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Anthropology, Pentecostalism, and the New Paul: Conversion, Event, and Social Transformation

Saint Paul Superstar

In certain high-visibility philosophical circles, the early twenty-first century has belonged surprisingly to Saint Paul. Held up by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, among others, as a figure who models the nature of radical change that arrives not as the result of the teleological march of progress but rather as an unexpected event, Paul has gathered around him those who, as Adrian Johnston puts it, embrace “the ‘weak messianism’ of a doctrine of events” as a replacement for “the strong messianism of . . . Hegelian-style Marxism covered with dust dating from the nineteenth century.”¹ Johnston’s reference to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and its invocation of a “weak messianic force” as the kind of transformative power humans possess is apt here, for by the end of the twentieth century Benjamin’s work came to seem prescient in its rejection of all models of progress, including Marxist ones, that saw progress as an inevitable process.² At the same time, in the theses Benjamin famously suggests that any materialism shorn of its progressivist assumptions would need to enlist the help of
theology if it were to win its battles to shape the direction of social change, though it would have to keep that theology hidden, like the dwarf stashed away inside the only apparently mechanical chess-playing automaton its job was to operate. For the new philosophical Paulines, as Eric L. Santner has pointed out, Saint Paul is that dwarf. This is true whether or not they accept Agamben’s claim that Paul also played this role for Benjamin. For these philosophers, all of us now, if we are headed in the right direction, are on the road to Damascus.

The present age is one in which not only are leading materialists taking Benjamin’s advice about enlisting the help of theology, but they are also ready to bring the dwarf out of hiding—hence, the move from theology as materialist messianic secret to the age of Saint Paul Superstar. If the Christian Century saw Jesus Christ Superstar as rescuing Jesus from the church and making him relevant to the unchurched masses, surely the new Paulines, by bringing Paul out into the open, have done the same for the intellectual masses of today. The question that remains is, why bring the dwarf out of hiding now? The most obvious answer points to the current vogue for post-secularist renegotiations of the relationship between the religious and the secular. Since this point is already well made by others, I turn my attention to a less regularly noted context in which it makes sense to situate the current turn to Paul: the explosive spread of Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity around the world over the last four decades.

Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity, to which I will generally refer as Pentecostal, hold that the gifts of the Holy Spirit—gifts such as those of speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesying—are available to all believers. Pentecostalism first emerged in 1906 at the Azusa Street revival, and since that time versions of it have claimed six hundred million converts, many of them in areas of the global South in which Christianity has not historically been a major religious presence. Taking stock of Pentecostalism’s rapid rise to global prominence, a rise that has been particularly intense in the last forty or so years, evangelical historian Mark Noll has aptly observed that its emergence “has had world historical significance.”

A form of Christianity firmly rooted in Acts and in the Pauline epistles, Pentecostalism’s coming to global prominence has also been an event that, whether the new philosophical Paulines realize it or not—and it is not clear that they do—has given their models of Pauline revolution a worldly reference they would not have had previously. Thus, for example, the argument frequently made by Latin Americanists that Pentecostalism’s growth
in the region they study has been fed by the failure of liberation theology to deliver on its promises makes it a powerful mirror for those who have made the turn toward Pauline materialism. More than that, the recent spread of Pentecostalism renders the current Pauline moment one that comprehends the radically transformed lives of a huge number of Christians around the world as well as it does the concerns of those who carry out their debates in the academic seminar rooms of the global North.

Early conversations, albeit with mixed results, have begun among scholars such as Žižek, Badiou, and Agamben and theologians and historians of early Christianity. What has not yet really begun is any sustained dialogue between these Continental Pauline thinkers and those who study the lives of Pentecostal converts. Such a dialogue would turn on the question of how we might read the work of philosophers of the event who claim Paul as their patron saint against what it means to become Christian in the contemporary world.

I raise the possibility of this dialogue as an anthropologist who studies global Pentecostalism. I also do so as someone involved in the recent development of the anthropology of Christianity, a field to which the study of Pentecostalism has been central. The anthropology of Christianity is largely a product of the last decade and as such is a late arrival on the social scientific scene. Given the prominence of Christianity throughout much of the world, one might have expected anthropologists to have attended to it earlier. One of the first agendas for this new area of study has been exploring why they did not. Many explanations have been offered. One that is relevant to my argument suggests that anthropologists have shied away from studying Christianity because they have not generally been much interested in studying radical cultural changes of the kind that converts to Pauline forms of the faith tend to claim they have experienced. Anthropology has mostly been, to put it otherwise, a science of continuity, dedicated to showing the force of cultural reproduction in human life. It has done important work along these lines, but its interest in how structures engineer their own repetition in social life has left it few resources for studying radical change.

Anthropologists who have lately found themselves studying Pentecostals have come up hard against this disciplinary limit. Over and over again they listen to converts narrate their lives in terms of just the kind of eventful discontinuities expected by the new philosophical Paulines. If anthropologists take these narratives seriously, they must forego relying on continuity argu-
ments claiming that no matter what such converts say, if you look closely, you will see that they are just dressing up their traditional understandings in the lightly worn clothes of new religious ideas and practices. But once anthropologists give up this kind of argument, they are faced with the difficult task of developing theoretical frameworks that render such discontinuity sensible in anthropological terms.15

It is precisely at this point that it makes sense to bring anthropologists and the new philosophical Paulines into dialogue. The anthropologists can bring to this encounter materials pertaining to the way actually existing Pauline transformations work in the contemporary world, while the philosophers can bring carefully conceptualized models of change as radical discontinuity and event. There is promise, then, that each side might complement the other. This essay tries to realize some portion of that promise.

Before commencing with my argument along these lines, I want to suggest that there is one other body of work that deserves some place in this discussion. This is the scholarship that has grown up particularly since the 1970s on the problem of Paul’s relationship to the Jewish law. At stake in debates about how Paul related to the Jewish law is the veracity of the received Lutheran view—dominant in Protestant circles until recently—that after his conversion Paul saw Judaism as legalistic in the sense that it was committed to the idea that salvation could be gained only through strict observance of the law God had given to the Jewish people. In the wake of his conversion, Paul came to see that salvation instead depended on faith, and he claimed on the basis of this that Christians must wholly reject the Jewish emphasis on the law if they are to be saved. For many contemporary interpreters, writing after the appearance of E. P. Sanders’s hugely influential reconstruction of the Judaism of Paul’s time, this understanding of Paul’s postconversion relationship to Judaism is inaccurate.16 It is inaccurate, Sanders argues, because in fact the Judaism of Paul’s time was not legalistic, and hence, Paul could not have rejected it as such. The idea that he rejected it on legalistic grounds is more a projection of Luther’s own preoccupation with how abject sinners could possibly be saved than a fair reckoning with the historical facts as they can be known today. Those who follow Sanders support what is known as the “new perspective” on Paul and rethink Paul’s relationship to Judaism in terms other than those of the dominant Lutheran view.17

In light of this new perspective on Paul, many scholars now render the Pauline break between Judaism and Christianity in terms less radi-
cal than those used in popular and scholarly post-Reformation accounts. The immense debate the new perspective has inspired is relevant to my argument here because, as Ward Blanton observes, the image of Paul as a master of radical, evental rupture that is so dear to the new philosophical Paulines depends on the traditional Lutheran view that sees him breaking decisively with Jewish legalism—and with the particularity that legalism supposedly vouchsafed by defining the Jews as recipients of the law because they were the chosen people—in order to install a new religious orientation grounded not in the law of a given nation but in a universally available faith. In contrast to the view of the event as a clean break, the new perspective has forced us to ask what the postevental subject does with its past—does it reject it entirely or come into some more complex relationship of negotiation with it? This is part of what is at issue in varying interpretations of Paul’s relationship to the law, and it deserves to be in play in any account of the event that stays true to the complexity of its unfolding. That is why I will, toward the close of this discussion, briefly bring this debate to the table alongside the anthropology of Christianity and the new Pauline philosophies.

Having registered that the debate about Paul and the law raises important questions about the complexity of the evental aftermath, I should note that the model of Christian conversion experience that has spread so rapidly around the world in the decidedly post-Reformation Pentecostal movement is much more in keeping with the Lutheran view of a radical rupture with and rejection of the past than it is with any more messy notion of change. Thus anthropological studies of Pentecostal Christian conversion show that new converts often want to break completely with their pasts in just the kinds of discontinuous jolts the philosophical Paulines hope to theorize. For that reason, I begin with a consideration of the image of the event as radical rupture as it appears in one part of the new philosophical Pauline literature.

Event, Subject, and Change: Badiou’s Model of Pauline Discontinuity

Out of the ever-expanding list of new philosophical writings on Paul, I am going to deal here only with Badiou’s. Although Žižek is often in dialogue with Badiou and might be included on that account, and even though I regret leaving aside the emphasis on messianism that Agamben adds to the discussion, I will stick to Badiou here. The primary reason for this is that
Badiou conceptualizes the problem of change in a way that is tractable for anthropologists. As noted, anthropologists have made their strongest contributions on the side of structure and reproduction. Like them, Badiou sees the social world as most of the time taking the form of structured “situations.” These situations are structured by “states” that recognize or represent their regular, predictable, “countable” features. Through this process of representation, the state engineers its own reproduction by continually generating the same “count of the count”—or representation of recognizable features—out of the material presented by the situation. This view of the organization of the social world is closely akin to many anthropological understandings of the way culture creates order in social life. If we were to correlate the two views, the state would become culture, which by both guiding action and determining what can meaningfully count as an outcome of action engineers its own reproduction through time. Against those who in nominalist fashion would like to do away with all talk of such reproducible structural meta-levels of social life in favor of a sole focus on heterogeneity and becoming, Badiou recognizes how much the former view gets right about how social life works. Many anthropologists should have no trouble following Badiou this far.

Having developed an understanding of the reproducible state, Badiou’s next step is to ask how, given the reproductive power of culture/the state, anything new can ever gain purchase on social life. Here he moves onto ground few anthropologists have successfully canvassed. Having made themselves expert in studying culture/the state of the situation, anthropologists have not often developed models of radical change and tend, when they are not documenting reproduction, to concentrate on modeling gradual transformative drift or describing contestations in which people take positions that are already fully defined by the culture/state. Indeed, with the exception of Marshall Sahlins, no anthropologist working with a strong notion of culture has become a major disciplinary figure by writing primarily about eventful cultural change. For this reason, Badiou’s model of the event is the feature of his thought that makes him most original for anthropologists, even as his insistence that the event is not “readable” without an analysis that also relies on “structural formalism” makes him an appropriate interlocutor for them.

At the level of resolution I employ in reading him here, there are four crucial aspects to Badiou’s theory of the event: the existence of elements of a situation not recognized by the state; the need for events to elicit subjects
faithful to them if they are to have any impact on social life; the process of “forcing,” by which postevental subjects bring previously unrecognized elements to bear transformatively on the situation; and the universalism that defines an event. I will flesh these points out in turn.

For Badiou, every situation contains elements that exist but are not recognized by the state (Being, 97). In the language of Being and Event, they are presented by the situation, but not represented, not counted, at the level of the state. Most cultural anthropologists have neglected this point—ignoring rather than theorizing the extent to which social life is always in excess of the representations that work to structure it.23 For Badiou, these unrepresented elements of a situation are crucial for opening up the possibility of evental change and for laying the basis for the appearance of what he calls “evental sites.” The way such change can happen is by finding sites that make possible the surfacing of previously unrecognized elements and changing the existing state by making it take them into account.

The existence of unrepresented elements is common to every situation (part of the work that set theory does for Badiou is to demonstrate the necessity of this) and does not on its own bring about change. What initiates the possibility for change is the irruption of an event. Events in Badiou’s system are happenings that cannot be encompassed by the representations of the state (Being, 178). Further, they are not caused by the state of the situation—they are, instead, in radical discontinuity with it. This is what makes Badiou’s theory of change a viable alternative to determinist models of change. But if events happen of their own accord, they are not effective by themselves. They need to recruit subjects who will be faithful to them, who will work to realize their consequences by radically transforming the state that preexists them. Only those who faithfully heed the call of an event in this way are subjects for Badiou, and by definition, then, they are subjects who work for change.

Subjects do this work, on Badiou’s account, by what he calls “forcing” (Being, 403). Forcing involves linking aspects of the event—its new understandings and the previously unrepresented elements of the situation it brings to the surface—to already represented elements of the situation in such a way that they are transformed. Sometimes this requires developing names for elements that do not yet exist in the situation but that will exist after the event’s effects have been more fully realized. Subjects speak these names as if it were in the “future anterior” tense, noting what will have been the case once the situation has been further transformed
In Badiou’s model of forcing, he points us toward a processual model of change; although the event arrives in an instant, it is its “situational unfolding” that he aims to study. This focus on processes of change gives Badiou’s work a socially realistic character lacking in many other event-based notions of change as immediate.

Finally, Badiou understands genuine events to be ones whose import is universal. They must address their content to every person, regardless of what particular identities he or she has under the representational regime of the state that is currently in play. On my reading, this is why Badiou reserves the designation “truth” for what is revealed by an event. What is known only through the state and its representations, representations that among other things break up the social world into particular identities, is merely “knowledge”—it is not universal and (therefore) it is not true. Subjects who are faithful to an event work to spread the universal truth it reveals.

This is Badiou’s model of change as I will work with it in the remainder of this essay. For Badiou, it is a model that is exemplified by Paul (Saint Paul, 2). In the Jewish situation in which Paul lived, the event was Jesus’ resurrection (Saint Paul, 45). Paul encounters this event on the road to Damascus, where it comes to him suddenly: “Nothing leads up to it” (ibid., 17). Paul makes himself faithful to this event, and in becoming the Apostle to the Gentiles, he preaches its universal message of salvation available to all. He brings out its universal character most eloquently in Galatians 3:28, when he writes that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (ibid., 9). This claim is enough to mark Paul’s break with the states (in Badiou’s sense) that governed the ancient world in general (ibid.). But because salvation is addressed to all, it also must be noted that it “bears no privileged relation to the Jewish community” from which both Jesus and Paul emerged (ibid., 23). On Badiou’s reading, “Paul emphasizes rupture rather than continuity with Judaism” (ibid., 35). His epistles are “charged from beginning to end with the revolutionary announcement of a spiritual history that has been broken in two” (ibid., 62–63). It is this radical discontinuity with the state of the Jewish past, grounded as it is in particularity, that allows Paul to suspend “differences for the benefit of a radical universality” and to address the event of the resurrection “to all without exception” (ibid., 74).

In Badiou’s discussion of Paul, he does not take up several aspects of his model of change that I have drawn from Being and Event (and this is
why I discussed that earlier work first and in more detail). He does not, for example, explicitly consider the role of unrepresented elements of Paul’s Jewish situation in preparing the evental site or in transforming the state once subjects have recognized the event. Nor does he make use of his notion of forcing. But along with neglecting these parts of his model in his discussion of Paul, he also introduces one important new idea: that of the postevental person as a “divided” subject. In *Being and Event* and elsewhere in his work, Badiou often presents the subject of the event as wholly constituted by its fidelity to the universal truth it has been given. But in wrestling with Paul’s language of the flesh and the spirit and of the way of death versus the way of life, Badiou acknowledges that being single-mindedly a subject of the event may not be easy, or that the subject, to use a word Badiou relies on regularly, may not be so “pure” in its constitution. For in the model Badiou draws from Paul, all subjects must reckon with both the pull of the represented particularities that have governed their lives until the event and the guiding star of universalism that comes to direct them. As he puts it, referring to law in the sense of the Jewish law, “Law and grace are for the subject the name of the constituting weave through which he is related to the situation as it is and to the effects of the event as they have to become” (ibid., 63). As we will see, this notion of a divided subject fits more neatly than that of the pure subject of the event with what we know about contemporary Pauline conversions, and it will also help us find our way to questions about how one lives the universal that are also at stake in the theological literature on Paul’s relationship to the law. And more generally, this notion is closer to the processual strain of Badiou’s model, which I have emphasized throughout. I turn now to putting that model to work in understanding some materials concerning conversion in the contemporary world.

**On Pentecostal Conversion as Event: A Case from Papua New Guinea**

In this section, I analyze the course of Pentecostal conversion among one group of people in terms of the model of evental change I have drawn from Badiou. The group in question is the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (PNG), a group with whom I carried out extensive ethnographic research in the early 1990s. Many of the themes that mark Urapmin conversion, and particularly the emphasis on treating conversion as a rupture that renders the present disjointed from the past, are also prominent in other cases
of Pentecostal conversion. But because I argue that the situation of contemporary Pentecostal converts speaks substantively to the concerns of the new philosophical Paulines, it makes sense to present a single case in some detail.

The Urapmin are a group of approximately 390 people living in the West Sepik Province of PNG. The Australian colonial era began in the Min region the Urapmin inhabit in the 1940s. But remote even by PNG standards (no vehicular road goes to Urapmin territory, there is no airstrip to land light aircraft, and there is no electricity), the Urapmin were rarely visited by Westerners during the colonial era, just as they have rarely been visited by PNG government representatives since the country’s independence in 1975. Another group that has largely left the Urapmin to themselves has been the missionaries of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society who began to work among the Urapmin’s more accessible neighbors during the 1950s. As their neighbors became more involved in the Christian faith and as they correlative began to devote less time to the regionally organized traditional ritual system of which Urapmin were among the leaders, Urapmin adults determined to learn more about the new religion that was transforming the wider context in which they lived. By the early 1960s, they had begun to send young men to attend Christian schools the mission had set up among their neighbors. Over the next decade, a large proportion of the younger men in Urapmin received such schooling. Almost all of them became Christians. Many of them remained connected to the mission, finding work with it evangelizing groups even more remote than their own. Others brought their knowledge of Christianity home to Urapmin and began to teach both older and younger people the basics of the faith.

The period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was a complex one in Urapmin. On the one hand, many young men had converted and had a good deal of Christian knowledge. Some were living outside the community as evangelists, but many were living at home and spreading knowledge of Christianity quite widely throughout the Urapmin community. On the other hand, religious practice in Urapmin remained markedly traditional. Urapmin religion had always been male dominated and gerontocratic, with men in their mid-twenties and younger and women of all ages expected to know next to nothing of any import about religious matters and having only minor roles to play in religious practice. So the Christianization of the younger men did little to change how religion was collectively prac-
ticed in Urapmin. Even as older men themselves came to learn the major planks of the Christian faith, they continued to operate the traditional ritual system as the center of religious life. Moreover, most Urapmin remained unconverted. Drawing on Badiou’s conceptualization, we can argue that at this point Christianity was “presented” in Urapmin—it existed within the Urapmin situation—but was not “represented” at the level of the state of the situation. It had no concrete reference to life as it was lived in that state.

As the Urapmin narrate their past, all of this changed abruptly in 1977. During that year, a Pentecostal-style charismatic revival movement that had been flourishing in the Solomon Islands migrated across the highlands of PNG, carried by indigenous people. Several Urapmin who were studying at a regional bush Bible college encountered it there and were possessed by the Holy Spirit. Along with others at the college, these Urapmin students moved quickly to bring the revival to their home communities. Once the revival arrived in Urapmin, many people began to be “kicked” by the Holy Spirit, feeling convinced of their own sinfulness as their bodies shook uncontrollably. Some also received gifts of speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesying. Over the following months, everyone in Urapmin witnessed the Holy Spirit’s power, either directly in their own bodies or by watching those close to them have charismatic experiences. By the end of the year, everyone in Urapmin had converted, and the community had in its own eyes become a completely Christian one.

The revival in Urapmin was clearly an event of the kind written about by Badiou and the other new Pauline philosophers. In Urapmin experience, it arrived wholly unexpectedly when, as they say, “God came down and got us.” It also made little sense in terms of the traditional state of the situation in which they lived—a state in which Christianity existed for most people only as a diverse set of half-conceptualized cosmological ideas with no anchorage in the conduct of daily life. The revival transformed this situation, convincing the Urapmin of the truth of Christianity by showing, as they say, its “power.” As many Urapmin told me, it was only after they felt the Holy Spirit kick them that they knew that God was “really there” and that the Bible was “true.” The sense they were able to make of what was happening to them depended on the sudden ability they had to shape the previously unrepresented aspects of Christianity that had been presented in Urapmin for a decade into a cogent new model for living. As one man who had attended the mission school put it, up until the revival, he “pretended to read” the Bible, but he did not really understand what he read. Once the
revival started, “God’s spirit came and gave me strength and opened my eyes.” From that point on, the “Bible was in the open”—he could read it and make sense of it in terms of his own life.29 In similar ways, the event of revival made Christianity a meaningful force in the lives of all Urapmin by the end of 1977.

Urapmin tend to narrate the revival as if it happened in an instant, and in most people’s personal experience of their own conversion, this was likely experientially true—among them, as Badiou would have it, “every” Christian “subject is charismatic” and can point to a personal moment of charismatic experience, or of witnessing such experience, as its initial evental encounter with the truth of Christianity (Saint Paul, 77). But one can also elicit more detailed historical accounts of the revival that show a process whereby those who had been to mission schools or the regional Bible college and who had already converted before the revival and served as pastors made themselves subjects of the event of revival before others did so and quickly began a process of forcing the truth of the revival into relationship with the traditional state that governed life in the community. They did this by removing sacred ancestral bones from the cult houses in which they had been worshipped, eating foods that were understood to be tabooed by important ancestors or nature spirits, and encouraging others to discard any personal magical bones or other objects they possessed. Through their forcing, these men made it evident that in the terms of the truth of the revival, all non-Christian spiritual forces exist only as evil powers that people must battle against, not obey. Even as others were still awaiting charismatic experiences that would make them active subjects of the event, these early subjects began registering the effects of the event on the Urapmin situation. Once all Urapmin had become subjects themselves, they were able to inhabit a world that such forcing had made ready for them.

For Badiou, an event must be universal in its address. To anthropological ears—trained as they are to listen for particularity and always ready to hear the distinctive timbre of the Western voice in arguments about universalism—this is the part of his theory most likely to sound jarring on first encounter. I will come back to some concerns with universalism, but here it is worth noting that even the universalist requirement was met in three important respects by the event of the Urapmin revival. First, the revival was addressed to and experienced by men and women, young and old alike. This was in marked contrast to the traditional pattern of religion in Urapmin, which as noted made it primarily an affair of older men. In the years
following the revival, the Urapmin worked to realize this aspect of its universalizing push in their practice of Christianity. Although they had no tradition of spirit mediumship, in the wake of the revival female Holy Spirit mediums became, along with male pastors, the most important religious specialists in the community. Furthermore, pastors and other influential members of the community routinely encourage young men and women to preach and to take church leadership roles, and in daily life all manner of people speak of Christian matters with an authority they claim on the basis of their own encounters with the Holy Spirit.

A second universalizing effect of the Urapmin response to the event of the revival has been at least as profound. What Urapmin have come to see as their traditional “religion” featured an elaborate set of taboos governing contact between men and women and who could eat what foods. The taboos concerning male-female contact meant that adult Urapmin men slept in collective “men’s houses” in the center of each village, while women and children lived in surrounding “women’s houses.” Men and women also walked through the Urapmin territory on separate paths, preventing unexpected encounters. Further, men and women and older and younger people could not, in most contexts, eat together. The food taboos served to define each person’s gender and age identities with great specificity and to prevent commensality across many of the divisions they put in place. All of this focus on separating people of different identities was further elaborated through the male dominance of religious practice. In response to the revival, the Urapmin dismantled this entire system. Everyone now eats the same things, people eat together, and men and women sleep together in family homes and walk on the same paths. Men’s houses are now gone (except for one, which stands more as a communal clubhouse and is occasionally entered by women). By removing these taboos, the Urapmin have radically reorganized their landscape and have greatly lessened the role gender and age distinctions play in daily life.

The third and final universalizing thrust of Urapmin Christianity is its treatment of a distinction between “white” and “black” identities that has come to organize much Urapmin understanding over the course of the colonial and independence periods. As the Urapmin view the world population, it is divided between black people, who are prototypically Papua New Guinean like themselves, and white people, who live beyond PNG. Black people are the opposite of white ones along a large number of dimensions: blacks are, for example, poor, ignorant, fractious, and willfully uncontrolled,
while whites are rich, smart, cooperative, and well behaved. Blacks and whites are also segregated in space, with black places hard to live in and full of danger and white places developed and secure. I could go on at length in this vein, for it is hard briefly to convey the extent to which the black/white opposition saturates Urapmin understandings of the earthly realm. But perhaps it will help anyone somewhat familiar with ethnographic accounts of life in Melanesia or in many other places as well to say that since the revival, the black/white opposition has come to perform the work of symbolic organization once performed in Urapmin by that between male and female.

But even as the revival has, by attenuating the male/female distinction, cleared space for the black/white distinction to become culturally preeminent, it has also allowed the Urapmin a position from which to imagine the universalist dissolution of the black/white distinction itself. For the Urapmin, Christianity is a “white” religion: it arose, as they reckon it, in a white place; it was brought to PNG by white missionaries; and Jesus was white. The Urapmin have been largely unable to participate in the white economic, educational, or political systems, but as Christians they have been able to take up a place in this white religion. Their occupation of that place promises them that when Jesus returns, an event they believe is imminent, the truly faithful among them will go to the same heaven as faithful whites. In this heaven, Christian universalism will be fully realized. There will be no distinction between blacks and whites in heaven, Urapmin like to say, and all will live in the same way.

But the fact that heavenly life remains at this point a hope rather than a reality indicates that there is some drag on the Urapmin accomplishment of Christian universalism on earth. In many ways, the Urapmin worry that even as Christians they are unable to reach the standards they impute to white religious fidelity, standards they must reach to gain heaven’s promise. As Urapmin exclaim constantly, they do not know as much as most white Christians about the Christian cosmos. And even more damaging is their greater propensity, as they see it, to fall into sin. This propensity is rooted in those aspects of their black identity they have not been able to dissolve in the solvent of Christian universalism. Blacks like them, they say, cannot organize their lives together; they are too quick to anger and to fight, a “road” that leads them to sin. They are convinced that their propensity to sin is rooted in who they have been, in that black part of them not eradicated by the event of revival and their fidelity to it. In the next section
I want to consider what this aspect of the postevental Urapmin situation indicates about how difficult it can be to dwell in any “pure” way in the universal, regardless of the fidelity one shows to the event.

**Divided Subjects, Part-Cultures, and the Perils of the Universal Life**

When Urapmin doubt that they have broken with the past as fully as they feel they should have, they exemplify the situation of Badiou’s divided subject. The divided subject is one that works constantly to overcome the particular life it has led in light of its newfound fidelity to the event and its universal implications. In discussing the divided subject, Badiou acknowledges that becoming a subject of the truth is “an endless process” that marks the aftermath of all events (*Saint Paul*, 63–64). A subject will always have to struggle against the particularities defined by the situations in which it lives and against its own investment in them. Indeed, this struggle itself motivates fidelity to the universal, since a universalist stance can be known and valued only in relation to the particularities it overcomes.

Earlier I brought up the debate surrounding the question of Paul’s relationship with the Jewish law. How fully did Paul reject the Jewish law and Jewish identity? If he did reject them to a significant extent, on what grounds did he do so? I reference this debate not to evaluate the positions taken. Rather, I want to point out that its very existence, and the intensity of argument that marks it, attests that even at this late date it is difficult to determine how much Paul remained committed to the past and the particularities around which it was organized after he became the kind of subject of the event Badiou turns to him to illustrate. One of the outcomes of this debate is that we have at least to acknowledge the complexity of Paul’s relation to the Jewish law and more broadly to his Jewish past, and to recognize that no model of a simple or clean break will comprehend his own postevental course. More pointedly, I would also suggest that following the complexity of Paul’s own relationship to the past, many Pentecostals make a break that is less than clean. For them, a key dynamic of the break is one of at once seeking to reject the past and at the same time curating it so that its rejection can continue to motivate commitment to the event of conversion in the future. That is to say, for many Pentecostals vigilance against the past and against the still-current propensity to sin helps to steer Christian practice, and hence, breaking with that past becomes, as Badiou would have it, a meaningfully endless process.30
On the basis of a similar understanding of Pentecostalism, one that perhaps applies to many forms of Christianity, Simon Coleman has described it as a “part-culture”—a worldview that expects to come into contact with other worldviews whose values it will reject. It is built, so to speak, to make a specific kind of edgy contact with other worlds in which full recognition of their existence and rejection of them go hand in hand. One reason Christianity travels so well, on Coleman’s account, is that it always has a place for the way new converts will have lived before. This is a legacy of Paul’s relationship to Judaism in the global Christianity of today, and part of my argument here is that the complicated effects of this legacy have to be taken into account in modeling contemporary conversion as evental change.

But in the context of the current discussion among the philosophical Paulines, I would be inclined to go even further than noting the part-culture quality of Pentecostalism to suggest that perhaps all universalisms are part-cultures in this way. None of them can be lived wholly on its own. Universalism requires a relationship to a state and its particularisms to animate its transformative force. It depends on particularism because, as we have seen, the universal only makes sense against the particularities that state-governed situations produce. More important, however, it depends on particularism because all social lives have to be lived in some kinds of local, particular terms. People cannot dwell wholly outside of some state of a situation, and “the system that connects all the multiplicities belonging to the situation” will always generate particular identities that give life in various social domains their at least minimally orderly qualities. This is a social science truism I can only assert, not demonstrate, here—people never live wholly outside of cultural orderings, even as these orderings are susceptible to change (and sometimes to dramatic, evental change). Any theorist who hopes for the advent of radical social transformation based on the universalism inherent in the truth of the event needs to reckon with the way in which this truism renders universalism of necessity a part-culture that will feed in perpetuity on the particularities it is designed to reject.

Pentecostal life in Urapmin, and in many other places as well, attests to the extent to which living as a subject of truth means engaging in fraught negotiations between the universal and the particular. As sinners and as blacks, categories that for the Urapmin code much of their everyday sinful sociality, the Urapmin find that the particular has a kind of gravity that makes it hard to retain one’s grip on the universal. This does not mean, however, that they do not devote their best energy to living as Christians in
light of the event of revival, nor that in doing so they have not changed their lives in profound, universalizing (in Badiou’s sense) ways.

Conclusion

At the center of this essay has been the suggestion that the Urapmin and hundreds of millions of others have by means of Pentecostal conversion recently lived through precisely the kind of evental transformations Badiou and the other philosophical Paulines endeavor to theorize. They have organized their lives around fidelity to a truth that is new to them and have in important respects promoted the universalism at the heart of this truth. To be sure, there are debates about the political import of Pentecostal conversion, and these debates echo those that surround the political import of the work of the philosophical Paulines. Thus some have argued that Pentecostal conversion fosters authoritarianism, with believers subordinating themselves to the dictates of their super-charismatically endowed pastors. These scholars see Pentecostal converts as at best politically quietist and at worst decidedly conservative in their political views. But on the other side are those who see Pentecostalism’s volunteerism and democratizing spiritual tendencies as opening up formerly closed social structures to wider participation and training converts to be ready to take part in, if not bring about, new political futures. I have not dwelled on this level of debate here. Instead, I have focused on the process of change Pentecostal conversion tends to introduce, and I have tried to bring out the complexities of this process in a single case in order both to lend credence to the claim that change can at least sometimes unfold in evental terms and to point out some of the struggles those who would take part in such change can expect to face. Chief among the difficulties is how to manage the part-culture quality of universalism, a quality that means subjects of the event will inescapably have to negotiate with a past that rhetorically they often insist they have simply left behind.

Thinkers of a messianic bent tend to have “little faith in the present to beget the future.” The vogue enjoyed by the new philosophical Paulines in Western academic circles depends in part on the loss of just this kind of faith. It is currently hard for many, particularly on the Left, to imagine that the natural development of tendencies evident in the present will issue in a radically new and better kind of future. In response, they have pinned their hopes on sophisticated theories of the event as that which breaks into the
present and allows for changes the present on its own could never generate. The burden of this essay has been to polish the patina of unreality or wishful thinking off such theories by showing that many people today have lived such evental change and that they have sought to steer such change by becoming subjects of events we might have expected to overwhelm them. At its best, anthropology has always been about bringing unexpected possibilities of human living into scholarly (and sometimes popular) discourse. That is to say, when it works, anthropology should itself produce events in thought. With theology out from under the table, perhaps anthropology might angle to become the new hidden dwarf—helping the materialists see how the game can really be played.

Notes

I would like to thank Jon Bialecki, Matthew Engelke, Michael Hardt, and Rupert Stasch for their comments on this essay.


The one exception I know of to this generalization, and it is an important one, is Jon Bialecki, “Disjuncture, Continental Philosophy’s New ‘Political Paul,’ and the Question of Progressive Christianity in a Southern Californian Third Wave Church,” *American Ethnologist* 36.1 (2009): 110–23.


The language I use here is drawn from Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Felt-ham (London: Continuum, 2005); hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Being*. I treat this as the theoretical background against which Badiou’s *Saint Paul* should be read.


The one major exception to this statement would be Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Like Badiou, Dumont recognizes a number of structural levels, the highest one being that of value. Elements that are not valued continue to exist in all societies, but they are not elaborated and their social potential goes largely unrealized. As with Sahlins, it would be valuable to read Badiou and Dumont together, but that is not a task I can undertake here.

One way to take the measure of the anthropological commitment to the study of continuity is to compare Badiou’s subject as a figure faithful to the transformative demands of the event to Pierre Bourdieu’s model of the subject, a model that has until recently been dominant in anthropology. Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). For Bourdieu, the subject internalizes the state’s schemes of representation as habitus and then continually re-creates them. See Caroline Humphrey, “Reassembling Individual Subjects: Events and Decisions in Troubled Times,” Anthropological Theory 8.4 (2008): 357–80, for a trenchant critique of another anthropological model of the subject from the point of view of Badiou’s model.


I have presented the history of the Urapmin encounter with Christianity and the nature of their contemporary Christian lives in detail in Robbins, Becoming Sinners.


Robbins, Becoming Sinners.

For a review of these debates, see Robbins, “Globalization,” 131–37.