

An Interview with Kevin Hart “Paul and the Reduction”

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JPS: Our discussion today will revolve around the relationship between St Paul and philosophy, but to provide a backdrop for this discussion I wanted first to talk about your own work. Your writings, whether in prose or poetry, seem to inhabit and navigate comfortably between the realms of literature, theology, philosophy, and culture, to name a few. And, of course, some of your major works, such as *The Trespass of the Sign*¹ and *The Dark Gaze*² address specifically the relationship between philosophy and religion. How would you describe the way in which this tension—if this is even a fair word—between the disciplines plays out in your own work, especially the tension between religion and philosophy?

KH: As a placing shot, I'd say that what interests me in religion, philosophy and poetry can be traced to what Husserl described as the *epoché* and the phenomenological reduction. A poem begins when you bracket the natural attitude, when you suspend your usual habits of perception and convert your gaze so that the strangeness and wonder of the world are restored. We can call this a “philosophical experience,” if you like, so long as it's understood that this experience precedes all the theses that form the basis of philosophical discussions. Husserl was anxious to refine the reduction so that we can reflect fully and richly on how the world is constituted by consciousness. Only when we do that do we see with wonder. To my

mind, he is overly scrupulous in avoiding the attunements that can precipitate the reduction. Heidegger developed some of these in his account of *Befindlichkeit*, chiefly *Angst* and boredom, although I think that he overstated the extent of Husserl's interest in being only as cognized being. For Heidegger, *Angst* and boredom are forms of the *epoché*; they prepare us for thinking. He is like Husserl, though, in that the attunements lead to something other than themselves on the other side. *Angst* and boredom lead us to grasp our being in the world. I'm interested in those attunements that reveal themselves in a heightened state on the far side.

Wonder is like that, I think. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates says that a good deal of philosophy begins in wonder, and Heidegger seems to agree. For him, wonder puts us in touch with non-being and reveals the origin of the question “why?” I agree only to the extent that wonder discloses the fragility of the world. The wonder that prompts me to perform the reduction is revealed in a heightened way after it. It might lead to philosophizing or to poetry. The call is often the same; the response is different. The early Christian experience of *metanoia* or conversion can also be approached by the reduction. Paul Ricoeur speaks of the reduction making us lose the world in order to gain it: it's a deliberate echo of Matthew 10: 39. And Eugen Fink in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* evokes the “awful tremor” experienced by anyone who undertakes the reduction. I think that awe, like wonder, straddles the reduction, and that awe, more than wonder, prompts a reduction that is at the base of much religious thought and affect. Wonder leads us to ask questions; awe suspends the asking of questions, though without supplying answers of a concrete kind. That is the fundamental tension between philosophy and religion, as I see it. Of course, there are slippages from wonder to awe and from awe to wonder. I might begin by expressing wonder about something, encounter wonder in a heightened form, and then be moved to awe. A philosophical experience can lead to

religious experience. Or I might step back from an experience of awe and wonder about it. If I do so with guided by scripture and prayer, I will set out on a path called “theology.” If I do not, I follow that other path, “philosophy.”

JPS: The philosophical and the religious are not heterogeneous, then?

KH: One can sometimes pass from the one to the other before any theses are posited; thereafter, disciplinary moves come into play for most people and you do philosophy or theology. Highly creative theologians and philosophers are never fettered in that way, though. I don’t buy Heidegger’s insistence on “methodological atheism,” which is a dogmatic claim to the extent that it rules out of court the phenomenality of revelation. Husserl spoke of the need to be without presuppositions when doing philosophy. That means receiving phenomena without any conditions. Can this be done? One can certainly try very hard to put aside the natural attitude and what I call the supernatural attitude, the habit of regarding God in terms of positive and negative theses. Marion has rightly drawn our attention to invisible, paradoxical phenomena that impose on us, and if we agree with him we have no right to limit in advance what counts as phenomena. Belief in God does not simply give answers, as Husserl and Heidegger thought; it re-orientations questions and makes them all the more difficult. If I say, “God is love” I am not answering a question about the ultimate nature of reality. Long before that could ever be the case, I am posing a question: what does “love” mean here? We have no concept or set of concepts to deal with that word in the context of “God is love.” A conversion to Christ is the reception of God giving Himself to you in Christ without any conditions imposed by the one who comes to belief. I can receive unconditional love only if I set no conditions on receiving it. What I say of conversion is also true of prayer. Each prayer is a re-orientation to God in Christ, a *reductio in mysterium*. To

be converted is something that is always ahead of us as well as behind us.

JPS: The figure of Saint Paul provides a point of departure for debates about the proper relationship between religion and philosophy. Typically, Paul is perceived as a sort of “anti-philosopher,” and in *The Trespass of the Sign* you classify Paul as one of those figures who claim to be non-metaphysical “but which nonetheless find themselves entangled in metaphysics.” Should we see Paul as an “anti-philosopher” or at least someone who failed to recognize his implicit reliance on philosophy, or is this conception of Paul a mistake? Or, is it safer to say that there are “many Pauls” insofar as Paul’s message seems to shift depending on his audience?

KH: I think there are several threads here. I don’t see Paul as philosophical in the way that John is. Paul’s background is profoundly marked by Pharisaism, and unless we understand that we will never come to grasp what he tells us about monotheism or election. Unless we recognize Paul as a Jew we will never grasp the force with which he replaces Torah with Christ. But, as I say, he is different from John. His Christology has to do with refiguring Adam and Wisdom, with a vision of Lordship and Messiahship, not with the pre-existent *Logos*. Its roots are in Isaiah’s and Ezekiel’s teaching of the new heart, not in Plato and Aristotle’s reflections on the Good. When he calls himself a “debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians” in Romans, he is talking of his scope of his preaching, not his intellectual inheritance.

Rabbinic Judaism of the sort in which Paul was trained is plainly not metaphysical in the sense that it concerns thinking of being as being, let alone in Heidegger’s sense of the word: there’s nothing there to make one think of *Anwesenheit* or *Vorhandenheit*. And it can only be called philosophical if one stretches the word quite far, taking it to mean the seeking of truth through argument. Rabbinic argumentation

is more akin to the Gentile sense of law than to the Greek sense of philosophy. So if Paul is an anti-philosopher he is so in a different way than *les philosophes* were or the positivists were. He sets himself against both Jewish talk of signs and Greek talk of wisdom, and it is the latter that lets us see him as an anti-philosopher. Think of the opening of the first letter to the Corinthians. The Cross, he says there, is “foolishness,” and he quotes Isaiah, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise.” That’s a motif that was reset by Luther in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and that influenced Heidegger in his understanding of *Destruktion*. So Paul as “anti-philosopher” gets caught up in deconstituting the history of ontology.

That said, Paul is not simply outside the history of philosophy. Although his letters in no way comprise anything like a systematic theology, his thinking about redemption is organized by a sharp duality. On the one hand, there is the negative sequence of law, flesh and sin; on the other hand, there is the affirmative sequence of grace, spirit and righteousness. Is this a metaphysical schema? I don’t think it functions that way in Paul’s letters, although it does when it gets repeated, in a more concerted fashion, in later theology that has been inspired by Platonic dualism. Yet there are one or two moments when Greek philosophy impinges on Paul’s thought. The doxology of Romans 11:36 (“For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things”), for example, treats God as an instrumental cause.

JPS: What about the issue of many Pauls?

KH: Well, like every writer, Paul shows various facets of himself and his thought to different audiences. The church at Corinth isn’t the same as the church at Rome or Philippi; each has its problems, and we see Paul only in his responses to them. His “message” is surely the same if one stands sufficiently far away from the circumstances of each letter: there is only one Christ who was crucified and who has risen. The closer one gets to the texts, though, the more one

will find differences: the mystical Paul of the second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle of peace in the letter to the Romans, and so on. And of course we have the image of Paul that is given to us from his letters and the image of him that is given by Luke in Acts. These things alone would be more than sufficient to give rise to many Pauls. The last century alone gave birth to a good many of them: the apostle of self-understanding (Bultmann), the preacher of God’s impossible possibility (Barth), the witness of God’s apocalyptic claim upon creation (Käsemann), to name just three. Unlike many other writers, however, Paul has a plasticity that he explicitly turns to the advantage of preaching the gospel. “I am made all things to all men,” he tells the Corinthians, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.” We have in Paul a missionary who can cross the border not simply into another country, and not merely into another language, but into other ways of thinking. For him, all ways of thinking are relative to the astonishing truth that God has raised Jesus from the dead.

JPS: In your recent book *Postmodernism*,³ which provides a very helpful survey of this cultural and intellectual movement, you devote three chapters to scripture, religion, and the gift. You give an account of how postmodernism has opened up discourse in a way that allows for a critique of secularism and a fresh exploration of religion. Similarly, in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,⁴ Stanley Fish deemed “religion” to be the new “center of intellectual energy in the academy.” Given these two examples, do you see much of the current interest in Paul to be a manifestation of the spaces opened up by postmodernism? Secondly, is the current interest in Paul an indication of a concomitant interest in religion for its own sake? And, finally, what is your current assessment of the current status of religious discourse in the places of higher learning?

KH: I wonder if there has ever been a time when people were not interested in Paul? He always seems to come at an angle to culture, to intersect it in a way that makes us uneasy. Whenever he comes, he comes “out of due time,” although we usually try to make him more like us than he really is. There was certainly interest in him among modernists, and that has to be weighed when considering postmodern interests. The “modern Paul” has had great force from Bultmann to Sanders, and not just among New Testament scholars. Think of Heidegger’s course on Paul’s letters in the winter semester of 1920-21.

I distinguish between interest in Paul among people influenced by postmodernism, which is a diverse series of responses to modernism, and interest in him because of our situation in postmodernity. Take Alain Badiou as an example of the former, a problematic example no doubt, but no more so than any other. What interests Badiou is that for Paul the truth is not a relation between language and reality or a function of sentences or a matter of coherence but an event; it comes out of the sky and knocks Paul off his horse on the way to Damascus. It is therefore singular, and escapes all genera. The person who acts on the basis of this singular event lives without a ground, without a law. This antinomianism is attractive to postmodernists, as is a secularized form of what follows from it. Only a completely different sort of community, the Kingdom of God, can accommodate this new person. Badiou talks of this in terms of “universal singularity”; it’s his contribution to a debate that Jacques Derrida’s account of testimony and Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of “being singular plural.” Blanchot on the unavowable community, Derrida on the democracy to come, and Nancy on community, are examples of postmodern attempts to rethink the *basileia* without God.

When we shift attention to postmodernity, another set of issues comes into view. Paul is an exemplary figure of strong belatedness for many post-moderns, and thus a way of trying to overcome

anxiety with respect to modernity. Paul comes after Jesus but (it has been argued) founds Christianity by shifting the emphasis from the Kingdom of God to belief in Christ’s redemptive death. In making this move Paul eliminates in effect everything to do with Jesus’s life and teaching. If he knew anything about the parables and miracles, he says nothing about them. Everything turns on the redemptive death and glorious resurrection of Christ. Now I regard the idea of Paul as the founder of Christianity as a massive overstatement. He is a follower of Christ, not a founder of a religion. But he is a man of such powerful intellect and conviction that we need to be very careful because he can obscure the life and preaching of Jesus. Paul seems closer to us than Jesus: a man at home in cities, who travels from one culture to another. He is a man who has refashioned himself, who perpetually overworks himself and stretches himself in too many directions at once. So he is like many postmodern men and women. Unlike most postmoderns though, he talks with absolute certainty about the meaning and direction of life. In trying to understand him, we are indirectly seeking to understand how a highly intelligent, educated person can believe something so counter-intuitive with such certainty and passion. Perhaps it is one of the ways by which we indirectly reflect on Islam.

JPS: And religion in universities?

KH: For decades now the secular world has exerted a rigorous censorship in American colleges and universities and has done so by way of a firm rejection of censorship. The contradiction is easily identified. On the one hand, everything is tolerated and discussed; on the other hand, Christianity is treated with disrespect and its discourses are relegated to the fringe of the institution. Faculty will ridicule Christian beliefs that they would sharply (and rightly) rebuke others for doing if they were talking about Judaism or Islam. Unfortunately, I find that this happens in some Departments even at the University of Notre Dame where I teach.

I think the situation is changing, even in the secular universities, and not because a range of fascinating and important philosophers have been grouped together under the heading of “religion without religion.” I don’t find much sense in trying to squeeze a drop or two of theology out of Adorno or Lévinas.

I’ve noticed that some of the brightest students, undergraduate and graduate alike, are showing strong interest in “religion and literature,” not in the thematic and comparative way it was done a generation or two ago but in an analytic manner that draws from theology and philosophy as much as from literary criticism. And I think the same is true of philosophical theology, which has been strong for some time in analytic philosophy but which is quickly gaining strength in phenomenological and post-phenomenological thought.

JPS: Such issues as the acting person, politics, and truth have brought Saint Paul to the forefront of current debates between some of the heaviest hitters in contemporary philosophy, namely Zizek, Badiou and Agamben. What is your assessment of this particular debate between these three figures?

KH: I must say that right now we live in a poor time for European thought: we’ve lost so many of the great men who were such an inspiration to me when I was a graduate student and a young professor: Gadamer, Ricœur and Blanchot, Lévinas, Henry and Derrida. My list of our “heavy hitters,” as you put it, would differ from yours. Mine would feature Jean-Luc Marion and Alasdair MacIntyre. Of the people on your list, I’ve said something about Badiou. I’ve never found anything compelling in Zizek. You must be thinking of some lectures that Agamben has given on Paul that I haven’t heard. When his commentary on Romans comes out I’ll read it; otherwise, all I know are scattered allusions to Paul his other books.

The best people writing on Paul are New Testament scholars, not philosophers: N. T.

Wright and E. P. Sanders. Wright, in particular, is impressive in that he keeps exegetical and theological issues in tandem. I admire the fact that he writes for both a scholarly and a popular audience. The trouble with most New Testament scholars is that they focus intently on the text, especially in attempts to reconstruct the original audience of Paul’s letters (and therefore the author’s intentions), and ignore the ideas that he communicates. This division in theology between textual scholarship and systematics is a debilitating one, and not only with respect to Paul.

JPS: In some of these debates about Paul’s contributions to philosophy and political action, one might perceive a tendency to abstract a certain “Pauline structure” from the Christian content of Paul’s message. Do you see an abstraction taking place and can this serve as a positive end? Or, is it even possible to be selective in this manner without ultimately deforming the original structure?

KH: Paul is one of the great reducers of the western world. His Christianity turns on determining the essential structure of the faith, which for him is the resurrected Christ and the hope that this represents for us. If this essential structure is abstracted from its historical context, there is indeed a problem. It can become an *instrumentum* for interpreting the whole Bible. Marcion did that in a highly consequential manner, and it would be a mistake to think that the spirit of Marcion did not survive him. Think of von Harnack’s suggestion a century ago that Christians have matured sufficiently not to need the Old Testament. Paul’s antinomianism can always reinvigorate Christianity but always at the risk of distorting it. The idea of a “radical Reformation” is at the heart of any authentic Protestantism. Once you start reforming, there is always more reformation to be done.

The larger concern of removing Paul from his context and using him to read the Bible and present the faith is that his

Christology is pre-Trinitarian and therefore one-sided. To be sure, he talks of the Spirit fleetingly in Galatians and I Corinthians, but the working out of the triune nature of God was undertaken long after Paul.

JPS: I would like to switch gears a little bit, and turn to the topic of style. As a poet and professor of literature, you no doubt have a keen awareness of rhetorical style and the use of language. It seems in many ways that the writings attributed to Paul are crafted in a singular manner, one that displays a distinctive intensity. How would you as a writer describe Paul as a rhetorician?

KH: As you know, Paul's style or styles—along with his vocabulary and other benchmarks—are used to determine which letters are genuinely Pauline, which are Deutero-Pauline, and which reflect the early Church as it interprets itself by way of Paul (the pastoral epistles). Do we say that because the formal style of Ephesians indicates that it is not likely to have been written by Paul? Or do we say that a writer as masterly as Paul could multiply styles as needed?

Paul is certainly a powerful stylist, even when he refuses to write with “style.” His strength is paradox, which he uses in argument like a knuckleduster in a street fight. Sometimes he gets so overwrought that he mixes metaphors, but so does Shakespeare.

JPS: Can you identify any ways in which certain Pauline themes or resonances find their way into your own works, whether in prose or poetry?

KH: Just last year I taught Paul for the first time. In one seminar we read the letter to the Romans with Origen's commentary on one side, as it were, and Barth's commentary on the other side. I would not have been able to do that had I not been reading Paul for quite a long time. I think two motifs in particular organize much of my work at a distance, both of them in Philippians: the figures of *kenosis* and *epectasis*. The self-emptying of Christ is a very powerful motif for me; it is the preeminent figure of spiritual poverty, and Wallace Stevens's line always resonates with me, “It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.” I take that line out of Stevens's poem for Santayana, and think of it as a figure of prayer. To pray is to give oneself over to poverty's speech: the poverty of the Christ, the spiritual poverty of talking to God outside the sphere of experience, the linguistic poverty of praying with no words and few images. I would also say that the *epoché* and the reduction are an example of “poverty's speech” in philosophy. The other figure that I retain from Paul is *epectasis*: not in the athletic sense that Paul uses it, a stretching out towards the future, but rather a stretching out because one is called into the dark love of God.

Notes

1. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).
2. Id., *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
3. Id., *Postmodernism: a Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004).
4. Stanley Fish, “One University Under God?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 7, 2005.