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This essay is a thought experiment, bringing together representatives of two different tendencies in Continental philosophy, specifically in regard to theology—the Marxist "return" to biblical texts and the phenomenological effort to provide a philosophical ground for theology. The respective positions of these two tendencies are by now well-known: Marx versus Heidegger, immanence versus transcendence, atheism versus Roman Catholicism, overt political engagement versus a studied avoidance of the political.

The representatives of the "Neo-Paulinist" group, mostly leftist, increase almost daily; for now they include Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Jacob Taubes, Slavoj Žižek, Shmuel Trigano, Bernard Sichère and Jean-Michel Rey.1 On the phenomenological side appear Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-François Courtine, Michel Henry and Paul Ricoeur. The combined literature for this group is immense, but their key

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statements have been gathered in a useful and pointed collection edited by Dominique Janicaud. Both sides are overwhelmingly French, both draw deeply on the traditions of Continental philosophy and both are vitally interested in theology, if not the Bible. Despite this common ground, the differences are also immense, some of which I outlined in my opening sentences. Here I would add that the Neo-Paulinists are mostly materialists and atheists, while the phenomenologists are largely believers.

However, if we were to expect some interaction between them, if not lively debate, then we would be disappointed. So my task here is to explore what such an engagement might yield. Are they so far apart that they have little in common, or are they perhaps closer than they seem? In order to focus the discussion, I draw upon a representative from each group, namely Alain Badiou and Jean-Louis Chrétien. If Badiou is interested in the political insights provided by theology and the Bible (he draws variously from Pascal, Kierkegaard and the Apostle Paul), albeit without caring for the “the Good News” that they bring, Chrétien is far more interested in that good news, attempting to argue for a theological dimension to the long-standing phenomenological concern with “call and response” that goes back at least to Heidegger and filters through Jean-Luc Marion.

In what follows, I shall consider Badiou’s *Saint Paul* and Chrétien’s *The Call and the Response*, pitching them against each other. Some surprises are in store, for despite the differences between them, they have much more in common than perhaps either would care to think.

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3 Carl Schmitt may well be pleased, for the “metaphysical kernel of all politics,” repressed and pantheised in the secular and democratic theory of the state, is finally being allowed to emerge from its shell. Schmitt argued famously that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [1922]), 36.


5 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 1.

Let us begin with Badiou. In his brief *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Badiou seeks and locates a materialised or laicised doctrine of grace (the "event"), one that breaks into the mundane rhythm of human life and fundamentally disrupts it. Or rather, the moment of grace can only be such if it is recognised and named, and the one who names it then builds a militant political group that acts in fidelity to and builds their confident hope on the moment of grace. Badiou's position may usefully be summarised as: the Truth-Event is the naming of a fabulous event that is itself grace, a pure givenness that produces a militant collective characterised by fidelity to the event, love and confident hope.

In a little more detail, Badiou's system relies on the argument that an event bursts into the status quo, which he names the State, State of the situation, Order of Being, the situation, the "there is." The terms cluster heavily around this unannounced, unexpected, impossible event, which Badiou also describes in terms of a supplement to, or excess of, a situation or (in more mathematical terms) a subtraction from the "there is." The key nodes of the event are four: falling in love, political insurrection, scientific discovery or a great work of art (the reason for only four is never justified). In the Paul book, Badiou argues that the pure event can never be apprehended directly; it is identified and named after the fact, after its actual occurrence. Thus "I love you," May ’68, Galileo or Mallarmé are inadequate statements of an event that had already happened, linguistic traces of something that took place and then disappeared just as abruptly. Through such identification, an event constitutes a "truth" or a "procedure of truth," an ongoing organisation that is random, multiple, revolutionary, a new collective Subject in politics. A significant feature of this
trail of effects is that the event so named produces conviction, fidelity and certainty—a reinterpretation of the Pauline triad of faith, love and hope.\(^8\)

But let us cut to the chase and see what Badiou does with Paul's texts. He writes: “The pure event is reducible to this: Jesus died on the cross and resurrected. This event is 'grace' (kharis). Thus, it is neither a bequest, nor a tradition, nor a teaching. It is supernumerary to all this and presents itself as pure givenness (donation).”\(^9\) Donation, givenness, hardly appears gratuitously in Badiou's text, weighed down as it is with the history of the doctrine of grace, but also with the untiring attention of the phenomenologists. Rather than engaging deeply with the phenomenological and poststructuralist debates over the gift, Badiou wants to push grace into a materialist and political register. Or, in Badiou's words, he seeks to "extract a formal, wholly secularised conception of grace."\(^10\) Later he will variously name this a laicised or materialist grace.

Now we come across the key: “Everything hinges on knowing whether an ordinary existence, breaking with time's cruel routine, encounters the

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material chance of serving a truth, thereby becoming, through subjective di-
vision and beyond the human animal’s survival imperatives, an immortal.”11
This sentence is fundamental to Badiou’s whole argument, so I will pause for
a moment to exegete it. The key items include the multiple and contingent
nature of the truth, but above all the urgent need to tear grace from its theo-
logical content and context. Thus, an underlying laicisation runs through
the sentence I have quoted (an “ordinary existence”), which Badiou draws
from Paul’s argument that Christ’s resurrection enables the resurrection of
all human beings (Rom 6:4–9).12 It is also very much a part of Badiou’s em-
phasis on the contingency and particularity of truth and the universal—
hence “a truth.” So, a little later Badiou uses the inclusive “we” and pluralises
grace to “certain graces” of which we are all beneficiaries.13 However, Badiou
also deploys two metaphors that precede and follow the sentence I quoted:
“extract” and more forcefully “tear.” That is, in order to produce a materi-
alised grace, Badiou calls upon “us” to wrench the language of grace from
theological context, to empty it forcefully of its religious content and fill
it with materialist content. The violence of these metaphors seems exces-
vive until the weight of the first words of the sentence I quoted make their
presence felt: “Everything hinges.” What is this everything? Badiou’s whole
philosophical system? The validity of the truth-event over against Being?
Or revolution, for which the event is but another name? All of the above, I
would suggest.

Badiou attempts to materialise grace with three strategies. To begin with,
he is interested in the form of Paul’s argument, the “general procedure” of
Paul’s act and position rather than any fabulous content:

If there has been an event, and if truth consists in declaring it and then
in being faithful to this declaration, two consequences follow. First,
since truth is evental, or of the order of what occurs, it is singular....
Second, truth being inscribed on the basis of a declaration that is in
essence subjective, no preconstituted subset can support it; nothing
communitarian or historically established can lend its substance to the

11 In his later works, he still does not shy away from theological terminology for the event:
“Making unabashed use of a religious metaphor, I will say that the body-of-truth, as concerns
what cannot be reduced to facts, can be called a glorious body.” Badiou, The Communist
Hypothesis, 244–45.
12 Badiou, Saint Paul, 69–70.
13 Badiou, Saint Paul, 66.

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process of truth... It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address.14 Further, he consistently seeks to transform each of the categories Paul uses into a materialist register. How does Badiou do this? As we work through the Paul book we find that each of Paul's categories finds a ready vocabulary in Badiou's own philosophy. Grace becomes the event, God becomes universalism, love evental fidelity, hope the confidence that arises through ordeal, and law becomes the way things are or the Order of Being, into which death, sin, desire and the flesh all dissolve.

The most important strategy for my argument here is Badiou's final one, for it is fraught with any manner of snares. I shall call this the quarantining of the call. In contrast to Chretien, as we will see, who searches ever back into the mystery of the call, where pure givenness is ever more transcendent, Badiou is keen to stress that the event is a truth only when it is identified, named and symbolised, thereby providing a political goal and subject. Yet that event itself can only ever be a pure fable, asserted but never proved (the resurrection in Paul's case). For Badiou, this is precisely the strength of Paul's position. The claim that Jesus is resurrected is a fable, is not tied to any element of the "earthly" life of Jesus, or, more generally, any historical conditions or causes. It is not falsifiable or verifiable in terms of the order of fact. In other words, militant political movements, of which the motley group of early Christians are the new model, require such a fable in order to gather in the first place. In the language of Paul, the basis of grace, of that which is completely outside the system, is in fact that unverifiable fable, for otherwise it would not be grace. In Badiou's terms, the formal strength of Paul's act allows him to structure a subject "devoid of identity and suspended to an event whose only 'proof' lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject."15

However, soon we have a problem: for all his efforts to quarantine the call, or rather its source, he succumbs to the slippery historical problem of the book of Acts. While he discards Acts in his effort to construct something resembling a biography of the militant Paul, he holds onto the account of Paul's "conversion" on the road to Damascus. His parenthetical comment—"(if, as we believe, in this particular instance one can, for once and once only, trust that fabricated biography of Paul that the New Testament presents under the title Acts of the Apostles)"16—tosses away his carefully

14 Badiou, Saint Paul, 14.
15 Badiou, Saint Paul, 5.
16 Badiou, Saint Paul, 17.
constructed quarantine of the call. For Paul's call, or rather the call of Saul who became Paul, comes out of the blue, is without cause and reason.

The problems become worse, for it is now not clear how the event and its truth relate to this Damascus "experience" of Paul. Is the truth Paul's naming of the event, which is none other than the "fable" of the resurrection of Christ? Or is the truth-event Paul's "experience" on the Damascus road, based upon which Paul makes his extraordinary claim? If so, then the truth-event draws ever nearer to the phenomenologists' stress on givenness (donation), for Paul's call also comes from nowhere. Except that now for Badiou, givenness applies both to grace and to Paul's call; or are they perhaps the same thing?

To sum up, we have a problem that hinges on the question of the call, that obsession of the phenomenologists. But before passing onto Chrétien, let me summarise Badiou's argument as follows: the truth-event/call is based in a disruptive grace that produces a fundamentally new orientation by means of a faithful collective.

**CHRÉTIEN'S CALL**

A superficial reading might suggest that Jean-Louis Chrétien is everything Badiou is not: religious, if not mystical, looping, hyperbolic sentences, with not even the barest of political traces. Yet if we look more closely, Badiou and Chrétien are more alike than at first appears to be the case.

Since its first appearance in French in 1992, Chrétien's *Call and Response* has become a key text in the current debate within phenomenology. Like other phenomenologists of the "theological turn," Chrétien assumes that the Bible is the very basis of theology. For all his astuteness, Ricoeur agrees in his return, after some two decades, to reflection on the Bible. Michel Henry goes much further, arguing that the Bible is much more than a text, or even a sacred text: it is nothing other than the intersection between the word _parole_—small "w"—of linguistic content and the Word of God, both capitals, an "evangelic word" that is of "divine provenance." Over against

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*Roland Boer, The Pure Givenness of the Call / Event: Between Alain Badiou and Jean-Louis Chrétien*
such assertions, we should recall Ernst Bloch's observation that the Bible is the Church's bad conscience, that it is an unruly and fractious collation of materials colonised by Church and Synagogue. One is also tempted to apply Theodor Adorno's profound suspicion of Kierkegaard to Chrétien. Wary of Kierkegaard's enchantment, "the most dangerous power in his work" that comes from the assumption that Kierkegaard appears just as much a poet and storyteller as a philosophical theologian, Adorno relegates the poetry to the realm of "stage props" and "ominous decorations" of the private individual. For Chrétien is also a poet, and in his writing the poet always wants to leap forth.

The key to Chrétien's position is what might be called the creative rupture of the call. The call, one's vocation, is a call into existence, but it is also both irresistible and utterly disruptive. Chrétien's book is a response to Heidegger's effort in On the Way to Language to recast the question of language in terms of the call-and-response model. But Chrétien wishes to introduce God into the role of Heidegger's "silent voice [leutlosse Stimme]" of speech that comes to us and from which we speak, the silent voice that requests ours in response. If for Heidegger this silent voice is speech itself, the address of language that we receive at birth and to which we respond, then for Chrétien the call comes from God. Further, moving all too smoothly through Plato to Paul via Dionysius Areopagus (and thereby once again reasserting the mythic path from classical Greece to Western Europe), he argues that the call is firstly the call of beauty, for kalein has its cognate in kalon. But this is merely the first step to the pivot of his argument, namely that the relationship between call and response is thoroughly unequal, for the call creates the respondent: "The meaning of call and response is radically transformed when the call actually creates the respondent." The call, in other words, is not primarily one for a task, a vocation, but the call into existence itself.

Here Paul comes into play, especially the central epistle to the Romans. The text in question is one verse from Paul's amanuensis, Tertius. In the

23 Chrétien, The Call and the Response, 16.
midst of a much longer midrash on Abraham, Paul writes in Romans 4:17: “in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into being what is not” (emphasis mine). Chrétien seizes on the last clause, although he shifts too readily to the Vulgate, “he calls what is not as well as what is [vocat ea quae non sunt tanquam ea quae sunt].” The Vulgate provides what he wants—the conjunction of both the doctrine of election and of creation, since to be called is in the first place to be called into being (ea quae sunt).

The first vocation is the vocation to be, the first answer, to be there. We have always already answered our summons. Prior to all of the answers that may or may not eventually be given, prior to responses that engage responsibility and involve an actually articulated power of response, there is the response that we ourselves are, simply through the fact of our being, through the fact of having come to an eternal cry, that cry that calls to being and to be—a “here I am” provoked by a “come here.”

Let us exegete this passage for a moment. For Chrétien, Romans 4:17 provides the fundamental idea of the call into being, prior to any vocation, any responsibility, any response. But this is by no means all. The call, as creative, is also irresistible and disruptive, overwhelming its recipient in a moment that destroys all the coordinates of ordinary life. Here Marion the philosopher comes to the poet’s aid: Marion argues that this is a “saturated phenomenon,” which is “invisible according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, but also unconditioned (absolved from any horizon) according to relation, and irreducible to the I (incapable of being looked at) according to modality.” Back to Chrétien: in order to make this point, he goes into the heart of the doctrine of election. For Calvin of course, texts like Ephesians 1:4—“even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world”—were the basis in their own way of the notion of predestination; but for Chrétien this text adds another dimension to the call: “The power to create and the power to elect, the power that confers being and the power that confers justice, are one.”


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Further, the call from God is the call into existence and therefore one that we simply cannot resist. It is overwhelming; everything falls to pieces; nothing remains intact; an excess that is beyond our comprehension and thoroughly transforms us. Again, Chrétien: “Nothing therefore in the one who is called remains or can remain intact in the face of the call...since the call gives him being and makes it possible for him to be faced at all through being already caught up in the call.” At this point Chrétien invokes Moses, Jeremiah and the call of the lover in the Song of Songs:

That which I cannot hear in the call, that which I cannot answer, is what in it cries out and brings us forth. The non-correspondence alters my voice as it answers, for indeed the excess of the call is precisely what parts my lips again and again in order that I may sing what shatters my voice.

To summarise, the call is first of all a call into existence, and that call, as creative, is both fundamentally disruptive and irresistible. The echo of Badiou is remarkable, but let us go on. Chrétien is of course developing the notion of grace, although now not in a materialist and political sense but in a phenomenological one.

From here, Chrétien pursues a thoroughly incarnational angle, arguing for a collective, choral response to the call and then focusing on the related issues of voice, inner voice, body and touch, as one would expect for a phenomenologist. That is, “the answer must necessarily possess a choral character”; that we are part of “the inexhaustible chorus” of “the totality of the world in space and time.” Since we forever fall short on our own, we join a community of co-respondents, all joining in a polyphonic song. Before being drawn into the content of his argument, let me delineate its formal structure: the creating, dislocating and irresistible call is a pure givenness that produces a collective, choral response. Recall the form of Badiou’s argument: the truth-event (or is that the call?) is based in a disruptive grace, also a pure givenness, that produces a fundamentally new orientation by means of a faithful and militant collective.

Badiou and Chrétien have become close indeed, arguing for a disruptive call or event that shifts the very coordinates of our existence. Like the phenomenologists of the theological turn, Badiou too has a liking for

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terminology of the call (recall Paul’s Damascus road experience), as well as a fondness for the phenomenological term “givenness” (donation). Unwittingly, Badiou draws even closer to the phenomenologists, for Marion argues that the phenomena, “the things themselves,” of which phenomenology speaks are without cause, given. Picking up what he calls Husserl’s phenomenological breakthrough in the Logical Investigations,30 he argues “that, in its basis [dans son fond], every phenomenon surges forth as a gift [don], and therefore that all phenomenality comes to pass [advient] as a donation.”31 All of which flies in the face of Janicaud’s argument that while pure, unconditional givenness may be able to be thought, it is not subject to experience or intuition and therefore cannot be known,32 or Heidegger’s argument that theology’s proper concern is the positive content of faith itself, for which phenomenology and philosophy more generally may assist in understanding the significance of its content but not the way that content is achieved.33

Politics: Immanence and Transcendence

If the basic arguments of Badiou and Chrétien are so similar, why the significant differences between them? Or, to be more explicit, why the sheer absence of politics in Chrétien and most of the other (theological) phenomenologists and its unavoidable presence in Badiou? Let me stay with Chrétien for a moment, or rather the eloquent criticism levelled at him and the other phenomenologists of the theological turn by Dominique Janicaud. For Janicaud, the “theological turn” is a violation of one of the basic postulates of phenomenology that comes through from Husserl, namely the reduction. By closing down transcendence, or rather the ecstatic openness to transcendence, phenomenology deals only with the appearing that remains in and for consciousness. It is, in other words, the field of immanence sun­dered from any transcendence. For Janicaud, then, the newer developments


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in phenomenology—he lays much of the blame with Levinas—leads to its self-annihilation, for they use phenomenology "as a springboard in a quest for divine transcendence." Janicaud’s use of the springboard metaphor is perhaps more revealing than he might have imagined, for what he is saying is that immanence becomes the basis for the leap to transcendence, and a distinctly ontological transcendence at that. Janicaud has thereby revealed a key feature of much of this theological phenomenology, for there is an inescapable ethereal sense of much of the work by Chrétien, Henry, Marion and the others.

The problem, then, is not merely that they seek to grasp the tail of transcendence while leaping as high as possible from immanence, but that they move in precisely this fashion, from immanence to transcendence. On reading Chrétien, I remain puzzled by the way such an immanent approach could be so ethereal and even worshipful. Is not immanence meant to be earthed, grounded in this world and not another? Chrétien shows that a beginning with immanence is precisely not so. His extended discussions of the materiality and nature of voice, of body and touch, even calling upon the Song of Songs from the Hebrew Bible, seem at the same time mystical and devotional. In other words, this thoroughly incarnational and immanent approach turns out to disappear into the heavens. This is the nub of the problem. For the old theological dialectic reasserts itself in a strange fashion: only when you have travelled the road of immanence to its overgrown and weary end does transcendence finally appear out of the gloom—although the catch with most of these characters is that the immanence in question is a peculiarly inward one, a deep retreat into one’s own inner chamber. So, we find that Chrétien, whom we might have expected to be far earthier than Badiou, ends up in a world-denying argument that is more interested in heavenly choruses than anything as grubby as politics. The reason: he begins with a thoroughly immanent and incarnational position.

Let me be clear: I do not argue that phenomenology’s immanence will eventually lead to some sort of transcendence, that these theologians show up the internal logic of phenomenology (they would like to think so). Rather, since they wish to be phenomenologists first and foremost, they are locked into arguing from the plane of immanence, and from that point there is only one way to go: the call is nothing other than religious experience.35

34 Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” 70.
Now we face an apparent problem: is not Badiou also (like Deleuze) a champion of immanence? The One is not, God has been dead for some time, all that matters is this life, the plane of immanence. Yet Badiou evinces a continued fascination with theology, despite his denials, of which his book on Paul is but one instance. Others include, as I mentioned earlier, engagements with Pascal and Kierkegaard. One may well argue that his efforts to plunder theology and laicise it—after all, God is dead—actually provide significant room for theology in his work. So also with transcendence, for the event (in Paul's case, Christ's resurrection) is a distinctly transcendent moment: "that which occurs without being couched in any predicate, that which is translegal, that which happens to everyone without an assignable reason." Given the dialectic of transcendence and immanence, I suggest that Badiou's radical, Marxist focus on an immanent politics begins to emerge only through radical transcendence. In other words, the event becomes a moment of the experience of transcendence, an utterly inexplicable moment of grace that opens the gates for what is a new political model on the plane of immanence (witness his attraction to Paul's Damascus road experience). Further, given the undeserved, inexplicable nature of grace, the only way to determine whether grace has in fact made an appearance is by the results and fruits of that appearance: for Badiou these are the manifestations of conviction, fidelity, love and hope. In short, the very term "laicised grace" witnesses to a process of grounding the transcendent.

Thus, Badiou's Paul book is far more grounded than Chrétien's poetic tracts which begin with immanence. Reaching back beyond Lenin, Paul is always already the revolutionary figure, the mobile militant, sending off occasional interventions in the struggle rather than polished theological treatises, letters that first develop the radical transcendence of grace. Succinctly put, precisely because of his absolute emphasis on a transcendent event, Badiou is able to develop a far more immanent, political position than Chrétien and the others. Or rather, how is it that Paul can be such an evangelical militant? Because he begins with a radically transcendent doctrine of grace.

36 Boer, Criticism of Theology; Karlsen, "The Grace of Materialism".
38 Badiou, Saint Paul, 76–77.
39 Badiou, Saint Paul, 2.

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CONCLUSION

It seems as though we cannot escape the dialectic of immanence and transcendence. However much we try to banish the pair, writing divorce settlements, cutting one off from the other, attempting like Husserl “to put the transcendence of God 'out of circuit,”40 or even, like Badiou, to laicise the infinite, before we know they are back in their old places. In this context, Badiou's approach is, despite its problems, far preferable to that of Chrétiien along with the other phenomenologists and their “angelic horizon.”41

40 Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” 68.
41 Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” 68.

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