At the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, Continental philosophers have turned toward the first-century letters of Paul preserved in the New Testament as a resource for thinking about the question of the political in the contemporary moment. This trajectory of Paul’s political afterlife begins with Jacob Taubes’s 1987 Heidelberg lectures on “the political theology of Paul.”1 It resurfaces a few years later in philosopher Alain Badiou’s 1997 reading of Paul as “the poet-thinker of the event” and inventor of a universalism that makes possible a subject “devoid of all identity.”2 Three years later, in a millennial year, Giorgio Agamben published his homage to Taubes, situating Paul as a precursor to Walter Benjamin, with whom he shares an obsession over messianic time.3 Meanwhile, the philosophers’ turn to Paul has itself generated a massive cottage industry of commentary, and “political theology” has emerged as a preeminent theoretical category in the first decade of the twenty-first century.4

Producing readings that are intentionally thematic, focused, and partial, these philosophers work in a mode that is neither traditionally exegetical nor concerned with historically contin-
gent questions. That is, their methods are unencumbered by the customary practices of the field of biblical studies and shaped far more by the philosophical lineages in which the authors locate themselves. Their readings are also deeply self-conscious, even personal. But is there something more to these readings than their remaking of Paul’s letters into a sort of philosophical Rorschach test? Is there something beyond a nostalgia for biblical origins afoot in Paul’s resurrection into a series of philosophical afterlives?

Moreover, if these Western philosophical appropriations of Paul represent one kind of decentering of biblical reading (away from exegesis and history), how do they line up next to another kind of radical decentering: the refocusing of Christianity itself away from its traditional Western orientation in a turn to the global South? Both phenomena require one to account differently for the history of interpretation (whose readings count? on what claims or authorities are they based? what textual practices are legitimate, and who or what is the source of that legitimation? what relationships of responsibility exist between the reader and the text’s legacies?) and the history of Christianity itself (whose topography is radically recontoured when “global” history trumps the history of “the West”). The critique of historical criticism that has characterized the last three decades of biblical scholarship in the Western academy has perhaps run its course and, in the process, arrived at multiple possible horizons, among them the decoupling of biblical interpretation from its own history in the interpretive practices of European philosophers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the irrelevance of that history for the Christian communities of the global South, which bring their own interpretive frameworks, historical legacies, and theoretical/theological investments.

Whose politics? one might ask. Whose universalism or theology? Or, indeed, whose Christianity?, a tradition whose contemporary iterations serve simultaneously as a rich resource for imagining social change and a foundation for intense religious/affective fervor and social conservatism. The “Christianity” that emerges here is not a stable and unified tradition but a complex and often contradictory expression of competing commitments and practices. As European (and American) thinkers seek to develop a coherent genealogy of Paulinism (following Taubes), the multiplicities and incoherencies and effervescences of Christianity on the ground seem to have a quite different agenda altogether. So, what conversation is possible? And who will set its terms?

My purpose is not to make a simple comparison. I want rather to con-
sider how, in these different engagements with biblical texts, text and temporality, materiality and authority, disciplinary practices and intellectual/religious lineages are variously constituted. As a consequence, I will focus less on the content of the philosophical arguments under consideration than on how they are staged, for and to whom they attempt to speak, and within which disciplinary and methodological regimes they operate.7 My efforts to suggest lines of engagement between the philosophical project, biblical studies, and global Christianity are merely suggestive and by no means definitive. It is simply a place to start.

Jacob Taubes and Thinking Apocalyptically from Below

Today I see that a Bible lesson is more important than a lesson on Hegel. A little late. I can only suggest that you take your Bible lessons more seriously than all of philosophy. But I know I won’t get anywhere with that, it isn’t modern. Of course, I never wanted to be modern, that wasn’t my problem.
—Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul

Who has determined the values of the Occident . . . more deeply than Paul?
—Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul

The Political Theology of Paul is a posthumous redaction of a series of lectures that Jacob Taubes gave in Heidelberg in 1987. At the outset, Taubes offers an autobiographical reflection on his sense of the pressing character of time: “When I accepted this invitation, I did not have the idea of being so ‘pressed for time’ [die Zeit so drängt],” he writes. “I was thinking more of apocalyptic time pressure, but did not know that time was pressing so personally, that is, because of an incurable illness” (Political, 1; Politische, 9). Having been invited to lecture on 1 Corinthians, Taubes announces, “since I now know that time presses more for me than it does in general for us all,” he will abandon 1 Corinthians and “take up something that is a more secret concern [ein geheimeres Anliegen] of mine,” Paul’s letter to the Romans (Political, 1; Politische, 9).

Taubes’s sense of urgency emerges from this doubled sense of compressed time, his desire to respond to the apocalyptic claims of his interlocutor, the conservative legal theorist Carl Schmitt, and his sense of the
closeness of the end of his own life. Bemoaning the isolation of the fields of philosophy and theology—“I think the isolation of the theology departments is disastrous,” he writes in the introduction (Political, 4)—he goes on to argue for an intersectional engagement between the reading of biblical texts and the philosophical project. Later, he lays claim to the status of “historian of religion, and not a theologian” (ibid., 40), a disciplinary self-positioning that allows him to see things that, apparently, the theologians cannot see. He is also stridently dismissive of biblical scholarship—“Modern Biblical criticism, however, beginning with Spinoza, . . . I have no use for it,” he writes (ibid., 44). Taubes’s rejection of the project of biblical criticism post-Spinoza is, in some measure, a religious objection, insofar as he views the Enlightenment project of modern biblical interpretation as a historically reductive, literalist project divorced from the context of religious community and the history of religious interpretation. Yet it possesses a certain resonance for those in biblical studies who have for several decades pointed out the limits and limitations of historical criticism and sought to remake the field, often with literary theory operating as a decompression chamber of a sort.

In the process of his critique, Taubes makes a striking detour back through the history of interpretation, lifting up allegory—that ancient interpretive practice at once powerful and unpredictable, sidelined since the Reformation—and making a sweeping claim for its interconnectedness with the spirit-filled, the pneumatic: “the link of the pneumatic as life experience with allegorical textual experience” (ibid., 44). In the midst of an apocalyptic reading, Taubes stages a reaching back across time to a lost art, the art of reading otherwise or from another place. The pneumatic, a breeze that blows through the letters of Paul, alights in Taubes’s text. And yet, it is crucial to remember that Taubes’s reading of Paul is set very specifically within a debate with Schmitt’s political theology. Just so, Taubes puts it pointedly in the first appendix to The Political Theology of Paul: “You see now what I want from Schmitt—I want to show him that the separation of powers between worldly and spiritual is absolutely necessary. This boundary, if it is not drawn, we will lose our Occidental breath. This is what I wanted to impress upon him against his totalitarian concept” (ibid., 103). The pneumatic is something to think with, perhaps, but poses a critical danger at the level of the political.

Despite his brisk deposal of biblical criticism from Spinoza on forward, Taubes at the same time evinces a level of humility at the beginning of the
lectures, observing that, in coming to Heidelberg, he has come to a center of New Testament scholarship (ibid., 2). He goes on to tell an anecdote of an epistolary encounter, followed by a personal encounter, with Schmitt. The conversations that took place afterward “were conducted under a priestly seal,” writes Taubes. “Not that I’m a priest, but there are things one has to treat like a priest” (Political, 2). According to the account, the two men then went and read Romans 9–11 together, and Schmitt concluded this conversation with the insistence: “Taubes, before you die, you must tell some people about this” (ibid., 3). Taubes goes on to say that this is how he came to write about Romans, “as a Jew and not as a professor” (ibid.).

There may be some false modesty in Taubes’s assertion that he reads and writes about Romans “as a Jew and not as a professor,” insofar as he brings a focused erudition to the project. His reading travels through the Talmud to Benjamin, Nietzsche, and Freud, arriving at Freud ultimately as the one who “enters into the role of Paul” and who brings into the picture an entire theory of culture (ibid., 95). This movement from the first century to the twentieth, from Jewish apocalyptic to the Jewish science (psychoanalysis), places Paul in quite a different trajectory from the one frequently assigned him by Christian interpreters. By contrast, Taubes adds his voice to a chorus of interpreters who have insisted that Paul be understood as a Jewish thinker, one undermining the customary identity markers of social difference (though not, perhaps, eradicating them altogether—pace Badiou) in light of the messianic logic of his eschatological moment.

Taubes’s approach is methodologically fluid, and he inserts numerous asides into his commentary to situate himself vis-à-vis his subject: referring to himself at various points in the text as “poor Job” (ibid., 3, 4, 52) but also as “little Jacob Taubes” (ibid., 11), as a historian of religion rather than a theologian, as a philosopher, as a nonauthority yet as someone who “pays my dues to scholarship” (ibid., 16–17), as one whose interpretation (at a particular juncture) owes nothing to “literary exegesis” but instead is grounded in “a historical, concrete memory” (ibid., 18), as a resister of anachronism—that “ruin of any venture into sensible textual study” (ibid., 21)—as one “embarrassed [in the presence of renowned biblical scholars] . . . to be practicing exegesis” (ibid., 27), as a mocker of French scholarship (ibid., 45–46), as Schmitt’s interlocutor (ibid., 51), and so on. Overarching in his self-presentation is his vision of himself acting “as a Jew and not as a professor” (ibid., 3) whose project he puts in these terms: “This is the point at which little Jacob Taubes comes along and enters into the business.
ness of gathering the heretic back into the fold, because I regard him—this is my own personal business—as more Jewish than any Reform rabbi, or any Liberal rabbi, I ever heard in Germany, England, America, Switzerland, or anywhere” (ibid., 11). Later in the book, at the end of his discussion of Nietzsche, Taubes says of himself, “Now I of course am a Paulinist, not a Christian, but a Paulinist” (ibid., 88).

For scholars of the New Testament, in some sense there is nothing particularly novel about placing Paul in the context of first-century Judaism, and a scholarly consensus about doing so emerged well before Taubes’s Heidelberg seminar—reaching back to W. D. Davies’s *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* and E. P. Sanders’s *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and anticipating Daniel Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. But Taubes did not perform his lectures for New Testament scholars but rather for “an illustrious circle of scholars and artists” (*Political*, 2), heirs to a particular narrative about the Western philosophical canon, a narrative that routinely posits Paul as the creator of “universal Christianity” over against “ethnically particular Judaism,” a narrative that renders Paul as one of the fathers of Christianity and reads him backward through the lenses of the Protestant Reformation.

And so, as Taubes’s unpacking of Paul’s letter to the Romans goes forward, he works by way of a series of strongly worded theses. In the first instance, and most important for his overall argument, Taubes asserts, “my thesis is that . . . the Epistle to the Romans is a political theology, a political declaration of war on the Caesar” (ibid., 16). From this foundational claim emerges a series of others. Some theses will be historical: “my thesis is that the Gentiles whom Paul made into Christians were originally recruited from these sebomenoi [god-fearers] and that only later did other Gentiles join” (ibid., 20). Others are interpretive and focused specifically on the vexing problem of the law in Paul: “I want now to present this thesis, that the concept of law—and this again is political theology—is a compromise formula for the Imperium Romanum” (ibid., 23) and “this is why—and this now is my thesis—the critique of law is a critique of a dialogue that Paul is conducting not only with the Pharisees—that is, with himself—but also with his Mediterranean environment” (ibid., 25). Still others grow out of a history-of-religions sensibility that looks for repetitions, genealogies, and realignments of old figures and frameworks in new contexts: “now it is my thesis that the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, whose status in the Jewish calendar is the same as your Christmas, translates this contro-
versy between God and Moses into ritual” (ibid., 32); “my thesis is that Paul understands himself as outbidding Moses” (ibid., 39); and “the Paul-Moses comparison is forced by Paul himself. My thesis thus implies that Christianity has its origin not properly in Jesus but in Paul” (ibid., 40).

One can see how Taubes’s method operates to “bring the heretic back into the fold.” Positioning Paul in a clear historical-symbolic lineage with Moses, situating him within the historical framework of first-century Roman imperial domination, the legal and political dimensions of the Paulinist critique emerge to the full. So much for theses in The Political Theology of Paul; everything else is a gloss.

Paul’s declaration of war on Rome, as Taubes would have it, is predicated on the inversion or transvaluation of values that resides at the heart of Paul’s message. This transvaluation has its roots in the ordinary illogic of the crucifixion narrative, in which the purported messiah is executed in the most ignominious fashion available to Roman imperial authorities. “This is a total and monstrous inversion of the values of Roman and Jewish thought,” Taubes says. “The faith in this defamed son of David becomes an equivalent for all—now we’re speaking in Pauline terms—works . . . . the internal logic of events demanded a faith that is paradoxical, that is contradicted by the evidence” (ibid., 10).

For Taubes, it is precisely this transvaluation of values in the historical context of first-century Roman imperial domination that should make Paul the hero of Nietzsche’s story since “what Nietzsche discovered in Paul, the genius of the transvaluation of values, is contained precisely in the critique of the concept of law” (ibid., 26). The result is what Taubes’s commentators call “negative political theology,” an “unhinging” of the worldly order altogether and the undermining of the law as an “ordering power.”

The disruption of values and the critique of the law create, then, an opportunity for the reconstitution of the social in relation to God: “This is no blood kinship, but a kinship of the promise! . . . For Paul, the task at hand is the establishment and legitimation of a new people of God” (ibid., 28), a task that Taubes sees accomplished in Romans 9–11. Throughout, Taubes goes to great lengths to elaborate the view that the new people of God is an extension and expansion of the old category, not its cancellation.

Taubes speaks out of a sense of personal urgency—he is speaking and writing against time, suffering from a terminal illness. But there are other registers of urgency operating in the text as well: political, philosophical, even theological urgencies. For his argument engages with temporality,
figured apocalyptically, in an effort to interrupt a historical trajectory of interpretation that resolves/dissolves Paul’s Jewishness into a ready-made Christianity. Although the word *antisemitism* only appears three times in Taubes’s book (ibid., 51, 91, 105), he is nevertheless deeply concerned with its theological, intellectual, and political effects. By seeking to coax Paul the Jewish heretic back into the fold, Taubes lays claim to the politically destabilizing quality of Paul’s apocalyptic, its disruptive potential.

**Alain Badiou and Secular Universalism**

Basically, I have never really connected Paul with religion.
—Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*

Taubes reads Paul as a Jew. Alain Badiou, by contrast, undertakes his reading from a decidedly secular and purportedly disinterested place, the letters understood not as scripture but as classic text. “I have always read the epistles the way one returns to those classic texts with which one is particularly familiar; their paths well worn, their details abolished, their power preserved. No transcendence, nothing sacred, perfect equality of this work with every other, the moment it touches me personally” (*SP*, 1). Again, a personal project.

Badiou’s interest in Paul is not to situate him in a historical context but through him to make a much broader and historically noncontingent argument about the event, the subject, and universalism: “What is essential for us is that this paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support provides the foundation for the possibility of a universal teaching within history itself. Paul’s unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class” (ibid., 5).

Where does the urgency of Badiou’s argument come from? At one level, he seems to be worried about or, perhaps put better, annoyed by the emergence, post-1968, of identity politics. “All access to the universal, which neither tolerates assignation to the particular, nor maintains any direct relation with the status—whether it be that of dominator or victim—of the *sites* from which its proposition emerges, collapses when confronted with this intersection between culturalist ideology and the ‘victimist’ conception of
man” (ibid., 6). For him, such politics are simply the flip side of global capitalism: “On the one hand, there is an extension of the automatisms of capital, fulfilling one of Marx’s inspired predictions: the world finally configured, but as a market, as a world-market. . . . On the other side, there is a process of fragmentation into closed identities, and the culturalist and relativist ideology that accompanies this fragmentation” (SP, 9–10).

But how does Paul help with this? By repeating an early Christian baptismal formula in Galatians 3:28—“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female”—a phrase Badiou quotes but omits the final clause of the sentence: “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (SP, 9). There is an important clue here to Badiou’s mode of operation: by deracinating the baptismal formula from its ritual context and, indeed, from its messianic setting, the noncontingent universalism that is the touchstone of Badiou’s argument remains unproblematically intact.

Badiou goes out of his way to let his readers know that he is not reading from the perspective of religion: in particular, he introduces the specter of genetic predisposition, describing himself as “irreligious by heredity,” and the authority of his familial orientations—secular, schoolteacher grandparents who encouraged in him “the desire to crush the clerical infamy” (SP, 1). At the same time, though, he (like Taubes and Agamben) feels compelled to assert the authority of his reading by laying claim to a scholarly apparatus: an established text (the critical edition of Eberhard Nestle and Kurt and Barbara Aland), a good French translation (by Louis Segond), and two scholarly books “for further reading” (Stanislas Breton’s Saint Paul and Günther Bornkamm’s Paul): “A Catholic, a Protestant. May they form a triangle with the atheist” (ibid., 2–3). This figure of the triangle constituted by Catholic, Protestant, and atheist is a confounding detail in Badiou’s efforts to establish his authority to enter into the conversation about Paul. He has “never really connected Paul with religion” (ibid., 1), and yet the three interpretive subject positions he invokes are themselves religious subject positions. They seem moreover to cover, for Badiou, the relevant interpretive terrain, producing an oddly parochial effect in Badiou’s grand defense of universalism and its capacity to render all differences irrelevant.

These moves toward establishing authority outside the framework of Christianity, to read Paul with authority from outside—outside the disciplines of theology or biblical studies, outside the frame of religion itself—are striking: who does Badiou worry is policing these boundaries? And
what of his construction of an identity outside of the communitarian grasp, both in general and for that of Christianity? Is there, in other words, ever a subject-without-identity, as Badiou would like, a view-from-nowhere where he might perch?

An especially troubling aspect to Badiou’s method for reading involves his predisposition to superimpose his one-size-fits-all “event” on everything he sees. Once he has declared Paul the poet-thinker of the event, all the elements of the archive must line up with this characterization. Just so, in his discussion of the Jerusalem conference (a meeting narrated in both Acts and Paul’s letter to the Galatians), Badiou appears to be reporting the historical facts of the matter but ends up trafficking in hoary old clichés about the “Judeo-Christians” who are strictly observant and who misunderstand the “postevental imperative of truth” by which the Christ event renders the law a matter of indifference (ibid., 22–23). But then, he shifts gears: “The debate, philosophically reconstructed, bears upon three concepts: interruption (what does an event interrupt, what does it preserve?); fidelity (what is it to be faithful to an evental interruption?); and marking (are there visible marks or signs of fidelity?). The fundamental interrogation is crystallized at the intersection of these three concepts: Who is the subject of the truth procedure?” (ibid., 23). In this paragraph Badiou’s approach to the text is itself crystallized: the event is the lone theoretical optic through which the text may be read, and so, we cannot be surprised that it emerges centrally in Paul’s argument. Badiou’s postevental Paulinism has quite a bit in common with a long tradition of writing the history of early Christianity as a series of radical breaks and decisive historical shifts, placing “the parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity in the mid-first century and imagining these two complex, overlapping, and interwoven religious worlds transformed into separate spheres by mere force of philosophical argument.

Given Badiou’s insistence on the universality of postevental Paulinism, it is not surprising perhaps that he takes fundamental issue with the prospect that Paul is talking straightforwardly about ethnicity or social differences when he speaks of the ethnē (translated sometimes as “Gentiles” or the “nations”). Badiou is troubled by the repeated formulation—“Jews and Greeks”—observing rather positivistically that there are far more groups or “nations” than these populating the Roman Empire. His solution is to posit that Paul is saying something else by his repeated reference to “the Jews” and “the Greeks”:
In reality, “Jew” and “Greek” are subjective dispositions. More precisely, they refer to what Paul considers to be the two coherent intellectual figures of the world he inhabits, or what could be called regimes of discourse. When theorizing about the Jew and the Greek, Paul is in fact presenting us with a schema of discourses. And this schema is designed to position a third discourse, his own, in such a way as to render its complete originality apparent. (SP, 40–41)

He goes on:

What then is Greek discourse? The subjective figure constituted by it is that of the wise man. . . . Greek discourse is cosmic, deploying the subject within the reason of a natural totality. . . . Jewish discourse is a discourse of exception, because the prophetic sign, the miracle, election, designate transcendence as that which lies beyond the natural totality. The Jewish nation itself is at once sign, miracle, and election. It is constitutively exceptional. (ibid., 41)

Whereas Taubes’s vision of Paul’s transvaluation of all values, including ethnic difference, involves the extension of the category of the “people of God,” Badiou recycles here an old (and, some would say, pernicious) trope concerning the Greek universal and the Jewish exception. In the process, despite his claims to an interpretive position outside of religion altogether, Badiou nevertheless manages to reproduce a theory of Christian supercessionism, even if he does so outside the frame of Christianity’s historic relationship to Judaism. Moreover, Paul ends up underwriting Badiou’s own suspicions of identity politics and the politics of difference: “Paul’s unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class” (ibid., 5). What we have in Badiou is far less an interpretation of a text than a projection of the interpreter, a kind of philosophical feedback loop.

Badiou frets over the politics of difference, and Paul did too. Most distressing, however, Badiou’s rendering of Paul as both a worrier over difference and the poet-thinker of the event manages to recycle some of the most pernicious effects of Christian theology in its relationship to Judaism. At the same time, Badiou’s universalism bears an oddly parochial cast, with its insistence that the politics of difference serve only the unsatisfiable appetites of capital and that differences themselves are simply symptomatic, with the letters of Paul serving as touchstones and prooftexts.
Giorgio Agamben and the Structure of Messianic Time

What does it mean to live in the Messiah, and what is the messianic life? What is the structure of messianic time?

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*

Whereas universalism, the subject without identity, and truth beyond the communitarian grasp frame Badiou’s reading of Paul, for Agamben, the central trope of Romans resides in the figure of the *christos*, the messiah. As he states explicitly in the first sentence of the book, “This seminar proposes to restore Paul’s Letters to the status of the fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition” (*Time*, 1). Paying a debt to Taubes, Agamben argues that the messianic has been effectively suppressed in Paul’s letters by means of “complicity between Church and Synagogue” in an effort “to cancel out or at least mute Paul’s Judaism . . . to expunge it from its originary messianic context” (ibid., 2). Dedicated in its entirety to Taubes’s memory, *The Time That Remains* can be read as an extended gloss on *The Political Theology of Paul*.

Agamben’s method involves a close reading of the first ten words of Paul’s letter to the Romans, a passage that he posits contains the entirety of the text in itself (ibid., 6). The approach is simultaneously philological and idiosyncratic: by working word for word, even including an interlinear translation as an appendix to the book, Agamben suggests that he will extract a more accurate (messianic) meaning from the text, but his focus on the word at the expense of the phrase or the sentence, emphasizing semantics over rhetoric, can at times produce translations dependent on tortured syntax. Moreover, because he remains so committed to his interpretive framework as an apriorism in his reading of Romans, Agamben sometimes smooths out translational difficulties and downplays the full semantic range of certain important words, insisting that their meaning must derive from one genealogy (e.g., Hebrew precursors) over against others (e.g., common parlance or garden-variety administrative uses). Agamben’s philological method evinces a certain hard-headed rigor while resisting the prospect that textual ambiguities are part and parcel of the practice of interpretation. What is at stake for Agamben in these efforts to control the text through philological policing?

Agamben’s argument consists of several overarching and interwoven
theses, most critically this: Paul’s letter to the Romans is a messianic text. In a clear echo of Walter Benjamin, for Agamben, the messianic has to do with the temporal and functions as an interruption in ordinary time:

Messianic time is the time that time takes to come to an end, or, more precisely, the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time. This is not the line of chronological time (which was representable but unthinkable), nor the instant of its end (which was just as unthinkable); nor is it a segment cut from chronological time; rather, it is operational time pressing within the chronological time, working and transforming it from within; it is the time we need to make time end; the time that is left us [il tempo che ci resta]. (Time, 67–68)

Thus, to live in messianic time is to live in what Agamben calls ho nyn kairos—the time of the now (ibid., 2, 61, 63, 65, 70, 74, 75, 78, 143). The existence of this quality of time produces for Agamben a recapitulation (ibid., 75–77) but also a reconfiguration of things—not Taubes’s transvaluation of value but a disruption of conventional understanding. Therefore, on Agamben’s reading, nomos (law in its abstracted sense) is to the gospel as laws (in their ordinary, juridical sense) are to the state of exception (ibid., 104–8). 18

Agamben, picking up on Taubes’s apocalypticism from below, reads messianic time in Paul’s exhortations in 1 Corinthians 7 for his community to live hōs mē, “as if not,” that is, to live in the suspended state of urgency that awaits the end. More traditional interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7 will focus on the apocalyptic expectations that would have Paul, as a historical figure, frame his ethical exhortations to his followers in eschatological terms: live as if the culmination of history were just around the corner. 19 (Agamben, for all his attention to philology, seems somewhat tone-deaf to the subjunctive mood implied by hōs mē, the full implications of its capacity to express a condition contrary to fact remaining off-limits to him.) Yet for Agamben, the matter is not so much one of ethical exhortation than the effort to use messianic time as a meaning-installing gloss on historical time, to insist on the messianic vocation as “the revocation of every vocation” (Time, 23), and to assert the erasure of identity embedded in the messianic sensibility.

This impulse toward turning things over, toward erasure, toward radical suspension that Agamben hears ringing through Paul’s letters has important resonances with Taubes’s reading. Meanwhile, in a direct attack on
Badiou’s reading of Paul as the founder of universalism, Agamben takes the opposite tack. Badiou argues, “Paul demonstrates in detail how a universal thought, proceeding on the basis of the worldly proliferation of alterities . . . produces a Sameness and an Equality. . . . The production of equality and the casting off, in thought, of differences are the material signs of the universal” (SP, 109). By contrast, Agamben posits a radical system of division and “division of divisions” that “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” (Time, 51). In Agamben’s reading, it is not only time that remains but also the remainder or the remnant produced by the process of division—an excess, a “not-all,” a messianic remnant existing (for Paul, according to Agamben) in “the messianic now” (ibid., 55).

Agamben’s reading of Paul, while staged in the frame of the philological and exegetical, is also structured in a sense biblically: The Time That Remains seminar takes place over six days, echoing the six days of creation, and culminates in what Agamben calls the “threshold or tornada,” a poetical term for the verbal and thematic recapitulation that follows the six highly structured stanzas of a sestina (ibid., 78–87). The structure of time and the structure of the argument itself anticipate the in-breaking of the messianic, offered up by Agamben as a political alternative to historical time. Here again, we hear an echo of Benjamin, who inhabits the tornada that closes Agamben’s reading of Paul and, indeed, who literally has the last word in Agamben’s seminar.

The Philosophers’ Paul and Global Christianity:
Some Preliminary Reflections

How, then, to think about this turn among some Continental philosophers to the letters of Paul alongside the emergence of something called “global Christianity”? It is too simple to divide the terrain along geographical lines (Europe v. the global South) or disciplinary boundaries (philosophy v. anthropology) or lines of religiosity or secularism (belief v. rational detachment/engagement) and so on. Primarily, I have tried to imagine Taubes, Badiou, and Agamben in the same room with the people whose engagements with the Bible and reading habits are described in a work like Philip Jenkins’s The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South. What would the conversation sound like? Along what axes would it be plotted?
Jenkins offers a few suggestive snapshots of how Paul comes to be read in the Christian global South, and although these images do not map simply or straightforwardly onto the interventions of the European philosophers reading Paul, there are some striking resonances. One might think, for example, about the reactivation of the practice of allegory in both Taubes’s interpretation of Paul and a variety of postcolonial contexts. Recall that Taubes makes a particular analogy when discussing allegory: making a link between the pneumatic, the spirit-filled, and the allegorical: “the link of the pneumatic as life experience with allegorical textual experience” (Political, 44). Paul emerges as an allegorist in Taubes’s reading of him, and Taubes thereby pulls a late ancient and medieval textual practice into his late-twentieth-century context. Meanwhile, the story of Paul in the New Testament and the arguments Paul makes in Romans and Galatians become themselves the textual basis for the allegorical interpretation of the contemporary Christian situation in postcolonial contexts. Most often, this allegorical method produces a scriptural foundation for making an argument about the life of Christian communities. So, for example, just as ethnicity and culture were not barriers to conversion in the early Christian church, according to both Paul and Acts, just so, such barriers ought not to stand between potential converts in the present and full membership in the church. In terms of contemporary Christian interpretation of these ancient texts, old ethnic identities stand in for current ones. As Jenkins reports, “Just as Greeks and Romans did not have to be Judaized to receive salvation, ‘so also should the Igbo not be Europeanized or Americanized by the missionary message in order to be saved.’”

Likewise, the structures of opposition generated by Paul’s rhetoric (and highlighted for historically noncontingent purposes by the philosophers) can become a fruitful resource for Christian interpreters in the global South as they enter into institutional battles with their northern and Western coreligionists. The contestations within the Anglican communion over homosexuality are a case in point: mobilizing Paul’s construction of the conflicts in the Corinthian church as between those who are adepts in the wisdom of the world and those who embrace a godly foolishness, Anglican bishops in Nigeria have rendered liberal coreligionists in the West as figures for those who possess pride in wisdom in the first-century Corinthian community.

With countless examples of this sort of allegorical engagement, one could argue that a fluid allegory functions as the dominant mode of inter-
pretation in global Christian contexts across the political terrain, from left-leaning liberation theologies to conservative evangelical and Pentecostal movements. This mode of allegorization is made possible, in part, by a particular attunement to apocalyptic—a heightened sense of living in what Agamben would call “messianic time”—that governs much of contemporary Christianity across a wide swath, both North and South. In such a context, the current historical situation and the archaic biblical past are not separated by a great and unbridgeable divide. Rather, one temporality inflects the other, and time expands and collapses concertina-style, always caught in the structure of already-not-yet.

Of course, apocalyptic thinking is always double-edged, an observation that calls to mind Taubes’s critique of Schmitt as “ein Apokalyptiker der Gegenrevolution” (“an apocalyptic thinker of counterrevolution”) who “thinks apocalyptically, but from above, from the powers; I think from below.”24 Christianity of the Southern Hemisphere has itself a long history of thinking apocalyptically “from below.”25 The popularity and salience of the book of Revelation, read as protest literature and as anti-imperial imagining, in the context of liberation theology in Latin America and elsewhere, serves as one potent example of such apocalyptic thinking. Moreover, it is certainly not mere happenstance that the famous 1985 theological manifesto against South African apartheid was called The Kairos Document,26 using the Greek word kairos (so important to Agamben’s notion of messianic time) to signal the singular importance of the historical moment when the churches came together to condemn state-sponsored white supremacy.

Another arena for reflecting further on the overlap between the philosophers’ readings of Paul and global Christianity might be to undertake a comparison of critical readings of specific texts. Taubes and Agamben, for example, offer opposing readings of Romans 13, the passage that begins, “Let every soul [person] be subject to the ruling powers” and goes on to argue that the rulers are owed obedience because they are appointed by God as God’s ministers [diakonoi, leitourgoi].27 Taubes links this passage to 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, where Paul urges the Christians of Corinth to live “as if not” because “the schema of this world is passing away.” Taubes concurs, “That’s absolutely right, I would give the same advice. Demonstrate obedience to state authority, pay taxes, don’t do anything bad, don’t get involved in conflicts, because otherwise it’ll get confused with some revolutionary movement, which, of course is how it happened . . . for heaven’s
sake, don’t stand out!” (Political, 54) By contrast, Agamben argues, “The only interpretation that is in no way possible is the one put forth by the Church . . . which states that there is no authority except from God, and that you should therefore work, obey, and not question your given place in society” (Time, 33). For Agamben, something is missing here, the very “as if not” through which Taubes reads the same passage: “What happens to the as not in all of this? Doesn’t the messianic vocation become reduced to a sort of mental reserve, or, in the best of cases, to a kind of Marranism [crypto-Judaism] ante litteram?” (Political, 33).

Romans 13 has a long and complex interpretive history, ranging from blanket assertions of its literal and universal applicability through highly nuanced and politically grounded counter-readings. The text was routinely used as a theological justification for apartheid in South Africa, and Christian resistance to the state’s imposition of a policy of white supremacy called for a contextual reading of Romans. Meanwhile, in Latin American contexts, where liberation theologies in the latter half of the twentieth century linked their exegesis to the preferential option for the poor, Romans 13 also called for a contextual reading that allowed for resistance to illegitimate authorities. With the rise of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in Latin America in recent decades, however, the effect of Romans 13 has been felt mostly in conservative ways. Yet, as one scholar exploring the shifting dynamics around race in Brazilian evangelical contexts notes, the evangelical predilection to take Romans 13 seriously has also lent authority to emerging antiracist projects among evangelicals, with the emergence of a different political context in Brazil and the state’s commitment to implementing resolutions from the 2001 Durban conference on racism. Jenkins, meanwhile, places the contemporary Christian concern over the text’s call for submission to ruling authorities in parts of the world where Christians live as minority communities, often in contexts of violence. He writes, “Christians living under repressive Muslim regimes . . . ask seriously whether the words of Romans 13 should apply to them, and at what point Christian submission should give place to the martial spirit of the Old Testament.” In seeking to cross borders between the philosophers’ readings of Paul and the scholarly study of global Christianity, given the centrality of political theology to the philosophical argument, one would be well served to approach questions of religion, secularity, and the state as potentially fruitful arenas of investigation.

An alternative approach would be more thematic, focusing on a trope
or image or concept found in both the philosophical readings of Paul, on the one hand, and in the lived worlds of global Christianity, on the other. For example, all three of the philosophers under discussion attend to the theme of spirit/breath (in Greek, \textit{pneuma}) in their readings of Paul. Even as each of these writers seeks, in his own fashion, to trouble the cliché that spirit has become in some Christian theologies—spirit standing in for the new, the impassible, the animating force of human life, and the opposite of flesh, of the old, the mortal, the deadening letter—one wonders how their readings of \textit{pneuma} would line up against examples drawn from the world of contemporary global Christianity. Two examples suggest the direction such work might take.

In his 2007 monograph, \textit{A Problem of Presence}, Matthew Engelke invites his readers into a sustained encounter with the Friday Apostolics, a small group of Zimbabwean Christians who describe themselves as “the Christians who do not read the Bible,” who instead receive the word of God “live and direct” from the Holy Spirit.\footnote{33} Dismissed by some other Zimbabwean Christians as “primitive” and “mad,” the Friday Apostolics nevertheless take their rightful place in a long historical lineage of Christians who have struggled over the materiality of writing and its capacity to mediate revelation. And whereas students of Christianity might be tempted initially to dismiss the Friday Apostolics as a heterodox aberration or ethnographic exception, Engelke challenges such facile responses by elegantly showing how this community articulates, embodies, and inhabits a complex postcolonial theoretical stance that one might characterize as a semiotics of immateriality. Along with this mode of signifying practice—one that is profoundly performative and embodied—comes a radical critique and rejection of the Bible as a material object, a thing that becomes “stale” and “falls apart,” a document transmitting the propaganda of Europeans, a dangerous artifact.

The spirit works in this context in a mode of radical immediacy, and as a consequence, it should perhaps be no surprise that the spirit of Paul himself makes an uncanny appearance in the midst of one Friday Apostolic community late in Engelke’s book. Godfrey Nzira is one of the critical figures in Engelke’s ethnography, a spiritual leader of the Apostolics who, when speaking as a prophet, goes by the name of Pageneck. As Engelke recounts the occasion, when a visitor from another group introduced himself at the beginning of a service, giving his name and announcing that he had come from another community in Hatcliffe, Pageneck responded dismissively: “I don’t have relationships with Galatians. I don’t eat with Gala-
tians.” In Engelke’s account of this moment, several witnesses expressed the view that Paul had spoken through the prophet, with Paul’s letter to the Galatians operating in the deep background of Pageneck’s rejection of the visitor from Hatcliffe. Remarkably, the critique of the Hatcliffe community’s failures, according to Pageneck, draws on a shared knowledge of Paul’s letter, even as the critique revolves around the Hatcliffe-Galatians’ inability to maintain a spiritual stance unmediated by (written?) proscriptions. As Engelke puts it, “The presence of the Bible is a precondition for its absence. . . . As a negative declaration, ‘We are the Christians who don’t read the Bible’ contains a dependency [that] . . . is always, in the end, there.”

The Friday Apostolics occupy an extreme end of the continuum along which the exploration of global Christianity’s engagement with the concept of “spirit” might be mapped. For if the Friday Apostolics position themselves and their religious practice as an unmediated, “live and direct” access to spirit, others embrace rather different strategies of theorization and mediation (and remediation) of the role of the spirit in their devotional lives. Take, for example, Marie José Alves de Abreu’s 2005 article on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement in Brazil. In this article, de Abreu focuses on the media-savvy efforts of Padre Marcelo Rossi, former bodybuilder and physical education teacher turned priest, to reorganize for his followers their notions of the universe, their own subjectivities, and their relationship to the spirit, using scripture as the template. For scripture to be the template for such a project is far from unusual, but Padre Marcelo’s techniques for achieving this reorganization of thought and self-understanding are. Blending traditional practices—the rosary cycle—with “pneumatic technologies” including his well-known “aerobics for Jesus,” Padre Marcelo establishes complex connections between technology and scripture, body performances and inspiration, his own star power and the remaking of subjectivities among his large numbers of followers.

Padre Marcelo’s pneumatic technologies and his ease with the practices of media emerged, as de Abreu explains, in a complex political and theological terrain: Padre Marcelo and his charismatic renewal movement, in contrast to Brazil’s strong tradition of liberation theology, insist that “spirituality and politics do not mingle” and turn to the New Testament story in which Jesus distinguishes between the things of God and the things of Caesar as a prooftext. The contrast is practical as well as metaphorical: the practices of liberation theology’s biblical interpretation are grounded in lived and temporal realities; those of the charismatic movement express
what de Abreu, following Gaston Bachelard, calls “the aerial imagina-
tion.”38 In a country where a Pentecostal conglomerate actually holds the
trademark on the word gospel,39 the traditional modes of thinking about
sacred texts—safely sequestered from media and market flows—are most
certainly left wanting.

Conclusion

The continuities between Continental philosophy’s fascination with the
letters of Paul and the emergence of something scholars and journalists
have come to call “global Christianity” are hardly straightfoward or exhaus-
tive. That said, the discontinuities and oblique ways in which the Euro-
pean philosophical texts and the lived reality of Christianity in the global
South overlap are nevertheless also informative. The methods of engage-
ment in these two quite distinct domains are obviously very different from
one another, and not only because of the insider/outsider dynamic put in
play by the philosophers themselves. Most striking for me, as I have tried
to read Taubes, Badiou, and Agamben in the political and intellectual con-
texts in which they operate, is how much their worlds comprise a narrow
swath of (the intellectual centers of) Europe and North America, even as
they seek to speak from outside the limits of time and place. Given this par-
tiality, one wonders whether the universalism attributed to Paul by these
thinkers extends fully to encompass the lived experiences of their global
others. What would happen if, for the purposes of experiment and analy-
sis, one deracinated Paul from the position in the history of ideas in the
West (where the philosophers are happy to plant him) and deposited him
in some completely other lineage, one recognizable to, say, the Friday Apos-
tolics of Engelke’s study or the Brazilian charismatics documented by de
Abreu? What would happen to the language of apocalyptic, messianism,
or univeralism in the process? And who would Paul be, under such newly
reframed circumstances?

Notes

1 Jacob Taubes, Die politische Theologie des Paulus: Vorträge, gehalten an der Forschungsstätte
der evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft in Heidelberg, 23.-27. Februar 1987, ed. Aleida As-
mann et al. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1993), hereafter cited parenthetically by page num-
ber as Politische; and Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, trans. Dana Hollander
(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), hereafter cited parenthetically by page
number as Political.


10 Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, Aleida Assmann, and Jan Assmann, “Afterword,” in The Political Theology of Paul, 122; see also 130, 134, 139.

11 Or a little later on: “What is the real unifying factor behind this attempt to promote the cultural virtue of oppressed subsets, this invocation of language in order to extol communitarian particularisms (which, besides language, always ultimately refer back to race, religion, or gender)?” (SP, 6).

12 Because Badiou frames the issue in these terms, it is possible for him to critique the relation between the two domains and throw decorum to the wind as he makes his argument and mocks the always already aggrieved in the process: “What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge—taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities—of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a godsend! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth! ... identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market” (SP, 10).

13 Galatians 3:28 (Greek New Testament); all translations are my own. My translation of the Greek passage reflects the syntactical nonparallelism between “there is no male and female” and the two clauses that precede it (“there is neither Jew nor Greek,” “there is neither slave nor free”). Not only does Badiou omit the final phrase of the verse but he also omits the prior verse, which makes it clear that this paean to nondifferentiation occurs only under the aegis of baptism “into Christ” by those who have, as a consequence, “put on Christ” [as a garment].


15 The discussion of the punctuation and possible alternative translation of Romans 1:1 (Time, 6–7) is a case in point. The interlinear translation appears at 147–85. An interlinear translation provides a word-by-word translation of individual terms but cannot by its very nature attend to issues of syntax, grammar, and idiom.

16 The most striking—and for Agamben’s argument, most important—translational problem involves the phrase mallon chrēsai in 1 Corinthians 7:21 (Time, 26). The verse reads: “If called as a slave, let it not be a care to you [or never mind]. But if you are able to become free, mallon chrēsai.” The phrase mallon chrēsai can be translated either “make the most of [something], take advantage of [something]” or “be all the more useful”—that is, “work that much harder” or, more colloquially, “make the best of things.” The standard study of the phrase and its history of interpretation is S. Scott Bartchy, MALLON CHRēSAI: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973).

17 Agamben’s discussion of the term apostolos, conventionally translated “apostle,” illustrates this approach (Time, 59).

18 See also Gignac, “Taubes, Badiou, Agamben,” 191. Agamben puts it epigrammatically:

Agamben knows something of this reading of Paul, expressed through his discussion of Weber’s interpretation of the notion of “call” in Paul as “an expression of ‘eschatological indifference’” (Time, 22).

Agamben advocates for an “epistemological paradigm . . . that rhyme issues from Christian poetry as a metrical-linguistic transcodification of messianic time and is structured according to the play of typological relations and recapitulations evoked by Paul” (Time, 85).


Jenkins, New Faces, 150–53.


Romans 13:1–2, 4, 6.


34 Ibid., 195.

35 Engelke, Problem, 196–98, 198. In this section, Engelke also traces the authority claims of the prophet who, at points, speaks as the apostle Peter (ibid., 192).


37 Ibid., 333.

38 Ibid., 336.