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*Becoming Whosoever: Re-examining Pauline Universalism*

In my paper I examine, on the one hand, the emergence of the idea of universal natural law in Greek antiquity and especially in Roman Stoic thought. On the other hand, I compare this philosophical universalism (universalism of *logos/ratio*) with Christian and especially Pauline universalism. I argue that the Pauline conception of universalism is very different from the philosophical understanding of it. It is not a category that transcends particular cultures and identities in the name of universal principles (as in Greek and Stoic thought) but rather a category that *denotes a process of rupture of all principles (nomos, arche, and so on)*. To be sure, this interpretation is not the traditional interpretation of Pauline universalism, going against the Catholic understanding of it in particular, but neither is it in agreement with Daniel Boyarin's recent reinterpretation of Paul suggesting that Pauline universalism must be understood in terms of human sameness. Pauline universalism does not denote human sameness but rather a process of *becoming whosoever* in a mutual opening of hearts. In my view, such universalism may provide a fruitful point of departure for critically assessing the contemporary global situation characterized by a rigid opposition between universal liberal principles and particularistic identity claims. It provides material for thinking about the co-appearance of diverse forms of life without exclusion and violence.

*Stoic Universalism and Beyond*

The Greek city-state was based on a series of exclusions: women, foreigners, slaves, and barbarians were all excluded and this exclusion was the *sine qua non* of the state. According to Aristotle (*Politics* 1283a, 18-19), even the poor are excluded, at least if the state consists merely of poor men: "A state consisting entirely of poor men would not be a state, any more than one consisting of slaves." For the Greeks, certain exceptions aside, there was neither an idea of a universal world state nor a notion of cosmopolites, the citizen of the world. Certainly, the Greeks were familiar with the universal idea of justice. Aristotle writes: "Justice in the polis can be based on nature (*physis*) or on law (*nomos*). Justice based on nature is valid everywhere regardless of opinions" (*Eth. Nic.* 5.7). In the same vein, Plato writes in *Laws* (4.714): "We ought by every means to imitate the life of the age of Cronos, as tradition paints it, and order both our homes and our States in obedience to the immortal element within us, giving to reason's (*noos*) distribution the name of 'law' (*nomos*)."<sup>1</sup> In Heraclitus' fragment 114, moreover, we find the following: "Those who speak with insight must base themselves firmly on that which is common to all, as a city does upon laws – and much more firmly. For all human laws (*nomoi*) are nourished by one, the divine. For it holds sway to the extent that it wishes, and suffices for all, and is still left over."<sup>1</sup> Thus, there exists, the Greeks believed, universal justice beyond its particular

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. and trans. by T. M. Robinson. University of Toronto Press, 1987.

enactments, universal and divine law above the human laws of the polis. Yet this divine law did not make all men equal but rather *confirmed* a number of already existing exclusions. Slaves are inferior by nature and thus by natural justice, as Aristotle asserted. Furthermore, the Greeks did not believe that a man living according to these universal principles would transcend the framework of the city-state. The citizen who lives according to justice and divine law is a just citizen of the polis, not of the world. Even if there exists within us, as Plato asserts, an immortal element through which we participate in the universal and eternal justice, it is in the context of the city-state that we are supposed to employ it. It does not make us cosmopolites but merely citizens of the polis.

Yet they were precisely these early speculations concerning divine law and justice that paved the way for the Western conception of universalism. The Stoic concept of natural law (*ius naturale*) was certainly based on these assumptions, but the Stoics developed into a full theory. And even though Cicero was not a Stoic in the strict sense of the word, his *De legibus* is nevertheless the best ancient source of the Stoic view of natural law and it goes as follows: the whole nature is ruled by a divine law of nature. Men participate in this law through their reason and this reason is distributed evenly within all minds. Thus all men and even all women, be they free or slaves, Romans or Barbarians, or whatever, participate in the divine wisdom called natural law (*lex naturalis*) through reason, on account of which they are absolutely equal with each other. Hence, the earlier exclusions and even hierarchies dissolve, and it is precisely this that makes all men cosmopolites, citizens of the world. Yet Cicero adds that this evenly distributed reason is not equally *effective* in all men. Only virtuous and wise (and only the wise are virtuous) men and women participate in the divine law in the right way, which means that only such men and women are cosmopolites and even further that they alone are suitable for “issuing commands and prohibitions” (*De legibus* 2.8). Hence, although Stoic universalism supersedes differences between social, economic, and political statuses and identities (man-woman, free-slave, rich-poor), this does not entail that it would be non-exclusive, only that the dividing line is now drawn between *capacities* and *abilities*. Even slaves can be virtuous and wise, but, on the other hand, those who are not virtuous and wise are not included in the universal community of cosmopolites issuing commands and prohibitions. This is the original foundation of Western universalism: in order to overcome the exclusive function of status, position, identity, and so on, it shifts the emphasis on capacities (such as the universal human capacity to *logos / ratio*), but in order to maintain hierarchy and exclusion, it announces that these capacities either are not equally distributed or if they are equally distributed, as Cicero says, they are not equally effective in all men, that is to say, some are not able to *use* them properly.

It is of course impossible to cover the entire history of Western universalism of capacities here, but I can assure you that it is present in Scholasticism, in the early modern theory of natural law, and even in Kant. The citizen of the world is the wise: the one who is capable of applying the principles of natural moral law through the right use of reason – and although it is not easy to discern that in Kant this moral law is natural in the traditional sense of the word, we discover the demand for the exclusion of immature non-enlightened subjects from the sphere of universality even there. Similar accounts can be found even in Jürgen Habermas’ theory of inclusive community based on his idea of communicative action.<sup>2</sup> According to him, an inclusive community is one which is sensitive to difference and takes the form of a non-levelling and non-appropriating inclusion of the other in his otherness as its basic principle. This non-appropriating inclusion is possible on account of a reflexive form of communicative action which points beyond all particular forms of life (the tribe, the city, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*. MIT Press, 1998, pp. 140-142.

nation, and so on). Such communication (“generalized, abstracted, and freed from all limits”) does not in principle exclude any “subject capable of speech and action who can make relevant contributions,” but this implies, respectively, that it does exclude those who cannot contribute in a relevant way, that is to say, “stupid” people.

It is true that there is also another line of development in the Western tradition of universalism. I mean the emergence of the idea of rights and its development since its inception in the famous Franciscan poverty controversy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This development paved the way for the modern concept of human rights. With this concept, it no longer matters whether you are black or white, or even wise or stupid, since the very being human is enough: everybody has the same rights. Yet, on the one hand, it must be noted that the theory of rights was developed on the basis of the Stoic conception of natural law and that it is merely an extension of this law into the sphere of property conceived from the subjective point of view – from the perspective of the owner. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, if the objective natural law laid the foundation for a universal community of the wise to the extent that the wise behave peacefully with each other by the very necessity of being wise, the modern idea of rights does not found any community whatsoever but rather isolates every individual from every other individual as the bearer of his own rights. Hence, whereas the objective natural law excludes only the stupid or the incapable of virtue, the subjective natural right excludes everybody from everybody else, constituting thus a virtual space of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, at least in principle. It is through a further operation that people form a community, this further operation being either a contract as in classical liberal theory, or mutual recognition, as in the Hegelian configurations: I recognize your rights if you recognize mine, and so forth.

### *Deconstruction of the Law as Principle*

Now, it must first be noted that we cannot find a critique of human rights in Pauline letters – for the simple reason that there was no idea of human rights he could have criticized. And, indeed, there are elements in Pauline theology that might easily be seen as arguments, if not for human rights then at least for the absolute equality of all humans before God: “There is no partiality (*prosôpolépsia*)” (Rom. 2:11), “no distinction (*diastolê*)” (Rom. 3:22) before God. Like the Stoics, Paul argues that it does not matter if you are a man or a woman, free or slave, Jew, Greek, or barbarian, circumcised or not, because “you are all one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28; Rom. 10:12). Yet Paul goes further: it does not matter if you are wise or stupid, virtuous or non-virtuous either. In fact, Paul deconstructs the Stoic ethics of virtue by a simple gesture: “There is none righteous (*dikaïos*), not one” (Rom. 3:9). On the other hand, however, it is perfectly clear that Paul’s message contradicts the idea of human rights as well, due in particular to the emphasis he puts on the idea that a human being is not the owner of the self: “You are not your own” (*ouk este heautôn*) (1 Cor. 6:19, see also Philipp. 3:3-9). It is not an individual who owns himself, because everybody is owned by God by whose grace we are what we are (1 Cor. 15:10). As Paul puts it in the Romans (14:7): “None of us lives for himself (*heautô zê*)...”

To be sure, there is a long Christian tradition which assumes that Pauline universalism is precisely the universalism of Stoic natural law. The assumption is based on a passage in the Romans 2:14-15 where Paul writes:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their

conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

In the Catholic tradition, this law written on the hearts of men became one of the cornerstones of the doctrine. This Catholic doctrine was preserved in the early modern theory of natural law, but whereas the Catholics appointed the Church and especially the pope as the Stoic wise who alone is able to give the true interpretation of the dictates of conscience, that is to say, of the principles that elevate man to the level of the universal, in the early modern natural law tradition this role was played either by the sovereign (as in the Bodinian-Hobbesian tradition) or the well-educated and enlightened men (as in the Grotian-Pufendorfian-Kantian tradition). As Alain Badiou has correctly noted, however, Paul's universalism is not universalism of the law.<sup>3</sup> In fact, already Origen in his typical insightfulness was aware of this. In his commentary on the Romans he time and again stresses that when Paul speaks about the law (*nomos*) he also and even primarily means natural law. Examining passage 5:13 where Paul says that "sin is not imputed when there is no law," Origen asserts that this cannot refer to the Mosaic Law alone, since otherwise all Gentiles would be free from sin. Therefore: "Paul is speaking of natural law" (*In Ep. ad Romanos* 3.2.9), the law that has been universally valid ever since Adam. Yet Origen, referring to Romans 3:21 ("now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law"), also acknowledges that for Paul, true righteousness is disclosed apart from the law (*In Ep. ad Romanos* 3.7.5). Thus he is forced to conclude – and indeed, he is forced to conclude, because the text clearly shows that he is doing it unwillingly – that the natural law is not in force "in Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Why, then, does Paul not embrace the Stoic idea of universal law? The answer relates to Paul's understanding of the law (*nomos*) in general. According to him, the law is a curse, a wall of separation. This is particularly clear in the case of the Hebrew law, that is to say, the Mosaic Law and Israel's sacred tradition. It is the wall that divides and separates peoples: Jews from Gentiles, but also Jews from Jews, by introducing hierarchies among groups, between males and females, priests and laymen, and so on. Therefore, Badiou is perfectly right in insisting that for Paul, the law is "predicative, particular, and partial."<sup>5</sup> Yet Badiou errs when he claims that it is *always* particular and partial for Paul. The universal law of the heart, not discussed by Badiou in his book on Paul, is not partial for the Apostle. It is genuinely universal. Therefore, it does not suffice to say that the reason for Paul's critique of the law lies in the fact that the law is always particular or "statist," as Badiou puts it. Here, I rather agree with Andrew Das who argues that "Paul has in mind more than just those aspects of the law that divide the Jew from the Gentile," namely the "very performance of the law as a whole."<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Badiou is right in arguing that Pauline universalism is not universalism of the law but rather that of an event, the Christ-event which is "essentially the abolition of the law."<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is not Paul's opinion that a law cannot be universal: it surely can but this does not make it any better. Paul is well aware that the Stoics had constructed a universal model of man (*cosmopolites*) based on the principle of right reason, but his universalism aims for the destruction of all models and principles.

Why does Paul then want to immobilize the very performance of the law? He wants to do it because the law, be it particular or universal, separates people from true righteousness (*dikaïosyne*). In fact, this is the real reason why the *nomos* separates peoples in the first place, given the fact that the

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<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p.

<sup>4</sup> Translations from Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Books 1-5*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law and the Covenant*. Hendrickson Publications, 2001, p. 213.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 86.

righteous peoples, those who live in Christ, are not divided and separated. Those who live in Christ – this is the Pauline metaphor for the righteous living together – live in peace and in mutual understanding. And the law separates man from righteousness insofar as for Paul the law is that which keeps sin in force: “The power of sin is the law (*nomos*)” (1 Cor. 15:56). The law is the power of sin because the law makes you desire what is forbidden. The *nomos* sustains transgressions:

If it had not been for the law (*nomos*), I should not have known sin (*hamartia*). I should not have known what it is to desire (*epithymia*) if the law had not said, ‘You shall not desire.’ But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. (Rom. 7:7-11)

For Paul, admittedly, the *nomos* is also “just and good” (Rom 7:12) and “certainly not” against the promises made by God (Gal 3:21), not even against the promise according to which all those who have Abraham’s faith – and not only the Jews – will be justified (Gal 3:6). However, the law was just and good only until Christ, the heir of Abraham, came. Before Christ, the promise had not been fulfilled and people lived in sin. Then the law was a necessary custodian (*paidagogos*):

Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian. (Gal 3:23-25.)

In other words, although the law is the power of sin, it is also a power that restrains sin, being thus a sort of *pharmakon*, simultaneously a remedy and a poison, a necessary evil (Rom. 7:10). However, living in Christ one has no need for any remedies. One needs no custodians because those who live in Christ are righteous without the law (Rom. 3:21). Among righteous people, there are no divisions or enmity, because they live as one: “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, “Christ is the end (*telos*) of the law” (Rom. 10:4).

It is true, as we know, that Paul speaks about the law of Christ as well (1 Cor. 9:21). First, Paul maintains that Christ is the end of the law, but then goes on to assert that there is a law of Christ. What is this law? In Badiou’s estimation, the law of Christ is the law of life. According to Badiou, in abolishing the law Paul abolishes only the letter of the law, in order to find it in “life itself.”<sup>8</sup> Badiou equates this law of life with such Pauline expressions in the Romans (7:14 and 3:27) as the “pneumatic law” (*nomos pneumatikos*) and the “law of faith” (*nomos pisteôs*). The content of this pneumatic and universal law of life is love (*agape*). This is not to say, however, that Badiou believes, like the Catholics, that Paul’s critique of law concerns only the positive law, whereas the law of the heart, in which the commandment of love is inscribed, is left untouched. For Badiou the universal law of life as love is not a natural law but something that comes into existence only in the aftermath of the Christ-event, functioning as the “principle and consistency for the subjective energy initiated by the declaration of

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<sup>8</sup> Badiou, *The Foundation*, p. 88.

faith.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the law of love gives merely *ex post facto* consistency to the (subjective) declaration that constitutes the truth of the Christ-event – the truth that in itself is always evental, not structural, axiomatic, or legal.<sup>10</sup> Yet if we examine the Pauline epistles carefully, it soon becomes clear that the law of Christ is not a principle at all. It does not give consistency for the subjective energy initiated by the declaration of faith. Quite the contrary, it is a law without any consistency. It has nothing to do with principles. It is, as Martin Luther realized, an oxymoron. It is a “law without a law, without measure, without end, without limit.”<sup>11</sup> To be sure, it is also a law of love and love is something that controls us: “The love of Christ controls (*synekebeô*) us” (2 Cor. 5:14). Through love “necessity (*anagkê*) is laid upon me” (1 Cor. 9:16). However, love can control us only by virtue of the absence of all control, because love can arrive – and it can only arrive – in the absence of all control. Love is a free gift which comes without cause, in vain (*dorean*). It is a law which can be obeyed only in the absence of all obedience, that is to say, when people are absolutely free: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). Love does not control us – *nothing* can control us because for us “everything is permitted (*exesti*)” (1 Cor. 6:12) – but rather holds us together (as *synekebeô*, literally “to hold together”, implies) in the “liberality of fellowship” (*aplotêti tês koinônias*) (2 Cor. 9:13).

### *Becoming-Nobody*

Now, we have seen that Christ abolishes the law which sustains sin, that is to say, strife and enmity between people. Yet we have not yet said anything about it how Christ does it. What does it mean that Christ abolishes the law? In fact, it is not Christ as a distinct person who abolishes the law but it is *we* who must live together in a way that renders the law inoperative – and we can do it by “living in Christ” which is the Pauline expression for non-exclusive living together, for the universal “Christian” community. In other words, for Paul, “life in Christ” is not a category which distinguishes those who believe in Christ from unbelievers but rather a metaphor for righteous life: “life in Christ” *means* non-exclusive being-together. Where there is no exclusion, no violence between human beings – that is to say, no sin, for sin is, as Paul says, “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy” (Gal. 5:19) – there is Christ, life in Christ. Then “Christ is in you.” But how can we live together without exclusion and enmity, that is to say, without the law? First of all, Paul understood that we cannot live without the law by destroying the law, for the destruction of the law is a transgression of the law, but the transgression of the law does not abolish the law: it strengthens it. The law is the power of sin, but similarly the power of the law derives from transgression and sin: “Where there is no law, neither is there transgression (*parabasis*)” (Rom. 4:15) and, conversely, where there is transgression, there is law, or, in practical terms: the more crime, the more policing. Hence, the law must be rendered inoperative by means other than breaking the law. According to Paul, we must *withdraw* from the vicious circle of the law and sin and this happens, as he says, by “removing” ourselves from the sphere of influence of the law: “Now we are discharged (*katargeô*) from the law, dead to which held us captive” (Rom. 7:6).

How, then, does one withdraw from the sphere of influence of *nomos*? According to Paul, this withdrawal is accomplished by *changing one’s relationship with oneself*. This is the perspective from which we must view Paul’s demand that one should “not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of mind” (Rom. 12:2). Paul understood that the law, be it particular or

<sup>9</sup> Badiou, *The Foundation*, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, *The Foundation*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans 2:14*. In *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970, p. 187.

universal, operates only at the level of positions and identities and in order to make the law inoperative, we must render our identities inoperative. You cannot change the universal principles of *recta ratio* because they *are* the true principles of reason (it is right to give everybody one's due, it is evil to do evil, and so on, but as Paul says, in Christ all "reasoning (*logismos*) is thrown down (*kathaireô*)" 2 Cor. 10:4) and while it is very difficult to change the sacred tradition of Israel, you can change yourself. You can render inoperative your identity and you are also obliged to do so because the law operates on the level of positions and identities, allotting each man his identity, position, and due. How, then, is identity rendered inoperative by changing one's relationship with oneself? According to Badiou, this is achieved by means of what he calls resubjection, but he does not explain what this resubjection consists of. He is happy to merely state that it relates to fidelity to the Christ-event. Yet, if you read any of Paul's letters, it becomes immediately clear what kind of resubjection is at issue: instead of becoming a subject of fidelity, the one who lives in Christ becomes weak, enslaved, poor, humble, a fool, eventually nobody. The theme is omnipresent in Paul's letters. Already the fact that the royal Saul becomes Paul on the road to Damascus witnesses this becoming given that in Latin *paulus* signifies minor. But not only does the royal Saul become minor on the road to Damascus, he also abases himself (*epoiêsa emouton tapeinôn* 2 Cor 11:7), he becomes weak ("I became ... weak" / *egenomen ... asthenês* 1 Cor. 9:22), he becomes a slave ("I enslaved myself" / *emauton edolousa* Cor. 9:19), he asks men to become fools ("If any man seems to be wise in this world, let him become fool" / *môros genosthô* 1 Cor. 3:18) and to let him be a fool (*aphrôn* 2 Cor. 11:16), he asserts that Christ became poor (*eptôcheusen* 2 Cor. 8:9), and so on. This is the perspective from which we can understand Paul's statement that power is made perfect in weakness and his claim that "when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinth. 12:10). Paul's famous statement that one should "associate with the lowly" (Rom. 12:16) contains this meaning as well. It does not mean that one should feel pity for those of low estate, as the Catholic tradition has interpreted it. Neither does it mean that he should identify himself with them. The real meaning is that one should *become* lowly given that this is the correct translation of the phrase (*tois tapeinois synapagomenoi*). *tapeinois* signifies humble and lowly, but also humble things and conditions, literally something that does not rise far from the ground. What about *synapagô*? *apagô* signifies "to carry away." Inasmuch as in the Romans the verb *synapagomenoi* is a passive participle and *syn* signifies with, the whole passage could be translated as follows: "Let the lowly conditions carry you away together" or "let you become lowly together."<sup>12</sup>

What, then, is common to all these: slave, fool, and so on? Common to them all is exclusion. This was not known only to Aristotle but to the Hellenistic world as a whole, including Paul. He knew that these are names for the excluded of the world, for those who have no community, be it a particular polis or the universal cosmopolis. And he reasoned that those who are excluded from all communities are the "foundation" of a community that does not exclude anyone. This is the backdrop of his assertion that "God chose what is low and despised in the world" (1 Cor. 1:27). By using the metaphor of the body, he goes so far as to declare that God has given the genitals (allegedly the most despicable member of the body) a higher standing than the other members (1 Cor. 12:24) thus alluding that the most despicable members of a community (slaves, fools, the poor, and so on) are its most honorable ones. However, does this gesture not merely reverse the ranking order? The despised becomes honored and the honored despised. Besides, is a lowly condition not a position as well, a position which excludes those who are not lowly? Does a slave or a humble individual not have an

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<sup>12</sup> Compared to the Revised Standard Version I am using here, Kings James Version comes closer to the original meaning: "Condescend to men of low estate."

identity – the identity of a slave or a humble individual? This is indeed the case and therefore, when Paul speaks about them his speech is to be understood metaphorically, not as referring to concrete persons. Even slaves have to *become* slaves, because it is not the position that counts but the very becoming. Slave, fool, and a humble individual are names for the process of rendering identities inoperative. For Paul, becoming (*ginomai*) is never becoming something or somebody but always a loss: “I have suffered the loss of all things” (Philipp. 3:10). The most illuminating example of this is found in Paul’s statement in the Philippians (3:3-8) in which he counts as a loss the entire way of life he had practiced before his ‘conversion’:

Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss.

The one who lives in Christ – that is, righteously – becomes less than something and eventually, nothing: “I am nothing (*egō ... ouden eimi*),” Paul describes himself in 2 Corinthians (12:11). It is precisely in this becoming, becoming-nothing and nobody, in which the *nomos* is made inoperative and God’s promise is fulfilled. This is the meaning of Paul’s universalism. It is the process of becoming-nothing that is universal in contrast to all positions and identities, including the position and identity of human being qua human being.

In other words, it is this becoming-nothing (weak, fool, slave) that is the kernel of the Pauline universal community (“life in Christ”). In this community, there are neither positions nor identities: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” in Christ (Gal. 3:28). In Christ, for those who live in Christ, there is nothing but a line of flight from every position and identity, which is to say in Pauline terms, from the flesh (*sarx*). In opposition to it, Paul sets the spirit (*pneuma*) – life in Christ – in which there are no longer positions or identities, but only a continuous collapsing of them, a continuous becoming-nothing: “Our outer nature” (flesh) “is wasting away,” but “our inner nature” (spirit) “is being renewed every day” (2 Cor. 4:16). To be sure, Paul also insists that every man living in Christ should “abide in the same calling wherein he was called” (1 Cor. 7:20). For this reason Friedrich Nietzsche is partially right when he says that Paul abandons Jesus as a teacher of the “new practice” insofar as this new practice means that one has to abandon the traditional way of life and to appropriate a new way of life in order to unconditionally follow Jesus of Nazareth. After all, what can be a more exclusive maxim? However, for Paul becoming-nobody does not signify that the traditional way of life – former position and identity – is simply abandoned. In the same way as Paul understood transgression of the law to lead to a strengthening of the law, he holds that abandoning one’s former position and identity is not only a violent gesture but easily paves the way for construction of new identities. In this way, the struggle between peoples – the eternal war between exclusive identities – continues. In this way, the dialectical tension that keeps history in motion will not cease. Therefore, Paul does not want to erect new identities (or new subjectivities) but on the contrary, to hold all identities in abeyance. The one who lives in Christ does not acquire a Christian identity but remains a Jew – or a Gentile – *as though* he was *not* a Jew. He remains a Jew but only by becoming other and strange in relation to his very identity as a Jew:

But this I say, brethren, the time is shortened, that henceforth both those that have wives may be as though they had none [*hōs mē* = as though not]; and those that weep, as though

they wept not; and those that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and those that buy, as though they possessed not; and those that use the world, as not using it to the full (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

In other words, Paul does not ask us to abandon our position or identity – in fact it is impossible to abandon one’s tradition, language, and identity. That is why Paul says in the first letter to Corinthians (7:26) that it is “well for a person to remain as he is.” Instead, he asks us to be those men and women, Jews and Greeks, that we in any case are, but as though we were not. This is why by becoming-nobody we do not lose ourselves but on the contrary, *we find our proper self as always already lost*: “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as dung (*skubalon*),” as goes the literal translation of the noun in the phrase (Philipp. 3:8) already quoted above. When I live in Christ I indeed count everything as dung and loss but it does not entail that I actually lose everything. I am what I have been before with the difference that my relationship with myself is changed. I am what I have been before – circumcised or uncircumcised – but I have to understand that it “counts for nothing” (Gal. 6:15). Therefore, “let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him” (1 Cor. 7:17). This is Paul’s rule for the churches. One has to be what one has always been but as though not. The loss of position and identity in the process of becoming-nobody is, in other words, merely relative. It *opens up* positions and identities, it neutralizes them, but it does not replace them because becoming-nobody exists in and by identity.

But what kind of process is it, exactly, this Pauline becoming-nobody? It is nothing very miraculous. It is a concrete encounter of two or more subjects/identities. It is *communication* between them. Becoming-nobody takes place in communication alone and, respectively, in all communication there is a moment of becoming-nobody. Paul calls this moment love (*agape*). Love fulfils the law: “He who loves his neighbour (*heteros*) has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). In love, the law ceases to be in force, because it is fulfilled, that is, brought to its end (*telos*). What, then, is love as communication? It is an opening of the heart (*chôreô*) (2 Cor. 7:2). It is an event in which people expose (*platonô*) themselves to each other (2 Cor. 6:13), that is to say, an event in which people expose their positions and identities to the mutual process of becoming-nobody. It is no wonder Paul is speaking about love. What is love if not a process of becoming weak and vulnerable, eventually nothing? What is love if not a cut across one’s identity, something that profoundly alters “our old self”? Love is always ecstatic: when I expose my heart to the other, I depart my stasis – my law based position and identity as a stasis. Strictly speaking, however, it is not my ecstasy that is at issue here, for every ecstasy means the withering away of the self. Ecstasy happens to me but in a way that the self disappears – and to the extent that it happens to me in my encounter with the other, it takes place *between* me and the other. Indeed, it is here, in the non-position of in-between, in the mutual exposition of hearts, where the righteous life in Christ takes place. In fact, Christ *is* this in-between. Christ is between us, it dwells the in-between me and you, but it is not something that is added to our existence. It is not a third term which sublates me and you. It is me and you – the Jew and the Greek – exposed to each other: “Christ is in you” (*christos en humin estin*) (2 Cor 13:5).

### *The Body of Christ*

The famous Pauline metaphor “the body of Christ,” the name for the “Christian” community, must also be understood from this perspective. Therefore, I do not subscribe to Jean-Luc Nancy’s interpretation according to which the body of Christ is a community of communion, a community in

which the identification with the living body of the community takes place through the supplementary mediation of the body of Christ.<sup>13</sup> In the body of Christ, there are no supplements. “You are the body of Christ,” as Paul puts it in the first letter to Corinthians (12:27). The body of Christ is not, therefore, something additional to our existence. It is our existence – our being in common – as such. Compare also the phrase in the Romans where Paul says that we are “one body in Christ, though in relation to one another we are members” (Rom. 12:5). We must be precise here. Paul does not say that we are members of the body, but that we are members *in relation to one another* (*kath eis allélôn melê*). To the extent that *we* are the body of Christ, the body of Christ is precisely this relation, which is to say, that it takes place *between* us and has no other meaning than this in-between. Therefore, there is no communion here. The body of Christ is nothing but communication (*agape*) between the members of the body. However, given the fact that the body itself is this in-between, the non-position and the exposition of in-between, we must add that it is not a body at all but rather the “no-body.” When I live in Christ, I share this “no-body” with others and I share it because I expose myself to the process of becoming-nobody in the event of communication (*agape*).

There are, of course, difficulties in discussing this community, the community of those who are living in Christ, under the rubric of universalism. Perhaps we should not speak about universalism in this context at all. Perhaps we should merely speak about non-exclusiveness. For, the Pauline universalism, the community of those who live in Christ, is not a universal community of men, a community that embraces all human beings as an actual fact. If Paul abandons the law as the model of universality, he does not outline a universal homogenous state either, not even universal homogenous humankind. Thus, I do not agree with Daniel Boyarin who maintains that life in Christ is based on the fundamental human sameness: “For Paul the only possibility for human equality involved human sameness. Difference was the threat.”<sup>14</sup> Paul recognized very well that there are differences and if difference was a threat to him, he would not have written that the body of Christ *consists* of differences:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? (1 Cor. 12:14-19)

There is no merging of differences in the body of Christ. A Jew is not the same as a Greek – everyone is different – but while exposing themselves to the common process of becoming-nobody in the event of communication (*agape*) without law, identity, and so on, they become the same – or rather, it is this *becoming* which is the same for all. *The body of Christ is composed of these becomings*. It is in them that humanity is united, not in the sameness of human beings. For Paul, there are indeed Jews and Greeks but not in Christ. “In Christ,” however, is not a state of things. Nobody *is* “nobody” – everybody is somebody – but everybody is becoming nobody in the mutual opening of hearts. In this becoming we all drink the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), the Spirit of common ecstasy. In this Spirit the Pauline non-

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp. 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 156.

exclusive (“universal”) community is disclosed. It is “universal” because whosoever can be a member of the body of Christ, and, indeed, *whosoever is always already a member of the body* (or rather of the “nobody”), not as a person with identity but *as whosoever*, that is to say, without a community, law, identity, even without a name.<sup>15</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As a conclusion, let us move from phenomenology to ontology and Paul’s view of the “world” (*cosmos*). What is the Pauline view of the “world”? First, he rejects outright the Stoic notion of “world” as *cosmos*. He does not preach the wisdom of this world (*aiôn*) (1 Cor. 2:6). For him, the form of *cosmos* (*schema tou kosmou*) is withering away (*paragô*) (1 Cor. 7:31). With Christ, the *cosmos* (*cosmos*) is crucified (Gal. 6:14). What Paul is proclaiming is God’s secret wisdom, not known to any of the authorities of this world (1 Cor. 2:8). What, then, is this secret wisdom? It is the “wisdom” that there is no *cosmos*, or rather, that *cosmos* is not everything there is: “God chose,” Paul writes, “things that are not (*ta me onta*) in order to inactivate (*katargeô*) things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27)! The “Christian” world is not a *cosmos* but rather something that is not. But neither is it nothing at all. It is the very *withering away* of *cosmos*, inactivation of things that are. The “Christian” world exists, but it exists as a process of *becoming* nothing – and it is this becoming that is the true “foundation” of every *cosmos*, be it Greek, Roman, or the contemporary *cosmos* of the Capital. To my mind, this is also the meaning of the creation *ex nihilo* (a theme, introduced by the Fathers, that was not yet familiar to Paul). There is no nothingness prior to the world out of which it is created but the nothingness is inscribed in every *cosmos* as its indeterminate “foundation.” In political terms, there is no natural and immutable order of things, no historical ruse of reason, no necessary process of life, no will to power, not even an eternal rule of *polemos*, which allegedly allots positions and identities to people and species, but a constant collapsing of every order, an inactivation (*katargesis*) of every principle (*archê*), of all authority (*exousia*) and all power (*dunamis*) (1 Cor. 15:24). No wonder Nietzsche considered Christianity as the highest manifestation of nihilism – but it is nihilistic only if we accept that a world without principles, without a fundamental *archê* is nihilistic, that is to say, if anarchism is nihilism. For Nietzsche, it surely was: “The anarchist and the Christian,” as he writes in *The Antichrist* (§ 57) “have the same ancestry...”

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<sup>15</sup> As Giorgio Agamben, after pointing out that *Paulos* is not a proper name but a mere surname, writes: “At the very moment when the call transforms him who is a free man into ‘the slave of the Messiah,’ the apostle must, like a slave, lose his name, whether it be Roman or Jewish. From this point on he must call himself by a simple surname.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 11.