

An Interview with Alain Badiou “Universal Truths and the Question of Religion”

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JPS: Would you describe your reading of Saint Paul as non-hermeneutic? And if so, in what ways is it not hermeneutic?

AB: I think that my reading of Saint Paul is, in fact, not hermeneutic. I can say that because my reading is a direct reading of the text. It is, strictly speaking, a *reading*. My goal is not at all to discover something that is obscure, something that is hidden in the text of Paul, or to develop a revelation. I don't care for that. My goal is only to read exactly what Paul has said. So my reading of Saint Paul is absolutely on the surface of the text and in this way it is not hermeneutic. I think that in the same way my reading is not in the field of religious hermeneutics. My relation to Paul does not involve faith or the church. It is, strictly speaking, a relation to the text of Paul and nothing else.

JPS: Is your decision to read Paul in a non-hermeneutic way tied to your conception of truth as something that is itself necessarily non-hermeneutic?

AB: Yes. I think that my reading of Paul is a reading of Paul as something like a testimony about a new conception of truth. I read Paul not at all as a sacred text, as a revelation or something religious. Instead, I read Paul as a text about a new and provocative conception of truth and, more profoundly, about the *general conditions* for a new truth. This is why I do not read Paul differently than I would a great mathematical text or a great artistic testimony. I read Paul as a human creation in

the field of the question of truth.

JPS: Your book on Saint Paul is provocatively subtitled, “The Foundation of Universalism.” Could you describe your notion of universalism and the way that it differs from, or is similar to, traditional conceptions of universality?

AB: Naturally, I agree that “The Foundation of Universalism” is a provocative subtitle – though I say in the book that we can't understand that sort of provocation too literally. Universal truths, of course, existed before Paul. There is something like a universalism in Chinese and Greek thought. So the foundation is, to be more precise, the foundation of an explicit conception of universalism. It would be more exact to say that the formation of universalism as such is, in this case, the formation of a new conception of what universalism is.

What is this new conception? For me, something is universal if it is something that is beyond established differences. We have differences that seem absolutely natural to us. In the context of these differences, the sign of a new truth is that that these differences become indifferent. So we have an absorption of an evident natural difference into something that is beyond that difference.

A striking example, which is completely different from the Pauline example, is the example of the creation of a new physics by Galileo. Before Galileo, there is a clear difference between natural movements and abstract mathematics. From Aristotle to the 16th century natural movement is conceived of as something with local determinations, as a kind of movement that is part of a closed cosmology. With the Galileo-event we have a completely new conception of movement in which the difference between concrete, natural movement on the one side and mathematical analysis on the other side becomes indifferent. This happens because Galileo declares that the world itself is written in mathematical language. The old

difference simply loses its pertinence.

Traditionally, universalism is conceived as the realization of a universal judgment about some real thing. This is something like a grammatical conception of universalism. Universality as a judgment is something that you can find from Aristotle to Kant to analytic philosophy today.

My conception is, on the contrary, a creative one. Universalism is always the result of a great process that opens with an event. To create something universal is to go beyond evident differences and separations. This is, in my conviction, the great difference between my conception of universality (which, of course, is not *only* my conception) and some traditional conceptions of universality. It is also the difference between a grammatical conception of truth and my conception of truth as a creation, a process, an event.

But the fact that with a new truth there is always something like the becoming indifferent of some evident differences is, in my opinion, very important. It is true in the example of Galileo. It is true in all the examples of a new truth. Just this morning, Daniel Boyarin, a fine critic of my work, asked a question about whether or not the difference between Jews and Greeks was relevant to the Pauline situation. Paul, of course, knows perfectly well that there are people who are Jews and people who are Greeks. But the new truth exceeds the evident difference between the Jew and the Greek. We can only completely receive a new truth by going beyond such differences. But this does not mean for Paul that they need to change their customs and practices. Instead, there is a becoming indifferent to this difference.

That is why Paul does not say that circumcision is bad – though he also does not say that it is good. In light of the event, circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is also nothing. Circumcision is not something good that becomes bad. That is

the interpretation that comes after Paul. There is certainly something like an anti-Semitism in primitive Christianity, but not in Paul. Paul is only saying that something that constitutes a difference in his world becomes indifferent in light of the new event. So we do not have a change of evaluation where bad becomes good or good becomes bad. Rather, it is something much more like Nietzsche where the difference is beyond good and evil. This is the same thing for Galileo. Galileo does not say that there is no natural movement or that we can't have an experience of natural movement, but that from the point of view of the new physics, the distinction between natural and artificial movements is no longer pertinent.

JPS: What do you make of Agamben's explicit contention in *A Time that Remains* that, contra your position, Paul is not an advocate of universalism but of radical separation? As Agamben puts it, Paul is instead advocating "a separation to the second power, a separation of separation itself, which divides and traverses?" (79)

AB: I know that Agamben's reading of Paul is very different from mine, but is this difference really a contradiction? I ask because, in fact, the question of separation belongs to the question of universalism. There is not, in my view, necessarily a contradiction between the two.

When separation is conceived of as a closure, as a closed separation (take, for example, a closed church), when you completely separate yourself from your enemies, the new from the old, then this is not at all like a universalism. The formation of a new particularity, a new closed group, leads exactly, for example, to anti-Semitism.

But in Paul there is an interplay between separation and universalism. For Paul, there is certainly a kind of separation necessary for his universalism because we have separated ourselves from the old man. We have, out of this separation, a newness of

life. But it remains a universalism because there is no limit to this separation, there is no closure. The Pauline conception of the church is not at all the realization of a closed separation. Instead, it proposes something that is open to everybody, a collective determination, the realization of a separation in a universal field. So, naturally, there is, for Paul, in the process of universalism, something like division but this is a division internal to the subject itself. It is not an external division between the subject and others, but a division within the subject. Every subject has to cross a sort of intimate division between the old man and the new man, between the power of death and the power of life. So I perfectly understand that universalism can take the form of a separation. There is always something like an intimate division when universalism takes the form of a separation.

But there is also always a risk that this separation may become closed and turn universalism against itself. This is always a risk. This is true not only in the religious field but also in the revolutionary field. Look at what happened when the Leninist party became closed. But in the beginning it was not at all closed. It was something completely open to the situation, the newness, the movement, and so on. But there is never the pure opposition of universalism and separation because there is something like the becoming separate of a universalism.

JPS: How do you respond to Žižek's charge in *The Ticklish Subject* that religion tacitly operates for you as a *fifth* generic procedure (in addition to politics, art, science, and love) that occupies a privileged position in relation to the other four because it "gives body to the generic as such"? (144)

AB: I think that it is a question of published books. The English translations of my work appear in a certain order: first, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, second, *Ethics*, and third, *Saint Paul*. But the fundamental book, *Being and*

Event, is not yet translated. So we have an isolated reading of my work in which my clearest example of a truth procedure is religious. From this it is assumed that it is only in religion that we can find something like a generic assertion. But this is not true. I find in the religious example not really an example of truth but an example of something like a non-philosophical conception of truth. For Paul the distinction is the distinction between the philosophical point of view and something else. This something else is not a new type of truth (as Žižek appears to say), but a new way of conceiving truth that is explicitly opposed to the Greek philosophical tradition.

I read Paul not at all as a philosopher but as a new experience of what is probably something like a truth. And so Paul is not at all in the same field as my examples of truths in politics, art, science and love. Religion is simply not in the same field. There is something in my friend Slavoj's consideration that is not completely precise because the comparison is not between political revolutions, artistic creations, new theories of science, new experiences of love, and Paul. The comparison is between philosophy and Paul; that is, between my conception of truth and the Pauline conception of truth. So religion does not make a fifth on the list of politics, science, art and love. We cannot say that Paul occupies a privileged position any more than Plato, Hegel, Kierkegaard, or Pascal. I make some comparisons between Paul and Nietzsche or between Paul and Pascal because Nietzsche and Pascal are also on the borderline of philosophy, somewhere between philosophy and anti-philosophy. So there is no body of the generic as such to be found in Paul, though there is a theory of the universal address of a truth. My reading of Paul is that he offers a new conception of truth in general. He offers to us a formal conception of truth.

JPS: In general, what do you take to be the decisive difference between your position and Žižek's?

AB: The difference between my position and Žižek's is a very complex question. Sometimes I am very near to Žižek, sometimes I am not exactly in agreement. I think, in fact, that our projects are not the same.

I think that the brilliant work of Žižek is something like the creation of a conceptual matrix that has the power to shed new light on a great field of cultural facts: movies, books, sexual differences, sexual practices, psychoanalysis, and so on. And so I read Žižek as a strange and completely new composition, the composition of a conceptual nucleus between Lacan and German Idealism. He is an absolutely singular unification of Lacan and Kant, Schelling, and Hegel. With this sort of conceptual nucleus, with this conceptual matrix, Žižek can interpret anything in the world. You can ask him, 'What do you think about this horrible movie?' And he will have a brilliant interpretation that is much better than the actual movie because his conceptual matrix is very strong and very convincing.

That is, in my opinion, why Žižek is not exactly in the field of philosophy, but in the field of a new topology, a new topology for the interpretation of concrete facts in a situation, political events and so on. Though, here, I mean interpretation not in the hermeneutic sense, but in the psychoanalytic sense. Žižek offers us something like a general psychoanalysis, a psychoanalysis that exceeds the question of clinics and becomes an absolutely general psychoanalysis. This is the first time that anyone has proposed to psychoanalyze our whole world.

My work is ultimately much more classical. It belongs to the field of philosophy, to the field of ontological propositions, and concerns a theory of the relation between truth and the subject. So my fundamental concerns are things like being *qua* being, the event, the subject, truth, and the distinction between constructed multiplicities and generic

multiplicities. My work is systematic philosophy in the great tradition of systematic philosophy that stretches from Plato to today.

JPS: Jacques Derrida, despite his professed atheism, has, over the past 15 years, attracted a great deal of attention from religious thinkers who have gone on to adopt many of his positions while remaining expressly theistic. When you participate in conferences such as this ["Saint Paul among the Philosophers," Syracuse University, April 2005], do you feel nervous about a similar kind of religious co-opting of your work, an adoption that wouldn't take the apparent necessity of your own atheism seriously?

AB: I don't feel nervous, but the religious co-opting of my work exists. It exists, however, for profound reasons. It is not only the result of my reference to Paul. It exists because when your work concerns the relation between truth and an event you are necessarily exposed to a religious interpretation. You cannot avoid it. You are exposed because you are no longer confined to the strictly empirical or ontological field. You cannot reduce truth to grammatical correctness or to an experimental correlation between languages and facts. You have to understand that there is something in the becoming of a truth that exceeds the strict possibilities of the human mind. There is something in truth that is beyond our immediate capacities. In a new truth there is something that is beyond the established differences between languages and facts. This is what the example of Galileo shows us. So there is always somebody with religious convictions who is saying, 'I am interested in your work because of your correlation of something like a radical event, a newness of life, with truth.'

And so I have to deal with this sort of religious co-opting of my work and I have to propose a subtraction of my work from it. But I accept the discussion. I accept the discussion because I think that in the present

world the great and fundamental problem is not between the religious way and the non-religious way. Certainly, it is, finally, very important, but it is not our principal problem. We know that today there is religious conviction that takes the way of sacrifice, religious conviction in the way of enjoyment, and religious conviction in a third way. So we can see that the distinction between religious conviction and non-religious conviction does not determine the

topology of our world. We are not in the same position as in previous centuries. Today, religious conviction is important, but it is not the central problem. The world cannot be divided into the religious and the non-religious. So the discussion is, for me, a positive discussion.

*Transcribed and edited for fluency
by Adam S. Miller.*