

Sharing God with others or dividing God from powerlessness – a late-modern challenge by the heterotopian experience of the new Paul

by

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You may have seen this commercial with George Clooney on TV. In the video clip Clooney drinks a certain type of coffee which, in fact, doesn't taste very well but which gives you the impression that you get a flavour of him personally. In the clip, an attractive woman – in fact the actress Camilla Belle – approaches Clooney standing right by the coffee-machine where he sips a cup of coffee. And she says to him “Excuse me. I am sorry, do you mind if I am ...”. Clooney, of course, thinks that she wants to get an autograph after having recognized him. And so, he is searching for his pen but then he has to confess “I'm sorry I don't have a pen.” She looks pretty surprised and then she says “I just want a nespresso.” As soon as Clooney realizes that it's not him who is the real star on the scene, he sips again at his cup issuing the commercial's trailer: “Nespresso. What else?”

Clooney tunes this line with a sound of such a surprised deception that one is almost immediately inclined to give him merciful support for not being recognized as he deserves it. This is of course a very sophisticated advertisement. It plays with irony and with self-relativisation. And the irony of a relativity confessed by Clooney himself even increases his appeal as one of the most attractive men on Earth.

Looking to what has happened to Paul in the last two decades sometimes this George Clooney clip is crossing my mind. Christian theology – or at least Christian systematic theology – is standing since centuries in front of Paul and of course this theology thinks it's her who has the real say about Paul. Whoever wants to approach Paul has to deal with her positions like ‘Paul, the real inventor of Christian message about God’, ‘Paul, the founder of personal justification’, ‘Paul, the source for subjective sovereignty’. And it's these positions which really matter about Paul.

But now two very attractive ideas are approaching Paul and obviously they are not in favour of these ideas at all. They tell something about him that is a heavy relativization of what seemed to be obvious facts for which Christian systematic theology is claiming copyright. They demonstrate that these are no facts but fiction. The first attractive approach comes from exegesis and its new perspective on Paul demonstrates that even if he may have become a

Christian he certainly remained a Jew. And looking closer to this hypothesis one has to confess: “Paul, the Jew. What else?” The second attractive approach comes from contemporary philosophy and its dealings with Paul demonstrate how much his presentation of powerlessness is politically valid for subjects endangered by the fluidity and flexibility of late modernity we are going through. And looking closer to these philosophies opening up a new Paul never seen before one has to confess: “Paul, the political thinker of powerlessness. What else?”

But unfortunately Christian systematic theology is not George Clooney. It is not that attractive at all and nobody will book systematic theologians for a highly paid job in a commercial. So, it's pretty hard to answer to these relativizing views on the new Paul with irony and with a humorous understanding of faults concerning Paul's positions. They force to rethink basics in Christian convictions. But it seems to me that these relativities on Paul by the new perspective and by the new philosophies are unavoidable. The only task of systematic theology is to bring forward arguments which enable us to realize with affirmation and admiration these various ‘what else?’ But I hope, the flavour of the arguments will be better than Clooney's capsules of coffee.

1. The new perspective on Paul – a relativization of the faithful subject by justification of the relevant other

In exegetical contexts the new perspective on Paul is already very well known and thoroughly discussed.¹ Within systematic theology the picture is different. This is due to the fact that systematic discussions are in second row concerning biblical matters and so, they are always coming late. And it has something to do with the dispositions of discourse in relation to Paul. He is used as a representative figure for modern discourses in theology. This is the reason why the new perspective has triggered some discussion about Luther's ability to get a correct picture of Paul's intentions and theological issues.² Especially protestant systematic

¹ Cf. James Dunn's response to the complex variety of arguments in the debate “The New Perspective: whence, what and whither?” in *James Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005, 1-88. I also rely on: N.T. Wright, *Paul*. In *Fresh Perspective*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005.

² Michael Bachmann (Hg.), *Lutherische und neue Paulusperspektive. Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselproblem der gegenwärtigen exegetischen Diskussion*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005.

theologians are trying hard to prove that there are no misunderstandings of Paul in Luther's theology but that there is a basic misunderstanding of Luther by the new perspective.³

Continuity from Paul to Luther is much more than a hermeneutical question because the reformation's idea of justification has very much shaped modern civilization. It is not the question how much Luther representatives of the new perspective have read in their academic life but how stable the ground proves to be Luther has build his theology on. If this ground is a logical progress from the basic Christian narratives then the secular offspring of the modern idea about justification by faith alone do represent a culture which should be defended with all the power Christian religion is able to accumulate. One may theologially rethink the modern story shaped by the Reformation's interpretation of the Christian narratives if these narratives point to a different direction.

There is a question of power involved in this theological problem. It comes out of the grammar modern justification is built on. The use Luther made of Paul is the very source for important binary codes in modern life and these binary codes provide with power and divide power from powerlessness. In this sense, the new perspective on Paul effects more than purely exegetical problems. Its different view affects the platform on which modern life was built, the justification of the singular subject before God and in relation to social institutions, especially the Church. It would have an impact on the modern power structure if a discontinuity from Paul to Luther must be conceded. The binary codes of this structure would become fragile by that.

Luther's view on Paul's theological achievements has liberated the medieval world from an overwhelming divine power being a force constantly putting pressure on one's own personal life, on society and culture, on economy and politics. This has opened up the door to modernity in the sense that the single subject seized position after position which put it in the

³ Cf. Wilfried Härle, Paulus und Luther. Ein kritischer Blick auf die „New Perspective“, in: Spurensuche nach Gott. Studien zur Fundamentaltheologie und Gotteslehre, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008, 202-239 (also in: ZThK, 103 (2006), 362-393). Härle is challenging E.P. Sanders view on Luther and attacking it as a complete misconception in the very core of Luther's theology: „Anhand dieses Zusammenhangs zwischen Gerechtigkeit und Glauben macht Luther eine exegetische bzw. philologische Entdeckung von größter Bedeutung: Die Prämisse, von der er bei alledem ausgegangen war, nämlich sein Verständnis von ‚Gerechtigkeit Gottes‘ ist dem Text - ja dem ganzen biblischen Kanon - unangemessen. Mit dieser verkehrten Prämisse bricht aber das ganze schreckliche Gebäude von unerfüllbarer Forderung und gleichwohl bestehender Strafandrohung wie ein Kartenhaus in sich zusammen. Wenn Gottes Gerechtigkeit seine Barmherzigkeit ist, durch die er im Menschen Vertrauen weckt, dann ist nicht nur dieser Teufelskreis durchbrochen, sondern dann geschieht durch die Verkündigung des Evangeliums genau das, wozu das Gesetz - als Forderung und Drohung - nicht in der Lage war: Der Mensch kann und wird nun Gott und seinen Nächsten lieben, die Gebote erfüllen, weil er es nicht mehr aus Angst vor Strafe zu tun versucht, sondern aus Dankbarkeit für die ihm zuteilgewordene Barmherzigkeit Gottes tut. Bei allem Respekt: Diese Einsichten Luthers haben sich E. P. Sanders auch nicht von ferne erschlossen. Er sieht in Luther einen Menschen, der Schuld- und Gewissensprobleme hat und sich darum durch den Gedanken einer zugerechneten, fiktiven Gerechtigkeit eine Lösung zurechtlegt, an die er glauben kann, die ihm hilft, mit seinen Schuld- und Gewissensproblemen zu leben und die ihn doch nicht nötigt, sein Leben radikal zu ändern und am Willen Gottes auszurichten. Das alles hat mit Luther - klar und deutlich gesagt - nichts zu tun.“ (226/227)

very centre of life. A vision continuously looked realistic that the whole life of a person depends on the talents and decisions of his own or her own – no matter what circumstances of birth, family, ethnic context, culture, gender and age one is confronted with by existence. The justified subject got the chance of being master of the universe and in the process of modern civilizations mankind has taken this chance. The subject's mastership is built on a different knowledge about God's justice. This justice is full of fairness and it is not a demonstration of almightiness at the cost of the individual.

Here, God's power was transformed into a force for personal hope based on God's grace by and through faith in Christ. This has humanized God and it has modernized his power as a source of cultural progress. God is a power for progressing mankind's living conditions. His justice is not a force of checking men into very tight borders. There is a positive link between God's power and men's power - and finally women's power as well – in modern times. They depend on each other and human civilized culture is the locus where this interdependency can be experienced. This culture is not a religious one, it is a secular phenomenon and as more secular it is as more it is in the line of the interdependency of God and men. There is no religious precondition to keep this culture on a progressive track.

In the contrary, if God's power is proven to be an obstacle for the living conditions of mankind or of personal life then a person is set free to get rid of this power. A negative relation between God's power and human development is not on the agenda. Then God's power has to fade away.

If there is no such thing as self-salvation but nevertheless good reasons to hope for a final triumph of salvific history also in the case of one's own existence then one is set free to concentrate on earthly matters and to develop them to their very best. It is in God's will to discipline one's life for the sake of one's own existence. And it is certainly not God's will that one doesn't care for what will be this life's final result. This discipline is the essential tool of the subject's mastery and it is for the sake of one's own life and for the lives of others.

The human progress made possible by this liberation may not be enough before God because everybody always remains a sinner – how hard he or she may try to go along with God's will. There is always concupiscence lurking in inner life. But this is not the most important issue. There is no reason to be constantly in fear of God because one has to face personal failure. Each one of my failures gives reason to try better the next time.

On the other hand, God is set free from being a sort of the permanent persecutor. This role is taken over by conscience. Authority by inner life is efficient enough for the sake of God's providence and so, God can concentrate his powers to salvific history. Grace is solely given

by God on his terms and I must not be bothered pushing God into a direction of my personal favour. I am set free not to be occupied by what God is doing with his singular power of salvation for others and not even for myself. It is proven by Christ that he has no intention to use it against mankind. So, I can have positive expectations for my existence because God has positive expectations with mankind. His plans may be in favour of my own self here and now. This means a deep relativization for the Church which was very much felt by the Catholic Church in modern times. For almost five hundred years it opposed the central meaning of justification by faith alone.⁴

For Luther's discovery of justification by faith alone the Church and the religious Community as a whole is put into second row. The church is still very important for the Gospel's presence in history, in society, in front of the state. But she is not decisive for personal salvation any more. This is decided between God and a human being personally. One may establish a good relation between God and oneself but nevertheless each one of these two partners has an own business in this process. One may work hard for the Gospel's importance in earthly matters but it is basically God who has to take care for his final importance in daily life and in history. And this is also the case for the person's existence – my life is my responsibility, I cannot put God in charge neither of my personal matters nor for existential decisions of others. A person is set free by justification to take care for her own self and this person cannot be taken responsible for the final result of somebody else's life - how close these persons may be. I may help somebody else but basically and finally it's his business or her business.

At the same time if I am 'simul iustus et peccator' then it is my personal responsibility to care for the very best of my existence and to stimulate others to do the same. I have to enlarge the distance to the sinful part of my life and to close the gap to the justified mode of my existence, because God has set me free to experience faith in Christ as justification of life. Although I will never be able to overcome sin in my life there is no reason to be pessimistic about a possible justification. This possibility alone gives me the power to look for a life in the line of God's will. It is not enough that I may develop myself – I have to do so because this is the very realm of my own powers. If I am not able to develop myself I will not be able

⁴ And even when the Lutheran and the Catholic denominations of Christian religion found an agreement by the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999 there was fierce opposition by German Lutheran theologians because the Official Common Statement by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church didn't agree on an essential in Luther's theology, the nature of sin in *concupiscentia*. The Catholic Church couldn't agree that concupiscence is already sin as expressed in Rom 7,7-8. This position would give the individual human subject the central meaning on the side of man in the process of justification. The Catholic Church eager to keep her own meaning for justification towards every human being wanted to embody the subject in an position where sin means a sort of breaking peace with the Church which is the place of God's presence in history. In justification by faith peace with the Church is restored and for that the sacrament of penitence is so important. For a Lutheran position penitence is not put into a central position for man's inner relations with God.

to be useful for others. My own existence is a demonstration of my power and this demonstration is a possible locus for God's presence by justification.

So, I have to concentrate on my personal matters to improve them as much as possible – no matter how bad the living conditions may be. They can never be that bad that I cannot take advantage of them for my own sake. God is standing on my side – and this improves the conditions for my life decisively. It is impossible to give myself up without destroying the chance to reach the very best which is possible in my life and by which I will be judged. A person is basically responsible for her or his existence, nobody can claim that it's God who is responsible instead.

Consequently, theodicy doesn't relieve a person from his or her existence by charging God for her or his fate. The problem of theodicy charges one own life to decide if one may still go along God's importance for oneself – or if one has to decide it's in the best of one's own interest to get rid of God's existence. If God cannot be of good use in my personal suffering then I may improve my capability to take care for myself by pushing him out of my life. In this case this power to push him out is the last service God's power can provide for my personal improvement. And it may also be a help for others not yet capable to keep him out of their lives if I can demonstrate that life will be improved by No-God. By justification the relevant subject is set free to work for his or her personal progress and this may include that there is no justification by God needed for the pursuit of one's own happiness. The atheist option to deny God's existence due to the power included in it is yet another example of the positive relation between God's power and the modern subject's power.

This was of course not the intention of the Reformation's theologians but this result cannot be excluded from liberation achieved by theologies of justification. But in the midst of justification there is a chance to relativize God and especially God's power. This power has no necessary existence for modern times but a pragmatic existence. It is useful in any respect for strengthening one's own power. As soon as it is not able to deliver this empowerment it has to be relativized.

To sum up: Two powers are relativized by the theological progress achieved by the thesis of justification, the Church and God. And a third power is strengthened by it – the power of the subject. In modern times God, Church and subject are combined in a sort of imbalanced trinity of power. Two of them are engaged in empowering the third one, the subject, and this subject takes all of the power it can get from the other two.

This threefold imbalanced nexus between relativization and empowering is attacked by the new perspective on Paul. It is not re-powering the Church and it is not giving God new power

to overcome any attempt to relativize his importance. It is introducing the logical relativization of the last partner in the modern trinity of power – the subject is relativized. It cannot claim any longer that everything has to be useful for it. In the contrary it is put into a position where its fate virtually depends on others. If a person cannot share God's justice to him or to her with others then the whole idea of justification will lead to bankruptcy of this person. This sharing does not rely on conditions set by this person but by the others. There are no means based on one's own subjectivity and owned by me personally which provides with a decisive advantage before God. This is an important new clue of the new perspective on Paul. He has discovered justification by faith in Christ under conditions set by others. This explains his resistance against a purely self-related esteem of ethnic Jews believing at the same time in Christ and to be the chosen ones above others, especially above other believers in Christ. Such a pride at the cost of others is attacked by Paul in Gal 2 and Rom 9.

Justification is granted by faith; it is not a result of ethnic, moral, cultural or personal specification. In the name of such justification a binary code between 'us' and 'them' has no effect. It must be overcome. Without respect for others one cannot claim to be in the realm of God's grace. Paul's theology is not simply following a grammar to decide between Law and Gospel. "The point, I repeat, if the new perspective is to be properly appreciated, is to recognize that the way by which such 'attitudes', such 'misunderstandings' of God's concern for the 'other', the 'outsider', were challenged was by means of Paul's gospel of justification, of God's acceptance, for *all* who believe, and on no other condition – not ethnicity, not colour, not race, not class, not creed, not denomination. It is crucial to the health of the churches that this aspect of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone be not neglected – as it has been frequently neglected in the history of Christianity, and still today in many parts of the 'Christian West'. There is something ironic in the fact that in pushing so hard to the more fundamental need of humankind before God, so many commentators ignore or play down the seriousness of the issue which actually brought the more fundamental point to such vital and all-consuming relevance for Paul."⁵

From a systematic point of view, the position of that what Dunn calls 'faith', is crucial here. Faith doesn't mean a position of power before God and in relation to other human beings. It stands for a position of powerlessness in relation to others. If those who believe in Christ are embodied in the justification by the covenant of God with his people then they have no reason to exclude others from this justification simply because they are different to the Jews and to themselves. There is no advantage against others based on God's justification by Christ – not

⁵ Dunn, *New Perspective*, 33.

even the advantage to have the true faith. True faith in Christ leads to the due respect of God's possible justification of others on the basis of their lives and their human values. In 1 Cor 9 Paul is using this connection as basis for his missionary strategy.

Justification by faith and not by merit has basically a social and political dimension because it empowers others and it depowers the power claims of those who believe in being justified against others. Justification by faith is a sort of relativity theory for believers in Christ. In this sense the new perspective doesn't simply take a stand different to theologies coming out of reformation and it doesn't simply provide with hermeneutics for a 'true Paul'. It opens Paul's theology for a current problem of life and society. Systematically seen, the new perspective is a theological theory developed in the context of a liquid modernity where theologies cannot avoid dealing with all sorts of relativizations. The contextualized character of the new perspective is its strong point; it is not an argument against it. Therefore, Dunn can point to the social and ethnic dimension of his 'new perspective' on Paul and he can deny the goal to turn around historical developments within protestant theology: "It [the new perspective] does *not* set this understanding of justification by faith in antithesis to the justification of the individual by faith. It is *not* opposed to the classic Reformed doctrine of justification. It simply observes that a social and ethnic dimension was part of the doctrine from its first formulation, was indeed integral to the first recorded exposition and defence of the doctrine – 'Jew first but also Greek'. These are the slogans which we should use to summarise Paul's gospel – 'to all whoc believe Jew first but also Greek', 'no distinction between Jew and Greek ... to all who call upon him' (Rom. 1.16; 10.12) – not the dogmatically logical 'from plight to solution', still less Sanders' somewhat contrived antitheses, 'from solution to plight'. This is the lost theological dimension of the doctrine which needs to be brought afresh into the light, *not* to diminish the traditional doctrine, but to enrich the doctrine from its biblical roots and to recover the wholeness of Paul's teaching on the subject."⁶

Jews and Greeks are a binary code Paul has to overcome in order to make his point against adversaries claiming that being Jews they have to separate from the Greeks in order to keep the justification God has chosen them to get access to. These Jews and Greeks are, of course, real human beings being Jews or being Greeks and they are belonging to the groups Paul is engaged with by his mission. But at the same time they are simply assigned to positions within Paul's theory of justification and these positions may be filled with other people or other groups. The only necessary element for the assignment is the binary code these groups are bound to each other within the normal order of things. By this code real justification has to

⁶ Dunn, *New Perspective*, 33.

be decided between two positions and only one of these two stands for it. As soon as one side is chosen the other is excluded. This coding was radically denied by Paul's theology of justification and this is the major systematic claim coming out of the new perspective.

Whoever comes first in justification has no advantage to others bound to him or her by a binary code because these others may be given the same chance by God. Justification is a common ground with others before God. Relevant others are unavoidable for one's own way to come to terms with existence before God and with other human beings. Whoever these Jews and those Greeks may actually be there is not a position 'Jew' which could be separated from the position 'Greek'. One can only get to first position in attributing the same chance of justification to the other position. Without respecting the other in the binary code the access to the position one wants to be assigned to is denied. So, one side depends on the position of the other for the final goal. This relativity is a *conditio sine qua non* for both sides.

Binary codes are not simply taxonomies for ordering problems. They are mechanisms to create power. If the position of Jew is relevant for justification then those at the position of Greek have to be excluded. Power becomes available which overpowers the Greek and for the Greek only powerlessness is left. In modern times various binary codes have ruled societies, politics, culture, religions like friend-foe, left-right, black-white, male-female, barbarians-men of culture, true believers-non believers etc. At least the binary code of Law and Gospel as being identical with the binary code of Christians and Jews was invented by Reformation. It was one of the major power mechanisms in 19th and 20th century for Christians.

In this sense the new perspective urges to relativize Reformation by a new Paul which stands firmly against binary codes in terms of justification. But it is not a relativization claiming that one has to overcome Reformation. This is simply impossible. The claims are reaching out to the modern grammar for which the Reformation's opposition between believing in Law and faith in the Gospel is a major example. Claims of its essential continuity with Paul are arguing that the grammar of the modern civilisation must be continued. But then the new perspective is a major obstacle. So, the debate around its theses is a struggle which way one should go for in current civilisation. Without substantial respect for the other claims of singularity fall short of Paul's insight in the process of justification.

Something quite similar to the relativization of singularity can be observed by the other 'new perspective on Paul', the claims of new philosophies on Paul. Here, it is universality which comes under pressure.

2. The new philosophies on Paul – a relativization of political power by powerlessness of excluded subjects

The new perspective on Paul on exegetical grounds has brought a different understanding of the universality of justification. The new philosophical perspective on Paul leads to a different understanding of the importance of human subject. It turns out to be a political statement of a special sort. But it is not the subject's power which is politically relevant. It is powerlessness subjects cannot avoid which enables them to resist against any political power. Within the new philosophies on Paul the subject's powerlessness takes the position the process of justification holds for the new perspective on Paul. On exegetical terms the subject is relativized by respect towards the other before God – whoever this other may be in concrete history. On philosophical terms the subject is relativized by the lack of sovereignty. It is unable to be the very ground for universality claimed by political, cultural, religious ambitions and so, this inability is a cornerstone to resist political powers. These philosophies on Paul have different reasons for their arguments and they are critical against each other. But they agree on Paul as holding a firm stand against universal claims based on the sovereignty of the subject. This gives him a surprising political impact not to be expected from a theologian whose name is taken to be responsible for Rom 13.⁷

For *Alain Badiou* a mathematical theory is the starting point. He is taking up Cantor's deliberations about the infinite. For Cantor infinity is not only a potential infinity, i.e. a set which is basically finite but whose fullness cannot be conceived here and now. Infinity may also be an actual infinity, i.e. a set which is definitely endless and which is present as a reality here and now. In consequence to actual infinity the finitude of life may be considered not as the normal order of things but as the great exception. In the contrary, it is actual infinitude which is building up normality. The many and not the one is grounding reality, i.e. the Greek hope for universality based on unity is dismissed. There is no way to avoid or overcome plurality. Every oneness is relative to the infinitude of others.

Badiou transforms this into an ontological reversal for the relation of transcendence and immanence. Transcendence as being boundless infinity is not the great exception to the normal experiences but it can break into finitude at any moment and at any place. Immanence as a set of objects of any sort is located within an infinite set of transcendence not being

⁷ I rely heavily here on the excellent book by Dominik Finkelde, *Politische Eschatologie nach Paulus*. Badiou-Agamben-Zizek-Santner, Wien: Turia+Kant, 2007. – For a new interpretation of Rom 13 see Wright, Paul, 59-82. Wright sees in Paul a 'counter-imperial theology' which gives God all power to overpower the empire of the State. The empire is a tool in God's hands which can be terminated as soon as God wishes to do so. Up to this point one may respect the state to avoid chaos. But the empire of the state is relativized by faith in God's justice.

objectified within this set.⁸ Each set, being it a numerical one, a sociological one, a political one, is grounded in a void which is a set of itself and which is part of the situation of the objectified set. This void is not conceivable within the locus of this set but it is present in an excess which is going beyond the objectified set. This void expressed by an excess from objectified finitude is the clue to singularity. Any order of things, the status of a finite set controlled by a power excluding the excess, can be relativized by void being an excess from infinity. And this relativization if it happens cannot be avoided and it cannot be controlled by the power ordering the finite set. This excess is transcending the ordered status and so, it cannot be proofed within its order. But it can be believed as a reality present at any moment and at any time. This ‘site de l’événement’ is the locus of a novelty changing the whole situation. It has revolutionary impact.

For Badiou, the messianic event of Christ as proclaimed by Paul takes up this locus. It is pure transcendence marking real infinitude and by that it is the very source of truth. At the other side, the Jewish Law and the Greek philosophies are simply systems of order opposing transcendence or excluding its revolutionary infinitude from normality in order to preserve their powers. They cannot represent real truth because in cosmic terms they represent the exception, not the reality of infinitude. For the messianic event as being an excess necessary to wipe out the powers of normality Paul cannot rely on this philosophies or that law. He has nothing else than his subjectivity which could ground the event seen as unprecedented both by Greek philosophies and Jewish law. This is it what happens to Paul before Damascus. Here, messianic power overpowers the burden of philosophical and religious order in the mode of a founding subjectivism. For Badiou, this is a subjective gesture having unmatched power by its powerlessness. “Paul’s unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of people, a city, an empire, a territory or a social class. What is true cannot be reduced to any objective aggregate.”⁹ The singularity of this gesture is the only universality possible. It resists universalism and relativism by the sudden emergence exceeding any order. “Consequently, a universal singularity is not of the order of being, but of the order of a sudden emergence.”¹⁰

Badiou’s idea of a universal singularity is strictly declined by *Giorgio Agamben* because there is no universality in Paul.¹¹ Nevertheless, like Badiou Agamben is using Paul as major

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Das Sein und das Ereignis*, Zürich: diaphanes, 2005: „Es ist folglich der nichtseiende Punkt, von dem aus begründet werden kann, dass es *eine* Präsentation des Seins gibt.“ (59)

⁹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by R. Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 5.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Eight Theses on the Universal*, <http://www.lacan.com/badeight.htm>, thesis 2.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Die Zeit, die bleibt. Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006, 65s.

example for his own theory of messianic time. Its basic idea is the division of division. The code which divides the chosen people from the pagan people is divided by Paul according to Agamben. This excludes the binary mode by which one has to decide to which part the relevant object is subjected. There are Jews chosen by God's grace and there are Non-Jews chosen by God's grace. The first one are not living outside the law, the second one are not living within the law but both are included in that what grace means. They are included in that what is excluded by parting the chosen people from the pagan people. Inclusion in exclusion is Agamben's major idea in his project of *homo sacer* for which the Muselman of the Nazi death camps is a striking reality in history. Whoever is included in exclusion is revealing an alternative to the ruling order which is precarious for this order. In this sense the division of the division is bringing in resistance against the power produced by the division of the ruling order. Like in the position of *homo sacer* Agamben has to find a category resisting the ruling power of the division caused by law and this category has to have some reality in history.

Agamben can refer for this on Paul. Especially in Rom 11,1-26 a third category is put into the division of am/gojim: the remnant. The division based on the law is undercut by another division - a remnant will remain in this time "according to the election of grace" (Rom 11,5). This is not a finite set or a vision of the end of time. It is happening now and here as the reality of the messianic time we are living in grounded in Christ. It is the position of those who cannot identify themselves by the division am/gojim without possessing a higher position. By the remnant the binary code of am/gojim is falling apart. So, the remnant is not the great alternative. It cannot be a finite set or an assurance against the end of time. It is the site of those who cannot be identical with themselves and who, by this non-identity, can exclude themselves from any power including them into an order ruled by its divisions. Only here, at an inclusion by exclusion, salvation is possible. It happens here and now and this is the messianic time. In this sense the remnant, living the messianic time, endures all time because it is saved by excluding the division of the law. "Als Rest machen wir, die Lebenden, die *en to nyn kairo* bleiben, die Rettung möglich. Als Rest sind wir ihre ‚Erstlingsgabe‘ (Röm 11,16: *aparche*), sind wir sozusagen schon gerettet: Gerade deshalb aber werden wir nur als Rest gerettet werden. Der messianische Rest überschreitet unrettbar das eschatologische Ganze, er ist das Unrettbare, das die Rettung möglich macht."¹²

Messianic time turns time into a relativization of history. It is the time which time needs to come to its end in the sense that we terminate our idea of time. By messianic time we cannot objectify time any more. Its division into past, present, future becomes obsolete; this division

¹² Agamben, *Zeit*, 69s.

is divided by messianic time and a remnant of time occurs. The time that is left transforms time into a permanent locus for the Messiah's return. Life cannot be lived any more as an existential project through past, present and future. It is no project but the time that is left to overcome the division of time. In this sense one is living in Christ. By this status something is given up and something else is given. Sovereignty of a subject in time is a fake, a mere idea but no existential reality. But this relativizes every power like e.g. the power of the State. Its state of the emergency is no demonstration of sovereignty but of dividing time. This division is divided in messianic time. At any moment every situation can change completely – the Messiah returns – and everything in life is changed from bottom up. No power has a lasting grip on such a subject living messianic time.

For *Slavoj Zizek* there is still a hidden universalistic agenda in Agamben's messianic remnant. The thirdness of this remnant in opposition to the binary code of chosen people versus pagans is yet at the same time dependent on the universalism of this code. Otherwise it couldn't function as alternative. For Zizek one cannot get the power quest out of abstract ideas and this is missing in Agamben's messianic remnant. "Allgemeinheit ist nicht der neutrale Behälter für besondere Gestalten oder deren gemeinsames Maß und auch nicht der passive (Hinter-)Grund, auf dem die Besonderheiten ihre Schlachten austragen, sondern sie ist *diese Schlacht selbst*, der von einer zur anderen besonderen Gestalt führende Kampf."¹³ In Zizek's view the exclusion is the more important position than the remnant and by that he incorporates Agamben's view of the inclusion of the excluded. Only at the position of being excluded one can claim universality – which is, of course, a relativistic universality, i.e. its claims are coming out of powerlessness and not by power. On the basis of the Nicean Creed Zizek is taking up from Paul the death of Christ which is missing in Badiou's philosophy. So, death and God are combined on the basis of powerlessness. Only powerlessness by sacrifice as demonstrated in Christ's death is able to give us meaning in a world without meaning and to guarantee some sort of freedom. This is Paul's most significant insight.

Christ is sacrificing his life without gift in return. By existing in Christ one is subjected to the meaning of this sacrifice and one should not expect a gift in return for this existence. In some sense a believer risks everything for nothing.¹⁴ But this is true power – it is a power able to transform all other powers. It is almighty power. Christ is not dying at the cross to leave humanity and to come back to divinity. He is dying exactly because he is God.¹⁵ It is an ability of divine nature to give everything for nothing. If a subject is living a life according to

¹³ Slavoj Zizek, *Parallaxe*. Aus dem Engl. von Frank Born, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006, 41.

¹⁴ Zizek, *Parallaxe*, 97.

¹⁵ Zizek, *Parallaxe*, 116.

this kenosis it cannot be broken by other powers. In giving up sovereignty this subjectivity is a political power par excellence. Peter Paik calls it a “Kierkegaardian conceptualization of radical politics”¹⁶ and Paul is its role-model.

Eric Santner, the last of the new philosophers on Paul I would like to refer to,¹⁷ is picking up Paul’s existential insight in Rom 7: “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Howbeit, I had not known sin, except through the law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet: but sin, finding occasion, wrought in me through the commandment all manner of coveting: for apart from the law sin is dead. [...] For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me, but to do that which is good *is* not. For the good which I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I practise. But if what I would not, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwelleth in me.” (Rom 7,7s.18-20) There are powers in a person’s inner life and a human being is subjected to these powers. By social, political and religious institutions mankind is trying to keep these powers under control. They balance their uncanny nature by building up symbolic identities. This gives legitimacy to personal life – a sort of relief which enables human being to work with reality. One’s life looks like a ‘normal life’. But at the same time these institutions create constantly excesses of meaning – “remnants” in Santner’s diction – which are uncanny and making precarious demands. They seem to be grounded in an otherness we cannot avoid and this can build up to the very big Other. This is what the Law is about Paul’s theology is dealing with. We accept demands of this surplus in meaning by building up fantasies giving human life stability and providing with forms to face reality. “Fantasy organizes or ‘binds’ the surplus into a schema, a distinctive ‘torsion’ or spin that colors/distorts the shape of our universe”.¹⁸

But nevertheless this constantly creates uneasiness with one’s own identity. You can never be sure if this symbolic identity meets the demands and if it is really one’s own identity. As reason behind these doubts Santner analyses that these institutions are groundless and that they simply cover their fragility up by claiming authority. At the same time we are banned by that because we urgently need such authority to keep up legitimacy in our lives. Otherwise the whole system of symbolic forms would be in deep trouble. In modernity the lack of legitimacy in these institutions became obvious. We know that they do not deliver what they

¹⁶ The Pessimist Rearmed: Zizek on Christianity and Revolution, in: *Theory & Event* 8 (2005) [quoted from Finkelde, *Eschatologie* 9].

¹⁷ Eric Santner, *Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud and the Matter of the Neighbor*, in: Slavoj Zizek / Erich Santner / Kenneth Reinhard (ed.), *The Neighbor. Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 2005, 76-134.

¹⁸ Eric Santner, *The Psychotheology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005, 39.

promise. Nevertheless we cannot give up the symbolic identity they provide us with. And so, we opt for keeping a “validity without meaning”¹⁹ Paul’s insisting that the Law is not given up by the Christ-event reflects this human condition. “The mind is [...] haunted, under the ‘ban’ of something that profoundly matters without being a full-fledged thought or emotion”²⁰ We are living in this ban without consciously fighting to be banned.

Paul’s remarks about the relation of law and sin in Rom 7,7s are revealing this constellation. Without law there is no sin but we cannot claim the law to be sin. We have to claim us to be sinner because we cannot avoid to be confronted by law. For Santner this analysis is a criticism of the ban in human condition. It is not simply the Torah which is attacked here but the symbolic identity which depends on groundless institutions claiming power and which cannot be simply left by us. It is a political act to leave the institution’s power behind. This empowers us without giving us power. And Paul’s God is a source of energy for this process because he is turning the human dependency around. His power is a counterpower to utopias of sovereignty inherent in the human condition created by groundless institutions: “if indeed the Jewish God is a kind of Master, he is one that, paradoxically, suspends the sovereign relation.”²¹

Finkelde transforms Santner’s position into a new interpretation of Paul’s “being in Christ”. His discovery that the law is still in rule but it is not decisive any more gives Paul the chance to leave the institutions of the Jewish Law and the Hellenistic Philosophy as a believer in Christ. He is not creating a new institution replacing the old ones but simply overriding any personal symbolic identity. Paul prefers to be a fool than to submit to the symbolic order of groundless institutions. “Ein Ende des ‚Dramas der Legitimität’ findet Paulus allein in Christus. Die permanente, ja krankmachende Suche nach Legitimität in einer illegitim bleibenden, symbolischen Schimären produzierenden Welt, scheint beendet. Letzte Legitimität erlangt das Subjekt Paulus nur in seiner Offenheit gegenüber göttlicher Offenbarung, nicht gegenüber den Institutionen der Welt.”²² Hence, resurrection would be a sort of exodus from the ban of a groundless symbolic identity. It could be seen as “a release from the fantasies that keep us in the thrall of some sort of exceptional ‘beyond’.”²³

These philosophies create a new Paul never seen before in theology. It is an alienated Paul from the mainstreams of the Christian religious community and of scholarly traditions. This Paul is not simply a highly respected source from the past but a contemporary in the fluid

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 27.

²² Finkelde, *Eschatologie*, 114.

²³ Santner, *Psychotheology*, 30s.

surroundings of late modernity. He is living with us and he cooperates in destruction of the subject's fictions about sovereignty which is harsh but unavoidable. This has a wide range for theology. Paul's authority is no more at hands for those who want to keep the normal religious order of Christian faith. This new Paul has a destabilizing power. Is he capable to be respected theologically?

3. From utopia to heterotopia – Christian mission in front of the new Paul

The new perspective on Paul and the new philosophies on Paul endanger more than simply traditions of interpretation. Church's traditional mission is no longer backed by the greatest missionary Church ever had if there is truth in these new views. And it is enough if there is some truth in them what indeed there is. The new perspective brings logic to Paul's debate with Peter and the other representatives of the Christian community in Jerusalem on the one hand and his continuing support for Jewish religious positions on the other hand. The new philosophy brings forward the revolutionary power in Paul's powerless identity quest which was demonstrated in the Reformation. Whatever can brought forward against these new views the basic shift they give to understanding of Paul will hold. So, it would be irrational to expect that these views will perish in the near future and theology simply has to wait for that.

But then there are precarious theological consequences based on this new Paul. At least the formula 'singularity of faith in Christ plus universality of the subject longing for universal claims of Christian singularity = necessity for Christian mission towards everybody everywhere at every time' becomes very doubtful. Paul's central place for Christian mission does not support this formula.

We are used to the fact that Jesus was not only a Jew but that he is a Jew. His goal was to transform his fellow Jews, and even to call those he might have thought to be sent to 'Jews' may already be an anachronism. He certainly didn't found a different religious community in the sense of a faith essentially different from faith in Jhwh as Christian trinity is. But Christian main line holds it to be evident that Paul developed the path towards a different religious community and that this religious community thinks of herself as the true believers before God. And now the new perspective says: 'be cautious that we Christians do not make the same mistake as Paul presented to his fellow Jews'. Paul may have been a Christian but he certainly remained a Jew – religiously and theologically. One cannot use a binary code and putting Paul in the position of the principle witness for that. His basic beliefs are issued

against separation between Christ and the Jewish people. He is following an anti-binary agenda in his theology. There he firmly stood against dividing justification by an essential difference between people from Judäa believing in Christ and people from the diaspora believing in Christ. Paul was even convinced that believers in Christ must be very careful in their relation to religiously others not to make the same mistake he made in his Jewish life against Christians. Believing in Christ is no reason to look to others as inferior to one's own position before God – whoever these others may be. Belief in Christ is rather a reason to search for one's own sinfulness in order to overcome divisions inflicted by one's own power on others.

If Paul firmly stood against any division in terms of salvation between Jews and Christian which would put those who invent this division in a theological advantage before God then he cannot be the mastermind of a mission to the Jews which sets the Jews in second row before God and other people in third, fourth etc. rank. Then the mission to the Jews is essentially an attack on the universality of the Gospel whose grace is granted by God on his terms alone because this mission denies God the freedom to save them on his grounds and not on the grounds of Christian religious claims. Then a Christian mission of the Jews even proves that Christians picturing themselves as religiously superior to the other not justified before God. They miss the very point of justification by faith alone and they look to faith as a sort of personal work. A mission which explicitly or implicitly leads to these consequences cannot refer to Paul as its role-model.

The result of the new philosophies on Paul comes close to this precarious result from a different angle. Christian mission with the goal to convince people of the salvific meaning of the Gospel is addressed to individual human beings. A person is not yet converted if representatives of its own people decide to convert to Christianity – although this was for a long time the leading strategy of Christian missionaries after the striking successes with Constantine and Clovis. A person has to decide out of herself because in matters of belief Christian faith cannot accept anything else but sovereignty of the individual subject. It may be that this subject is not sovereign at all in terms of social status, political will, economic means etc. but before God only existential sovereignty of one's own soul can hold. You cannot believe for somebody else and nobody else can do it for you. To be a Christian means to be a self-conscious person decided on one's own grounds.

But the new philosophy on Paul says that Paul is not the chief witness for such sovereignty; in the contrary he is a heavy critic of its modes of thought which is the main-line of modern thinking, especially modern political thinking. Paul's theology gets political importance

because it is a clear vote for overriding, relativizing, denouncing the possibility of such a position in front of God. Paul's theology is strengthening people by powerlessness they cannot avoid in the very centre of their existence, be it the non-normality of his or her singularity, be it an alternative time to time's usual divisions, be it a fate struck by violence or be it a devaluation of various symbolic identities. In this powerlessness Paul discovers the very key for a life of subjects able to resist powers alienating them from the very source of their personal existence. A Christian mission which favours personal sovereignty in matters of belief may be a very powerful enterprise but it cannot refer to Paul as its finest example. As in the case of justification the subject a Christian mission addresses remains an otherness who cannot be put into the powerful position this mission has at hands to convince him or her. This other continuous to be a vulnerable person, subjected to all sorts of power which try and do get a hand on her existence.

Christian mission is in danger just to be another of these powers, especially when it follows a project of increasing religious power by converting people. Against such projects Paul reminds Christians that powerlessness on the side of the concrete other empowers him or her to resist that this mission gets a hold on this concrete existence. For Paul, this is backed by the same God this mission wants people to believe in. So, Paul, the greatest missionary in Christian religious history, is relativizing this mission by pointing to powerlessness at its very centre.

In both new views – the new perspective and the new philosophy on Paul – there is a significant change for Paul's importance in Christian theology in general and specially in Christian mission. They touch on utopias bound with this mission which are using binary codes. I will mention only four. There is the expectation that in the end everybody will become a Christian – if not in historical time then in eschatological time. To be a Christian means the chance to be saved; not to become a Christian means not to be saved for sure. From an eschatological point of view no other religion will prevail before God than the Christian religion, because this religion is the chosen one. Secondly, there is the expectation that those who refuse to become Christians finally will regret this unwillingness, and this expectation is giving security for those who are already Christians and who have to suffer because of their religious conviction. Thirdly, there is hope that even the Jews – or to put it more correctly: especially the Jews – will in the end agree that the Messiah did already come and that he was Jesus. The messianic nature of Christ does not depend on acceptance by Jews but the fate of the Jewish people finally depends on this fact. To be pro Christ means to be pro Messiah, and to be against Christ means to be against the Messiah. Fourthly, for every human being

whoever he or she may be it is the best choice to become or to be a Christian. Christian existence is the peak-point of human nature, so that to be a human being means to long implicitly for Christian existence. Christianity means humanity and to be against Christianity means to be against humanity.

Such utopias are overridden by the new Paul. Paul is rather a factor to denounce such Christian projects as obstacles for the mission of the Gospel. This mission is not following binary codes but it is breaking them up. Utopias are very modern disciplinary methods which enable people and communities to accumulate power by clearly knowing which ways are wrong and who is misled. In this sense the Christian utopias for the mission of the Church have accelerated power claims by the Church and by Christian groups, not the least against the Jews in secular societies like in the assimilation of secular Jews from 18th to 20th century.

Paul's letters have a canonical authority. They are a *locus theologicus* for Christian theology and for the Church's official teaching. If the results of the new perspectives can be hold true then this *locus theologicus* will become a precarious site for arguments. This locus is denouncing binary codes as useful tools for Christian mission. By the new perspective and by the new philosophy on Paul, Paul's canonical letters are turned into a heterotopos. They are sites of arguments nobody in Church and in theology can avoid but this *locus theologicus* demonstrates how much traditional missionary praxis is alienated from the beliefs these letters put into an agenda of Christian faith because this praxis needs binary codes in order to function.

Heterotopias are sites which are really there but which reveal the authority of a locus which is concealed by utopias being in the power to shape the relevant order of things.²⁴ In this sense Paul's letters arguing against binary codes are really there and they confront Christian praxis with its constant use of such coding procedures. Heterotopias put precarious processes into action. To be confronted with one's own utopias one has to give up power claims which have dominated one's own action also in cases one didn't want to use power. In this sense heterotopias create powerlessness. But this is the very source of the mission Paul has subjected his faith to. So, the new Paul has a liberating effect for theology, the Church and her mission. It has to take a new perspective destroying their binary codes. This creates powerlessness for this mission, but just this powerlessness will bring it back to Paul as one of their major sources.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Andere Räume*, in: *Schriften in vier Bänden Dits et Ecrits*, Bd. 4, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005, 931-942; english version: 'Different Spaces', in M. Foucault/R. Hurley/J.D. Faubion/P. Rabinow, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, London, 2000, 175-185