

Douglas Harink (ed), *Paul, Philosophy and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Zizek and Others. Theopolitical Visions 7* (Eugene, CO: Cascade Books, 2010) ISBN 13: 978-60608-662-9

The Return of Theology or, is Paul also among the Philosophers?

The dismissal of theology as a valid and substantive discipline from wider academic conversations, particularly those in philosophy and political theory, has been regarded as emblematic of the irreversible secularisation of the academy. There is some evidence though that this outcome is not set in stone, and that theology, Dawkins and Dennett notwithstanding, is making a return from exile as a significant resource for debates in political philosophy and ethical theory.

At the centre of this return, perhaps paradoxically, are the writings of the apostle Paul. His encounter with the philosophers in Athens, while a noteworthy moment in the narrative of Acts, has resulted in many commentators drawing the conclusion that Paul never again attempted an engagement with the philosophers, and thereafter focussed his attention on the preaching of “Christ crucified”. But what if the philosophers engagement with Paul brings theological argument back within the apparently ‘secular’ world of the philosophers?

The last decade has seen a renewed attention paid to the writings of Paul by a range of Continental political philosophers in their search for resources to underpin and empower a renewed critique of consumer capitalism as well as providing the basis for a rethinking of political theory after the mid century assault of fascism and the collapse of communism. The recent launch of *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought* is another indication of this development. Philosophers who have engaged with Paul as part of this diverse, overlapping project include Agamben, Badiou, Zizek and Taubes, with Walter Benjamin as a significant earlier source of inspiration.

Agamben, for example, delivered a series of lectures, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* that deals solely with the themes that emerge from the first ten words of the epistle. He delivered a “homily” addressed to the church, at Notre Dame Cathedral that has been published under the title, *The Church and the Kingdom*.

While Pauline scholars at large seem to have paid little attention to this emerging interest in their field by philosophers, many of them influenced to one degree or another by Marxism, a minority of theologians with backgrounds in systematic theology, have decided to pay attention to these developments in Continental philosophy. The collection of papers under review, *Paul, Philosophy and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Zizek and Others*, edited by Douglas Harink, Professor of Theology at The King’s University College in Edmonton, Canada, arose from a conference “St Paul’s Journeys into Philosophy” in 2008 and provides a diverse range of responses by theologians to Paul’s return to the world of philosophical and political reflection.

The diverse, serious, and ad-hoc ways in which philosophers have taken up Paul in progressing their specific intellectual and political projects is reflected in the wide range of themes dealt with in the papers in this collection. It is a collection that responds to the philosophical engagement by way of conducting a conversation within the theological world rather than attempting a direct intervention in the wider

debates in which this appropriation is taking place. This is a conversation that is directed, according to the editor, Douglas Harink, at illuminating ... *the connections between Paul's apocalyptic theology and recent philosophy and political theory. ... in tracing and critically evaluating these connections this collection will on the one hand reveal the theological significance of the philosophers in question and on the other, make an important contribution to strengthening the witness of the messianic community, in its thought and action, to the Messiah Jesus who has called and created it.* (9-10)

Broadly two strategies for responding to this engagement with Paul by the philosophers are offered by contributors to this collection. Stephen Fowl, Professor of Theology at Loyola College in Maryland suggests that we should welcome these plunderers of Paul and to try to be intellectually hospitable. His paper "A Very Particular Universalism: Badiou and Paul" is offered as a close and hospitable engagement with Badiou in which Fowl concludes that ... *a more rigorously theological reading of Paul may found a politics that provides a way to advance some of the political aims that Badiou wants to achieve without some of the attendant side effects.* (120) Fowl extends this hospitality by means of offering Badiou a theological reading of Paul to help him achieve his goals. Paul Griffiths from Duke University Divinity School offers an alternative approach in his paper "The Cross as the Fulcrum of Politics: Expropriating Agamben on Paul". Griffiths wants to return the compliment on Agamben's expropriation of Paul, by expropriating Agamben for the benefit of the church., a strategy of despoiling the despoilers.

The essays in this collection vary greatly in style and approach and represent a broad range of theological traditions with contributions from theologians with Catholic, Mennonite and Evangelical affiliations. The papers are organised, after an introduction by the editor, under the following thematic headings:

- From Philosophy to Apocalyptic
- Nietzsche, Heidegger and Benjamin
- Badiou and Zizek
- Agamben
- Hermeneutics, Ecclesia, Time

The collection raises a substantial range of issues for the attention of theologians interested in the theology of culture, ecclesiology, political philosophy and continental philosophy's engagement with Pauline theology. The essays display theologians at their best in their careful argument drawing on detailed reading of texts and careful attention to the context of and intentions of the philosophers.

From my own experience, this collection will be of most value to those who have already read and been intrigued and provoked by how the philosophers under consideration engage with Paul. I would recommend this collection as an important and helpful theological supplement to a reading of Badiou, Agamben and Zizek, respectively.

The essays witness in fresh and illuminating ways to the ongoing significance of Paul's theology for thinking about politics, human action and human community. They remind the church of the deep political significance of its frequently taken for granted theological commitments and ecclesial practices. This current engagement with Paul by the philosophers subverts both a secularity, which dismisses theology as an individualistic privatised activity of no social or political significance, and an ecclesiology which views itself as a being a space for purely religious activities. The return of theology to academic attention beyond faculties of theology, through the claiming of Paul by the philosophers marks out our time as being in at least one important sense as 'post-secular'.

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