One of the most productive developments in religious studies over the past decade has been the turn to mediation as a key concept with which to understand the very idea of “religion.” As staked out in such volumes as Religion and Media, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, this turn has meant much more than expressing an interest in particular media technologies: printing, painting, audio recording, and so on. As de Vries argues, it means concentrating “on the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatization without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place.”1 From this perspective religion can be understood as mediation: a practice that both builds up and bridges the visible and invisible worlds through various technologies and signs.2

In much of the work that focuses on mediation in this way, the religious concern over which technologies and signs are appropriate channels of mediation has been prominent. This turn to mediation, in other words, is bringing new thoughts to bear on some of the most important concepts in the lexicon of religious studies: from purity and authenticity to iconoclasm and fetishism. Within anthropological studies of Chris-
tianity, the results have been particularly helpful in pushing beyond idealist understandings of religion-as-belief to a materialist semiotics that can better coordinate an understanding of the stuff of Christian praxis: the arguments, artifacts, and actions that make up its traditions.3

One vision that animates the concern with mediation and its material instantiations is what we might call the fantasy of immediacy, by which I mean a relation to the divine that is free from unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive trappings. Within Christian traditions, some charismatic and evangelical types of Protestantism are good examples of this, inasmuch as they stress individualized and “direct” relationships with God. The forms of intimacy with Jesus Christ described by Tanya Luhrmann in her work on American evangelicals and Kevin Lewis O’Neill in his study of Guatemalan neo-Pentecostals are good examples of this: Jesus as friend, Jesus as lover.4 In my own research, among apostolic Christians in Zimbabwe, a similar desire for immediacy is expressed through a rejection of the Bible, with written texts being understood as literal barriers to the experience of a “live and direct” faith.5 As I have argued, such types of Protestantism are, in a way, expressions of what Friedrich Schleiermacher and G. W. F. Hegel argued for in their philosophical programs.6 Indeed, this concern with immediacy and mediation is, at heart, the kind of concern that Hegel grappled with in his work on freedom and realization.7

In what follows, I want to expand on these remarks by considering them in relation to the philosophy of Alain Badiou and, in particular, to his work on number. On the face of it, this might seem odd, since Badiou is an avowed atheist, and moreover, I will not be arguing otherwise. But given that Badiou draws on such Christian figures as Saint Paul and Blaise Pascal to help explain his ideas, it is a worthwhile exercise. In fact, as this special issue makes clear and as recent work elsewhere confirms, Badiou is gaining the increasing attention of anthropologists working on religion.8 What has most engaged these anthropologists, especially those working on Christianity, is Badiou’s concept of the event as exemplified in his reading of Saint Paul. And yet while Badiou’s work on Paul and the event are important in their own right, there is good reason to connect Badiou’s version of Paul to his more general arguments about number. In a formal and fundamental sense, this is because everything in Badiou’s philosophy is dependent on the workings of number. As I hope to show, following what I have said above, what links Badiou’s reading of Paul to his work on number is, in particular, the extent to which both exemplify his disavowal of mediation.
For something to be true in Badiou’s terms, it has to be independent of any particularity. This is another way of saying that it has to be free of mediation. Badiou has in this sense crafted a fantasy of immediacy, and one of his most productive applications in the anthropology of religion may well come in terms of understanding how religion deals with the matter of mediation.

I frame my contention in relation to a tradition of nineteenth-century Christianity that has played a significant role in shaping current conceptions of “global Christianity”: British evangelicalism. In line with my interest in Badiou, I focus on the importance of numbers within this evangelical tradition and, in particular, in an organization that served as a powerful conduit for it: the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). As in evangelical and other circles in nineteenth-century Britain in general, counting and statistics became very important within the BFBS and were even perceived as crucial for the realization of its vision of a Christianity that covered the globe. Before turning to this vision in more detail, however, I offer some prefatory remarks on Badiou’s approach to number.

There is a basic distinction in Badiou’s work on number between numbers and Number. Simply put, the former are imperfect and obfuscating instantiations of the latter. We use numbers but “don’t know what they are”; we are gripped by them and “live in the era of number’s despotism.” All aspects of our lives—politics, social thought, cultural representations, the economy, even “our souls” (NN, 3)—express a slavish devotion to the count. “Nothing made into number is of value,” Badiou concludes (ibid., 213).

Badiou does not really have much more to say of substance about numbers in this sense, although he uses the basic argument to offer more elaborate critiques of such ideologies as capitalism and multiculturalism. But his utter contempt for the way in which we have enumerated ourselves can be summed up easily by turning to some classic pop culture versions of dystopia. One example that comes to mind for me is from the cult television series The Prisoner. “I am not a number,” declares Patrick McGoohan, playing Number 6 in the show, again and again. “I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed, or numbered. My life is my own,” as he puts it in one of the most famous sequences. Badiou and Number 6 might very well see eye to eye.

But Badiou does not stop with a critique of the reign of numbers. His work is not about the disavowal of numbers but their recuperation—or,
perhaps more accurately, their proper unveiling. It is in this sense that Badiou is interested in Number (capital $N$), not numbers (lowercase, plural), which he understands as the pure “form of Being” ($NN$, 211) only partly accessible through the deployment of numbers as described thus far. What Badiou advocates is a full-fledged mathematical turn, divorcing thought (and truth) from the uncertainties and specificities of time and place, substance and sentience. As Peter Hallward puts it, for Badiou, “Mathematics is the purest and most general form of thought . . . thought in its most freely creative form, unconstrained by the mediation of any external corporeality, materiality, or objectivity.”12

It is with this last point in mind, about freedom from mediation, that we can draw together the introductory claims of this essay. By offering an anthropological reading of one way in which a global Christianity emerged through the use of numbers, I want to explore how number functions for Badiou. I want to treat Badiou as an anthropological subject of sorts in order to highlight the operations behind his perceptions and arguments. The BFBS is a useful lens through which to view these perceptions and arguments not only because of the ways in which it allows us to investigate the logic of number in a particular form but equally for the link to Badiou’s more specific interest in Christianity and his reading of Saint Paul (the apostle, alongside Peter, most useful to any imagining of a global Christianity). Like others, I am not convinced that Badiou’s understanding of ontology differs fundamentally from the Christian one that serves as his sometime foil, although this doesn’t necessarily make him a crypto-believer.13 Badiou is offering something different from the Christian sensibility, inasmuch as his project is dependent on the generic and not, as with Christianity, the particular. In his terms, Christianity posits being in terms of a “One,” a God, a creator standing outside, before, in exception. In such a system Number and mathematics would come from something, as it were. Badiou is committed to showing this is not the case, that Number and mathematics are—again—“unconstrained.” Mathematics is; “mathematics provides Badiou with a language for describing the general situation of all conceivable situations, regardless of their particular contexts or contents.”14 Mathematics, we might say, is nothing, and no thing. Badiou thus posits what is called a subtractive ontology, according to which “the absolutely initial existence [must] be that of a negation” ($BE$, 67). Whatever is One is an outcome, a “presentation.” And so behind any such unity is multiplicity, the nothing-in-particular. As Hallward notes, for Badiou, “Pure or inconsistent multiplicity is the very being of being.”15
What I’m undertaking here might be understood as an exercise in the anthropology of religion and media. I am interested in how media as “middle grounds” function in Badiou’s work. Key to my argument is Badiou’s faith in the immediacy of Number, its independence from any such middle ground, any such mediator or instantiation. For Badiou, “Mathematics is ontology” (BE, 13). This axiomatic claim, conditioned by his understanding of Number as the only (non)thing that allows this claim to hold, is central to this faith. Without the immanence of Number, Badiou’s project falls apart. His understandings of truth, the event, and the subject are all dependent on their sense of immediacy, their resistance to mediation.

However one might want to tell the story of global Christianity’s emergence, the productive interplay of the evangelical revival and developments in print technology in early-nineteenth-century Britain deserves inclusion. It was evangelicals in this period who could first reasonably imagine universal provision of the Bible—if not theologically, then practically. A nascent empire brought the world into view for them, and a nascent Industrial Revolution a sense of the mechanics through which that world could be reached. Regarding the latter, what mattered most was the affordable, accessible Bible, its costs brought down through a mix of charitable sentiments (raising money to subsidize the translation and production of foreign-language editions) and business sense (driving hard bargains with printers, who had ever-increasing print run capacities).

One of the most notable organizations committed to making this textually saturated world a reality was the British and Foreign Bible Society. Founded in London in 1804, its charter members, both Anglican and non-conformist, resolved to make “a wider dispersion of the Holy Scriptures” its “sole object.” As enshrined in the society’s lore, one of the chief inspirations for its founding is the story of Mary Jones. Her story is probably the closest thing the BFBS has to an event of its own in Badiou’s sense: something that happened that allowed its founders to see the truth of a situation, to move beyond the actually existing structures of thought. Mary was a poor Welsh girl. She wanted nothing more than a Bible of her own, and she scrimped and saved to buy one. When she had enough money, she walked more than twenty miles to Bala, the closest town where Bibles could be had, only to find none available. The evangelicals in London who heard this story, duly relayed by a local reverend, were called to action. They realized children such as Mary should never face such disappointments;
the Bible should be always universally available. As Joseph Hughes, one of the society’s first secretaries, is said to have asked, “If for Wales, why not also for the Empire and the World?” There was in this question a deeply Pauline sentiment, as if the BFBS’s agents could be apostles to the nations. Not only for Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, the Bible was for everyone.

To reach the world the society published existing editions in the largest print runs possible and supported new translations, especially in languages for which no Bible existed. All these editions were published “without note or comment” in an effort to minimize denominational and doctrinal arguments, and sold (but always sold) at the lowest possible cost—an arrangement made possible through the donations (“free contributions,” as they were known) of a member base. Although in the initial years the society suffered teething pains (some quite serious) and although the goal of universal provision was necessarily utopian, the society became a notable success, a “fact of Victorian life.” By the time of its fiftieth anniversary in 1854, the BFBS had distributed twenty-eight million Bibles or scripture portions in 152 languages.

The BFBS was (is) a charity—a publisher that relied on the financial support of members in order to sell Bibles below production costs. But there can be no mistaking that since its inception and despite some early amateurish work, it has been run with business principles in mind. This particular kind of Christian organization was made possible by the expansion of book markets, the rise of modern accountancy, and the processes of secularization (in the sense of differentiation). As the Quaker chemist and meteorologist Luke Howard puts it, “It is a society for furnishing the means of religion, but not a religious society.” This understanding of work for the Church from within the space of a market reflects a long-standing tension within Christian thought about the proper relation between religion and economy—of how they should be demarcated and, often, kept apart. Observers of Christianity have long challenged the clear-cut nature of such distinctions, but inasmuch as they have been part of Christian social ideologies, we catch here a glimpse of what has become a more general process of the commoditization of religion, well known to us today but still protean in a modern sense when the BFBS was founded. By the end of the nineteenth century, this God-driven work in the realm of the market was so well embedded that the society felt able to distribute collection boxes shaped like Bibles (“piggy bank” Bibles), which could be placed in churches
to raise money for the cause. As Sue Zemka writes, “Evangelical theology, in the process of globalization, had been absorbed into an enterprise which pressed to an extreme its ever-present potential for political and economic uses.”

Like many modern charities, the BFBS of the early to mid-nineteenth century needed ways to tell stories that both inspired donations and provided a sense of satisfaction that those donations were making a difference. When it came to inspiration, in many ways the BFBS needed only to ride a wave of popular sentiment. While it did make arguments as to the worthiness of its cause, there was already a significant community of Christians who shared the belief that Bibles should be made universally available and that Bible reading was the privileged medium of and for salvation. More generally, as others have shown, the Bible was a major element in a dominant strand of British nationalism and imperialism in the early Victorian era: Britain was so powerful, and so advanced, because of its commitment to scripture. In this society for the means of furnishing religion, then, we have an example of what has long served as the student’s shorthand for summing up the rationales of empire: Christianity, commerce, and civilization all at once. Reflecting a mood of the day could not have been enough to ensure the BFBS’s success. For that, it needed to satisfy its constituency that its projects, investments, and networks were strong and sound. It is in this respect that the appeal to number mattered most.

One notable aspect of the BFBS’s annual reports and unpublished papers, held in the archives at the University Library in Cambridge and in smaller, national collections throughout the world, is the preponderance of statistics, figures, and accounts they contain. I was somewhat disappointed with this at first, having been in search of the adventures of colporteurs and society agents in foreign and dangerous lands—the kind of prose anthropologists love to dig into. I was even hoping for some behind-the-scenes theological spats. The adventures are there, to be sure, and add much needed spice to the annual reports (the spats, interestingly, are much less in evidence, although not entirely missing). But all this overtly “religious” content is icing, not cake. The cake is the numbers—tables of the society’s accounts, lists of Bibles sold and distributed around the world, updates on the costs of paper.

As quickly becomes clear, however, these numbers are part of the work of spreading God’s word; they are theologically important and help set out the society’s case and vision of a global Christianity in two main ways. First,
the numbers function as objective indicators of progress—signs that stand above the messiness of cultural and historical specificities. As with many modern uses of number, in other words, this gave the society a universal language. The most important accounts of this kind are of Bibles distributed, and in the annual reports the figures are given pride of place. They are also almost always exact. Thus we learn that in the 1867–68 operating year 2,400,076 Bibles and scripture portions were distributed (17,396 more than in 1866–67), bringing the sum total over sixty-four years to 55,069,865. Why not round the numbers out? Why do those seventy-six texts more than 2.4 million matter in the report for 1868? In part because the precision contributes to an image of corporate discipline, but just as significantly because, as BFBS supporters were encouraged to think, each copy stood for something more important: a person, an owner-reader, a saved soul. Bolstered by the more dramatic examples of individual cases (those colporteur adventures), numbers enjoin the society’s constituency to think in absolute, certain, formulaic terms: “incremental contributions to a Protestant British and foreign totality.”

The society’s presentation of its financial accounts worked in much the same way as the presentation of texts, reinforcing its fiscal professionalism and thoroughness down to the quarter penny. The financial accounts also helped make the case, in a way that the numbers of texts could not on their own, that more work needed to be done. This is because the society and its auxiliaries operated at a loss in terms of what was spent on printing and distribution as measured against the money generated from sales. It was the “free donations” of members that filled the gap, a gap always duly presented to that membership in an effort to stress the need for continued support.

While numbers helped make the global struggles of the BFBS concrete and compelling, the scale of its operations could also have the paradoxical effect of rendering the numbers into meaningless signifiers. At a certain point, large numbers simply do not convey anything because they are so large. One way of increasing their impact was to offer the kind of calculations and statistics that we often get from governments, charities, and interest groups today, in which numbers are given some material form that the mind can more easily grasp and appreciate: “It is difficult to conceive of the immense number of units contained in a million . . . [but] suppose you were to put a million Bibles side by side, and that they only measured one inch across the back, they would require a shelf nearly 16 miles in length to hold them.”
The society could not afford for anyone to think that fifty-five million Bibles was anywhere near enough: it wanted such a figure to be impressive but not satisfactory. To guard against this possibility, the materiality of the society’s output was often put into tension with the threats posed to its latent global public by the relentless march of time:

The following calculation, rough and uncertain as it must necessarily be, comes near enough to the truth to convey a faint idea of the vast disproportion between the number of immortal souls who are at this moment in possession of copies of the Word of God, and the number of those who are still destitute of this blessed Word. . . . the Society has distributed 55 million copies in all parts of the world. Other kindred societies, it is supposed, may have unitedly distributed about the same number, making a total of one hundred and ten million copies. . . . The population of the globe is estimated at twelve hundred millions. Since the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society, two generations have passed away, and a third is now upon the stage. These three generations make a total of thirty-six hundred millions; and for these only one hundred and ten millions of Bibles, or parts of the Bible, have been provided. How many, then, have during this short period perished for lack of knowledge! . . . These are solemn and startling facts: and though it is not usual to introduce such calculations into an annual report, your Committee have ventured to submit them for consideration.27

So over sixty-four years of hard work, the society reached only 3 percent of its intended public.

If there is a danger in numbers becoming “just numbers,” there is also an important way in which the society’s appeals to counting and calculation are premised on the desire for their obviation. What will matter is the attainment of one, the transformation of multiplicity into unity: not 3 percent of the world’s population over three generations or even 99 percent. In a way that Badiou might recognize as true to form, for the evangelicals it had to be 100 percent. A universal, global public means oneness in this sense.

Big numbers, then, are only ever a means to an end in the BFBS’s global Christian imagination, in which the number that matters is one. This point leads us on to the second way in which numbers function in the society’s work. For part of what marks Protestant understandings of the
Word-made-text is a belief in the Word’s ultimate translatability. Truth is not tied to any one human tongue; it will flourish as equally in Tswana as in English. This, too, is an accounting for number that informs the BFBS’s mission. But it differs from the accounting for Bibles in the sense that its deployment is premised on the recognition of cultural difference rather than its erasure. To report that there were 2,400,076 copies distributed in 1867–68 is an extracultural account—the use of numbers to make everyone the same. To report that these 2,400,076 copies were distributed in 152 languages (as the 22nd report of the South African Auxiliary does, for instance) is to reintroduce the matter of culture. To fund its translation work, then, the society had to play its supporters’ theologically driven commitment to translatability off the very kind of difference that circulation figures, when taken on their own, tried to mute. Translation was a pressing need, and it was as important for the evangelical Christian to view the world in terms of its diversity as in terms of its unity. In one of the society’s reports, this is referred to as the Christian’s duty to reflect on “the multiplicity of languages”:

How great that multiplicity, how perplexing, how obstructive to the spread and apprehension of thought, not the most experienced colporteur knows, scarcely the most erudite linguist, not even the far-wandering traveller who, like the old Greek wanderer, has seen many cities and many nations of men. With us in our island home how dimly felt: but there are forty languages needed in the Turkish Agency, forty in the South Russian. The colporteur must carry many books he cannot read, and there is a tender heart in every language which none can touch or understand but those in whom it was born. How numberless the rooms in the strange house of human life!—how many closed doors—how impossible to reach the inhabitant within unless one has the golden key—the knowledge of the mother tongue!

The zeal with which the secretaries raced to reach the numberless rooms in the strange house of human life led to occasional trouble. In 1827, Edward Edwards published an article that “heaped scorn” on the society’s translations, which were, he claimed, “unscholarly, philistine and potentially heretical.” Even the society and its supporters felt it necessary sometimes to slow the pace of translation work or to reconsider its contracted representatives. One missionary-translator in Mongolia was dismissed after his fellow translators complained that he appeared to know almost as little
about English (still less Greek or Hebrew) as he did about Mongolian.31 All in all, however, the society pressed on with trying to realize this Protestant vision by getting translations out as quickly as possible.

To sum up, then, one aspect of the BFBS’s appeal to number relies on the notions of transparency and universal validity. Another is how number is folded into the effort to create a universal community: how out of the dozens, hundreds, thousands, and numberless more we can reach one. As we transition to a discussion of Badiou, I’d like to suggest that what these aspects have in common is the overcoming of mediation.

In earlier work, which touches in passing on the BFBS, I have explored how the concern with mediation, as approached in certain Protestant traditions of thought, is met through a conceptualization of the Bible as providing a direct and unmediated connection to God.32 In its strongest versions sola scriptura is based on the argument that scripture cannot be understood in the same way as other mediums—that, in a sense, as the privileged medium, it is not a medium at all. In this section we’ve seen how uses of number contribute to that understanding for the BFBS. In terms of transparency the BFBS’s appeal to number—“sensational statistics,” as Zemka puts it33—is meant to stand above and beyond any particular socio-historical formation. Numbers here exist outside cultural relations and are universally meaningful, universally true. In terms of community, the movement toward one reflects the hope of immediacy, immaterial omnipresence (God), delivered by the ubiquitous presence of a thing (the Bible). With nothing in between. These appeals to number are a significant component of the evangelicals’ imagination of a global Christianity premised on this sense of presence.

While in a simplistic sense this line of argument can be understood as “Protestant” and while the Protestant underpinnings of modern social scientific thought have often been highlighted, it is important not to assume there is an exclusive relation between Protestantism and antimediation. If, again, in a simplistic sense, the Reformation and subsequent waves of iconoclasm can be understood as getting rid of things that stand in the way of a connection to God, it is just as important to recognize that the regulation of mediums, or even their disavowal, does not have to bear the Protestant stamp.34 Mediation is as much an ideological as a technical and a material issue.35 It is not as if a Catholic position would be, “We have all these things in order to frustrate a connection with God.” From any native point of view, proper mediation very often just seems to cancel itself out,
to absence itself from the equation. “Immediacy,” therefore, is not so much the lack of a middle ground as one that goes unquestioned or unnoticed.

I have said I do not think that Badiou is a Christian in potentia or in tenebris. Indeed, Badiou’s concern with immediacy (and Truth) can be linked to an older tradition of thought; he admired Plato. Nevertheless, inasmuch as Badiou has expressed an interest in forming a “triangle” (SP, 3) with the Protestant and the Catholic in his appreciation of Saint Paul, it is worth considering how this logic of immediacy gets articulated in his brand of atheism against a background of Christian thought. And inasmuch as the BFBS is a nineteenth-century organization committed to the Pauline principle of the universal—Victorian era apostles to the nations—the global Christianity it envisioned is a notable feature of such a background. It is not so far, arguably, from this society of evangelicals to the militant Saint Paul, traveling to Rome and Athens, circulating letters among Galatians and Corinthians. The BFBS was composed of militants of this sort putting number to use in their promotion of the Christian Truth Event.

Badiou states, “With Paul we notice a complete absence of the theme of mediation” (SP, 48). This is what makes Paul’s event, and the vision that emerges from it, a Truth Event and not, as Slavoj Žižek might put it, a “pseudo-Event.” It was a beginning and allowed him to see beyond the state of the situation. Paul (as understood by Badiou) is important because of his call “to sharply separate each truth procedure from the cultural ‘historicity’ wherein opinion presumes to dissolve it” (SP, 6). This meant a radical break with the law (Jews) and wisdom (Greeks) in order to reveal a universal truth, “detached from every particularism” (ibid., 42) and encapsulated in the famous (part) passage from Galatians that means so much to Badiou. For Badiou, this disavowal of culture, time, and place is manifest in Paul’s very style of writing: “When one reads Paul, one is stupefied by the paucity of traces left in his prose by the era, genres, and circumstances. There is in this prose, under the imperative of the event, something solid and timeless, something that, precisely because it is a question of orienting a thought toward the universal in its suddenly emerging singularity, but independently of all anecdote, is intelligible to us without having to resort to cumbersome historical mediations” (SP, 36). Badiou is lauding here Paul’s affirmation of something generic. What is most distinctive about a universal truth is, we might say, what is least distinct—the “solid and timeless”
core of Paul’s message that makes sense (“makes truth,” as it were, since all truths are made) everywhere. “There is no truth apart from the generic” (BE, 339).

This is, of course, where Number and mathematics come in. In lay terms it is a mathematical formula that allows this “plugging in” of specifics secondary to the generic formula. The importance of the generic in this sense, and how it helps us understand the premium on immediacy in Badiou’s conception of the event, is made clear in his discussion of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s San Paolo, the script for a film that was never made. In San Paolo the drama of Paul’s turning is transposed into the action of the Second World War Atlantic world. Paul is, to start, a collaborator rooting out members of the French Resistance; Paris is Jerusalem, New York is Rome, Barcelona is Damascus. Paul has his “illumination” (SP, 38) on a dispatch to Barcelona and joins the Resistance. And so on. Although there’s a change in the scenery, the time and place, Pasolini uses Paul’s words to drive his version of the story. According to Badiou, “no one has better illuminated the uninterrupted contemporaneousness of Paul’s prose” (ibid., 36) than Pasolini:

Pasolini’s aim was to turn Paul into a contemporary without modifying any of his statements. He wanted to restore, in the most direct, most violent way, the conviction of Paul’s intrinsic actuality. It was a question of explicitly telling the spectator that it was possible to imagine Paul among us, here, today, in his full physical existence. That it is our society Paul is addressing, that it is for us he weeps, threatens and forgives, attacks and tenderly embraces. He wanted to say: Paul is our fictional contemporary because the universal content of his preaching, obstacles and failures included, remains absolutely real. (ibid., 37)

There is plenty to discuss here about the relevance of the Christianity, but I want to keep focused on how Badiou’s reading of Paul (and Badiou’s reading of Pasolini’s filmic vision of Paul) fits into his (Badiou’s) larger concern with “generic procedures” (art, science, politics, love) as the sources of Truth and how these procedures, in turn, are made possible by Number—by their foundation (despite the problematic nature of that metaphor, given that Badiou’s is a “subtractive ontology”) on Number. Paul is not the be-all and end-all; he is an example, one militant proclaimer of Truth among others. What makes his Truth is, like all Truths, what Badiou calls fidelity to the void—“that which is unpresented, not counted” (ibid., 161),
that which produces “freedom from all relation, a situated production of radical autonomy or self-determination.” As that which is pure and free of all such relations, Number is the generative force behind any glimpses of Truth that events provide. Whether through mathematics, or events from time to time, to “think Number,” as Badiou puts it, is “a question, at once, of delivering Number from the tyranny of numbers, and of releasing some truths from it” (NN, 214).

This is a very quick move through difficult terrain, and there is more ground to cover in terms of Badiou’s treatment and articulation of Number, some of the key features of which I have not even reached. But there is enough here to make the point about Badiou’s understanding of Number’s immanence and how his appreciation of Number—as that which is free from all relations, all cultural or historical specificity, all “real stuff”—is the flame that illuminates his entire project.

At this point it is necessary to address the somewhat awkward relationship between anthropology and Badiou’s philosophy. On the one hand, anthropologists Jon Bialecki and Caroline Humphrey have emphasized that Badiou’s language and conceptual commitments—particularly his ideas of the state and the situation—are amenable to the anthropological project. As Humphrey puts it: “The great advantage of Badiou’s theory for the purposes of anthropological analysis is that he accounts for the conjuring up of the subject in what he calls ‘the situation,’ that is, real, substantive, historically, and geographically particular conditions.” While I accept that the formal arrangement of Badiou’s philosophy includes such conditions and that these make it usable for anthropology, it is also notable that Badiou is unable to bridge his logic with the real world, and it is not entirely clear that he wants to. On the other hand, then, anthropologists have to take note of the extent to which history and culture are insignificant in themselves for Badiou. What Badiou is most interested in—the question of being—cannot, in his view, be approached through history and culture. This is why Number is so important to him; it is the only purely non-thing, the only semiotic system that is not a semiotic system. Its truth is dependent on nothing and will go on as such. But at least in the dominant U.S. and British traditions, anthropologists do not think this way; they do not look on historical mediations as “cumbersome,” as Badiou describes them in his interpretation of Saint Paul. In any case, what would strike most anthropologists
reading Badiou’s *Saint Paul* is precisely the lack of attention to what many of us still call, perhaps quaintly, “context.”

This is an issue not only for human scientists who might feel bracketed out of Badiou’s project but for Badiou, given his political commitments in France. According to Hallward, his most important critical friend and commentator in the Anglo world, *Logics of Worlds*—the sequel to *Being and Event*—is Badiou’s most sustained attempt to bring being and beings (ontology and history) into the same frame. But this “return of mediation,” as John Milbank points out, falls well short of coherency. As even Hallward concludes, in *Logics* “Badiou assumes but does not account for the status of the middle and the mediating term—the status of beings (étants). Neither Badiou’s ontology nor his logic seem [sic] to provide any clear place for ordinary ontic reality.”

In November 2008, I met with James Catford, the CEO of the BFBS. It was one of a series of meetings with him over the course of a three-year ethnographic project on the society’s contemporary program of “Bible advocacy.” One of the points I raised was the irony that advocacy work could so often involve no actual Bibles—the material artefacts that have always been the raison d’être of the society. No colporteurs with wagons full of Bibles in this day and age, not in England anyway. Catford disagreed slightly with my characterization of what the society is all about: provision, yes, but also “circulation and use.” And it’s the last of these—use—that Catford hopes to foster. In many ways this has to involve a shift away from the artifact and toward the embodiment and articulation of its message. To illustrate this point and its theological basis, Catford brought up Paul’s well-known image in 2 Corinthians of the treasure and the pot: “Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us.” This image helps Catford stay focused on what he thinks should really matter: the Word of God. In a way that is not always recognizable in the kind of nineteenth-century “theological numeracy” discussed earlier, the Bible and the Word are not always identical. The Word is treasure. Treasures need pots, but it’s important not to mistake one for the other.

Badiou is also drawn to this Pauline imagery, this “magnificent and famous metaphor” (*SP*, 53): “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” Treasure is event; its subjective declaration, from a position of fidelity, servitude, and weakness, is the pot (earthen vessel).
Whoever is the subject of a truth (of love, of art, or science, or politics) knows that, in effect, he bears a treasure, that he is traversed by an infinite power. Whether or not this truth, so precarious, continues to deploy itself depends solely upon his subjective weakness. Thus, one may justifiably say that he bears it only in an earthen vessel, day after day enduring the imperative—delicacy and subtle thought—to ensure that nothing shatters it. For with the vessel, and with the dissipation into smoke of the treasure it contains, it is he, the anonymous bearer, the herald, who is equally shattered. (SP, 54)

Badiou is right to note that for Paul, Christ is not a mediation: he is not a conduit for the divine, but the divine. As I believe the juxtaposition of these two readings of 2 Corinthians 4:7 suggests, however, against the backdrop of our discussions on number and mediation this does not mean Paul has no interest in mediation per se. The distinction between treasure and pot is, rather, proof of his commitment to a media theory of sorts, to a concern with the middle ground and its proper relation. But here, too, I think we have a glimpse of a possible limit to Badiou’s refusal of relations and materiality—or, at the least, a recognition on his part that such a refusal can never be wholly owned. What Badiou gives us is, to be sure, an approach to (im)mediation that is, if such a thing is possible, new. In terms of a commitment to relations, however, there is still, from this anthropological vantage, an aspect of the Christian legacy worth fighting for.50

Notes

I would like to thank Jon Bialecki, Michael Hardt, Caroline Humphrey, and Joel Robbins for their helpful comments on this essay.


3 Webb Keane, Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter (Berkeley:


5 Engelke, A Problem of Presence.

6 Ibid., 20–28.

7 For related readings of Hegel, see Dominic Boyer, Understanding Media: A Popular Philosophy (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007); and Eisenlohr, “Technologies of the Spirit.”


9 While I have significant reservations about the arguments, Callum Brown’s The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000 (London: Routledge, 2001) does an admirable job of conveying the importance of statistics to nineteenth-century British evangelicals. For a helpful account of how statistics were central to colonial-state projects of control, see Arjun Appadurai’s discussion in Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 114–35.

10 Alain Badiou, Number and Numbers, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 1; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as NN.

11 Patrick McGoohan as Number 6, from The Prisoner, available on YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=29JewlGsYxs (accessed on September 25, 2009).

12 Peter Hallward, Badiou: A Subject to Truth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 55.


14 Hallward, Badiou, 57.

15 Ibid., 90.


18 As Howsam writes, the stipulation about free Bibles reflected the founder-members’ consideration of “contemporary concerns about the degrading effects of charity upon the poor”; as one committee member puts it, “a gratuitous distribution could not satisfy the
minds of those who wished to counteract the degrading influence of Pauperism, to check the progress of Infidelity, and to extend the empire of Religion and Morality” (ibid., 50).

19 Ibid., xiii.

20 The BFBS is still operating, in a network of more than 140 national Bible societies. In its domestic work, however, which covers England and Wales, the emphasis has shifted from provision to promotion, based on the sense that there is little unmet desire on the part of the reading public. See my “Strategic Secularism: Bible Advocacy in England,” Social Analysis 53.1 (2009): 39–54, for a preliminary account of the contemporary focus.

21 Howsam, Cheap Bibles, 7.


23 Needless to say, this is a simplified version of the story and should not be taken as a just-so kind of story. Not everyone supported this kind of evangelism—not even all Christians. High Church spokesmen in particular were often scathing critics of such ecumenical projects. See Howsam, Cheap Bibles, 13–18.


27 Ibid., 22–23.

28 Abstract of the Report of 1894 of the British and Foreign Bible Society, held in the South African Auxiliary, Cape Town, held in the Archives of the Bible Society of South Africa, Cape Town.

29 Ibid., 26–27.

30 Howsam, Cheap Bibles, 15.


33 Zemka, Victorian Testaments, 214.

34 For a good example of this, see Robert Orsi’s discussion of what he calls the “season of iconoclasm” within the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, in the 1960s, in which “devotions were derided as infantile, childish, or as exotic imports from Catholic Europe, alien and inappropiate in the American context.” Robert Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 56.

35 In anthropology, Keane’s idea of “semiotic ideologies” has been particularly productive for driving this point home; see his Christian Moderns. Mediation is also a “sensational” issue, as Birgit Meyer argues; see her Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Religion (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 2006).

36 I am thinking here in particular of Plato’s Phaedrus, in which these issues are framed by the debate over the written and the spoken word; see The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Lane Cooper (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 475–525.

37 It is not an arbitrary question to ask: what of the Jew? For an engaging answer, see Daniel


39 Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (New International Version).

40 Here is how Pasolini describes it: “Why would I transpose the worldly events of his life into our time? It is very simple: to give, cinematographically, in the most direct and violent way, the impression and certitude of his actuality. In sum, to tell the viewer explicitly, and without ever forcing him to think, that ‘St. Paul is here, today, among us,’ and almost physically and materially so.” Cited in Silvestra Mariniello, “St. Paul: The Unmade Movie,” *Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* 9.2/3 (1999): 72.

41 Hallward, *Badiou*, xxxi.

42 Bialecki, “Disjuncture”; and Humphrey, “Reassembling Individual Subjects.”


44 Anthropologists and Badiou might also have awkwardness over the extent to which number and statistics shape anthropological thought. Most anthropologists would say that their discipline is distinguished by its refusal to submit to the reign of number. By and large, anthropology has been distinguished by its rejection of statistical thinking. For more detailed discussions of this point in relation to traditions of U.S. cultural anthropology and British social anthropology, respectively, see Michael Chibnik, “The Use of Statistics in Sociocultural Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 14 (1985): 135–57; and Talal Asad, “Ethnographic Representation, Statistics, and Modern Power,” in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*, ed. Brian Keith Axel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 66–91.

Badiou, however, does not seem to accept this, as when he writes: “Number governs the quasi-totality of the ‘human sciences’ . . . Statistics invades the entire domain of these disciplines” (*NN*, 2). Although anthropology is not explicitly named, Badiou does disparage cultural facts (which is what anthropologists often trade in) as numerical facts and emphasizes that “whatever produces number can be culturally located” (*NN*, 3)—and cultural locations are no good thing.

45 Milbank, “The Return of Mediation.”


48 2 Corinthians 4:7 (Good News Bible UK).

49 2 Corinthians 4:7 (King James Version).