»<sup>17</sup> and this understood as «*ho nyn kairos*, the time of the now»<sup>18</sup>. The challenge begins to be a serious one for the religious universe itself. Agamben writes that, even without «a premeditated strategy of neutralizing messianism», the truth is that the history of the Christian churches has «literally cancelled out the messianic», and the situation would not be substantially different in relation to the synagogue: «As Jacob Bernays once observed with irony, “to have the Messiah behind you does not make for a very comfortable position”... But to have him perennially ahead of you can also, in the end, be discomfoting»<sup>19</sup>. This enables us to understand the author’s emphasis on the word *to restore*. But the widespread secularisation debate which is underlies Modernity also erroneously identified the messianic time with eschatological time, to which it declared itself totally opposed or, at least, to use an expression of Max Weber’s, in a “state of total indifference”<sup>20</sup>. But unlike the eschatological<sup>21</sup>, the messianic is not the time of the end: «it is the time that we ourselves are, and for this very reason, it is the only real time»<sup>22</sup>; it is not the chronological end of time, but the present as the exigency of fulfilment»<sup>23</sup>; «for this reason, each instant may be, to use Benjamin’s words, the “small door through which the Messiah enters”»<sup>24</sup>. In addition to which, as Agamben declares, the whole of Modernity is involved «in a tightly knit hermeneutic struggle with the messianic – in the sense that all of its determining concepts are more or less conscious interpretations and secularizations of messianic themes»<sup>25</sup>. Can the messianic represent “the small door” which establishes a dialogue between Religion and Public Reason?

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), 71.

<sup>21</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 71

<sup>25</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 95

## The contribution of Paul's theology

What contribution can Paul offer for the dialogue if, as Giorgio Agamben believes, his Letters are, in fact, «the fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition»? Basically, Paul offers both to the present time of Religion as well as to the Public Space, a territory of tension, full of existential implications, rather than a doctrine or a model. The verb with which Paul expresses his messianic tension, in the Letter to the Philippians (Phil. 3, 12-13) is *epkteinomenos*, a curious (we would say impossible) combination of two contradictory prepositions (*epi* which means “on” or “above” and *ek* indicating the place from which one is coming or is leaving), but which expresses clearly the double movement in the Pauline gesture: «The tension toward what lies ahead is produced on and out of what lies behind»<sup>26</sup>.

## The paradoxical morphology of the messianic

Anyone who is acquainted with the Pauline texts even to a limited extent knows that one of the obstacles (or one of the riches) of his thought is that it is built on a series of paradoxes, some of which are obscure or irresolvable. Now, one of the merits of Giorgio Agamben's commentary which, inspired by Jacob Taubes, decisively locates Paul in the tradition of Judaic messianism (from the Biblical prophets to contemporaries such as Walter Benjamin or Gershom Scholem) is to show how Paul's paradoxical discourse is, at bottom the only one that suits the messianic revelation. So let us have a look at three of the central paradoxes in Pauline thought and let us see how they describe the morphology of the messianic.

### Ownership and Use

For Agamben, the most rigorous definition that Paul gives us concerning the messianic life occurs in chapter 7 of the First Letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 7, 29-32):

<sup>26</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 77.

29 But this I say, brethren, time contracted is; the rest in order that also the ones having wives as not [*hōs mē*] having may be, 30 and the ones weeping as not [*hōs mē*] weeping, and the ones rejoicing as not [*hōs mē*] rejoicing 31 and the ones buying as not [*hōs mē*] possessing, and the ones using the world as not [*hōs mē*] using it up: 32 for passes away the figure of this world. I want now you without care to be.

An important question is to decide how to translate *hōs mē*, a technical term essential to Pauline vocabulary. Along the lines of a traditional interpretation of the text, Breton falls back on the expression “as if” and explains it as follows: «By the contrast it introduces between appearances and reality, between what something is and what it is said to be, it clearly suggests an imperative of indifference»<sup>27</sup>. For Agamben, however, *hōs mē* is the formula concerning messianic life and must be translated literally as “as not”, In vv. 30-31, where we read «those who buy as though they had no goods and those who deal [chrōmenoi] with the world as though they had no dealings with it [katachrōmenoi]», he argues that there is «an explicit reference to property (dominium) under Roman Law: *ius utendi et abutendi*». And he concludes «Paul contrasts messianic *usus* with *dominium*; thus, to remain in the calling in the ‘as not’ form means never to make the calling an object of ownership. The *hōs mē* therefore does not only have a negative content; rather, for Paul, this is the only possible *use* of worldly situations. The messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity; rather, it is a generic potentiality [*potenza*] that can be used without ever being owned. To be messianic, to live in the Messiah, signifies the expropriation of each and every juridical-factual property (circumcised/uncircumcised; free/slave; man/woman) under the “as not” form. This expropriation does not, however, create a new identity; the “new creature” is none other than the use and messianic vocation of the old»<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> Breton, *A radical philosophy of Saint Paul*, 150. This is an extremely interesting question that is full of subtleties in the various commentaries. Cf. C.K.Barrett: he opts for the expression “as though...not” and writes: «‘Though’ is an unfortunate English word in this context, for its common usage suggests an atmosphere of pretence and unreality, as though Paul were asking for a hypocritical show of sorrow or rejoicing. It is however difficult to see how the word can be avoided». C.K.Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hendrickson, 1968), 178.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 31.



## The Universal and the Particular

The epithet which Christian tradition has given to Paul is ‘Apostle of the Nations’, interpreting his missionary activity in universalist terms. Paul’s contribution would thus be that of having transcended the various particularisms and boldly proclaimed the emergence of the universal. It is this which underlies the praise expressed by Alain Badiou of Paul in a work which has “The Foundation of Universalism” as its subtitle and which seeks to demonstrate how «a universal thought, proceeding on the basis of the worldly proliferation of alterities (the Jew, the Greek, women, men, slaves, free men, and so on) produces a Sameness and an Equity (there is no longer either Jew, or Greek, and so on)»<sup>29</sup>. Badiou regards Paul’s universalism as «an indifference that tolerates differences» which then becomes «that with must be traversed in order for universality itself to be constructed»<sup>30</sup>. Giorgio Agamben’s opinion is very different. He believes that Paul forces us to «think about the question of the universal and particular in a completely new way, not only in logic, but also in ontology and politics». He goes on to explain: «For Paul, it is not a matter of “tolerating” or getting past differences in order to pinpoint a sameness or a universal lurking beyond. The universal is not a transcendent principle through which differences may be perceived, but an operation that divides the divisions of the law themselves and renders them inoperative, without ever reaching any final ground. No universal man, no Christian, can be found in the depths of the Jew or the Greek, neither as a principle nor as an end; all that is left is a remnant and the impossibility of the Jew or the Greek to coincide with himself»<sup>31</sup>. Agamben points to the term “remnant” (*leimna*), which belongs to the grammar of prophecy and messianism, as the key to resolving the Universal/Particular dialectic in Paul’s theology. And he proposes an interpretation which needs to be discussed but which is, to say the least, original: «It is therefore neither the all, nor a part of the all, but the impossibility for the part and the all to coincide with themselves or with each other»<sup>32</sup>. In this

<sup>29</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 105-106.

<sup>31</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 54-55.

<sup>32</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 57.

sense, the “remnant” emerges “as a very peculiar kind of soteriological machine” and, in Agamben’s view, constitutes «the only real political subject»<sup>33</sup>.

## The Law and Love

Paul’s theology contains a proverbial difficulty in relation to the theme of the Law which had been discussed indefatigably by commentators, at least from Origen onwards. «One must recognise the ambiguity of the concept of *nomos* used by Paul»<sup>34</sup>. Paul certainly used the same term to denote different things. What is he trying to say when he declares that the Messiah is the end (*tēlos*) of the Law (Rom. 10, 4)? And how to reconcile passages such as Romans 7:6 («But now we have been delivered from the law...») with Romans 7:12, which appears to say precisely the opposite («The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good»)? This is where Agamben comes into the debate arguing that Paul is not against the Law in general, but merely «in its prescriptive and normative aspect, which he refers to as *nomos tōn entolōn*, “the law of the commandments”»<sup>35</sup>. In fact, «there is something in the law that constitutively exceeds the norm and is irreducible to it, and it is this excess and to this inner dialectic that Paul refers»<sup>36</sup>. Two key terms are evoked to enable us to understand Paul’s discursive strategy: *katargēō*, which means “I make inoperative, I deactivate, I suspend the efficacy” and *astheneia*, meaning “weakness”. Paul writes as follows in 2 Cor. 12, 9: «Power [or potentiality] realizes itself in Weakness [*dynamis en astheneia teleitai*]». Messianic *katargēō* does not merely abolish; it preserves and brings to fulfilment. The messianic is not the destruction but the deactivation of the law, and in this way “*en astheneia teleitai*”. «Once he divides the law into a law of works and a law of faith, a law of sin and a law of God (Rom. 7, 22-23) — and thus renders it inoperable and unobservable (*ineseguibile*) — Paul can then fulfil and recapitulate the law in the figure of love»<sup>37</sup>. And what is love if it is not to accept finding oneself in absolute vulnerability before the other? As Agamben

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Denis Muller, «Le Christ, relève de la Loi (Romains 10, 4): La possibilité d’une éthique messianique à la suite de Giorgio Agamben» in *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*, 30/1 (2001), 55.

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 91.

writes: «The messianic is the instance, in religion and equally in law, of an exigency of fulfilment»<sup>38</sup>. But this fulfilment only comes about in the paradoxical grammar of love<sup>39</sup> which, in an earlier book, the philosopher expressed as: «To live in intimacy with a stranger, not in order to draw him closer, or to make him known, but rather to keep him strange, remote: unapparent - so unapparent that his name contains him entirely. And, even in discomfort, to be nothing else, day after day, than the ever open place, the unwaning light in which that one being, that thing, remains forever exposed and sealed off»<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*, 126.

<sup>39</sup> «Love, as agape and caritas, assumes a central importance in Agamben's later works». Paolo Bartolini, «Love» in Alex Murray – Jessica Whyte (ed.), *The Agamben Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 128.

<sup>40</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Idea della prosa* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1985), 40.

