

KATHARINE SARAH MOODY

Independent Scholar

WHAT'S MISSING IN THE TURN TO PAUL?:
IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE IN POSTSECULAR THEOLOGY

Introduction

There is more than one spirit of Saint Paul, and more than one way that interpretative communities have attempted to possess his body of work. Like any religious or cultural legacy, 'Paul' names a heterogeneous inheritance from which we must choose and decide.¹ He can be androcentric, misogynistic, sexist, homophobic, and *the* figure not only of hetero-patriarchy but also of Christian imperialism, supersessionism and anti-Semitism. But he can also be a proto-feminist with a vision of egalitarian life beyond positional identities, oppositional binaries and hierarchical differences, or a political militant who founds a new universalism beyond inessential identitarian distinctions and divisions: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all are one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). The turn to Paul has provided several contemporary thinkers with the means to further reflect upon concepts central to their work, and they often deploy Paul as a religious exemplar of their own secular projects, complicating this distinction. Their Pauls, and their Paulinisms, emerge against the backdrop of what Ward Blanton calls the "negotiation or contestation of the received and yet perhaps still malleable borders" between religion and the secular;² in other words, against the backdrop of postsecularity.

Discussions about the postsecular occur within and between a variety of humanities and social sciences disciplines, but the location of postsecular discourse at the intersection of theology and philosophy results in what Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler characterize as the "theologization" of the postsecular - the asymmetrical "contamination" of philosophy by normative theology, mutating into the promise of the postsecular to name the political

¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Peggy Kamuf, trans. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 18.

² Ward Blanton, 'Paul and the Philosophers: Return to a New Archive', in Ward Blanton and Hent de Vries, eds, *Paul and the Philosophers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 7. See also Ward Blanton, 'Disturbing Politics: Neo-Paulinism and the Scrambling of Religious and Secular Identities', *Dialog* 46/1 (2007), pp. 3-13.

potential of Christianity and of Christianity to name the political potential of the postsecular.³ They propose that the postsecular is in need of “liberation” not from theology per se but from the “normative constraints” of theology.⁴ This is the “minimal amount of secularity” required for any postsecular philosophical operation on religious and theological material, if it is to be liberated from the “theological postsecular.”⁵

Smith and Whistler suggest that theologians and philosophers associated with Radical Orthodoxy regularly appropriate and theologize the postsecular in this way, establishing a new Christian imperialism in which only a re-appraisal of pre-modern and counter-secular figures can resist and out-narrate secular reason’s metaphysical nihilism, ontology of violence, and logic of heretical parody; and only participation in the liturgy of the Christian church can physically inscript the beautiful aesthetic of an ontology of peace onto bodies, places, times and events through its practical repetition of implicit ideal values that counter-form us over and against formation by the anti-liturgies of secular modernism. It is not hard to detect this “theological postsecular” in popular Christian discourse, especially where it is influenced by John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy or, more broadly, by what Vincent Lloyd calls “the new partisans of tradition” and “the new enthusiasts of liturgy.”⁶ For James K.A. Smith, for example, the Christian worldview is implicit in Christian worship, which, through repetition, makes more and more automatic configurations of our desire towards God, whilst secular liturgies constitute a mis-formation of desire away from God. Only immersion in the Christian tradition can rightly form subjectivity.⁷ But if the promise of the postsecular for Smith is the correct (Christian) formation of identity in the face of the secular, for others the postsecular promises the deformation and dissolution of both secular and Christian identities.

³ Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, ‘What is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?’, *After the Postmodern and the Postsecular: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3 and 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9 and 11.

⁶ Vincent Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 92 and 113. Within this ‘rhetoric’, as Lloyd describes it, it is the task of the community leader or theologian to discern and articulate the values and norms implicit in the existing practices of the community, confirming the community in their own beautiful value-laden practices and doing nothing to contest or challenge the existing state of affairs. See pp. 91-107, especially.

⁷ See James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009); *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013) and *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, forthcoming 2017). On automaticity, see *Desiring the Kingdom*, p. 80. For Smith’s introduction to Radical Orthodoxy and his ideas for a ‘Reformed Radical Orthodoxy’, see *Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004).

Peter Rollins, for example, argues for the suspension of identity. Rollins works at the more radical, post-Christian, even atheistic, margins of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM),⁸ which has been described by sociologists Gerardo Martí and Gladys Ganiel as a religious orientation built around the sociological but not necessarily philosophical deconstruction of inherited forms of Christianity.⁹ While Martí and Ganiel report that there is little evidence that terminology associated with Rollins' postsecular theology is statistically salient within Emerging Church discourse, his work certainly pushes this orientation beyond the "superficial nods" to so-called postmodern thought that are characteristic of several other ECM writers and speakers.¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek emerges as most vital to the trajectory of Rollins' theology. Žižek's psychoanalytic philosophy is especially attractive to Rollins. Rollins seeks to help his audiences discard 'a faith that speaks only to those who cannot embrace existence' without religious idolatry and ideology. For him, Christianity as it actually exists in the West today functions as a fantasy covering over the material realities of life as constituted by negativity and lack.¹¹ He writes of holding beliefs and identities "lightly" or "as if you do not hold them",¹² and encourages churches to invite those gathered to "lay aside their various political, religious and social identities for a time" through the creation of what he calls "suspended space."¹³

Smith and Whistler's claim that the postsecular is in need of liberation from normative Christian theology will remain in view throughout this article, as I critically examine Rollins' theological appropriation of Žižek's postsecular Paul. I focus on Rollins' notion of identity suspension and suggest that Rollins' postsecular erases difference and risks both a theologization and a damaging depoliticization of Paul. I propose that moving beyond standard interpretations of Paul within both the turn to Paul in political philosophy and the New Perspective on Paul in biblical studies can enable us not only to better attend to Paul's practices relating to identity and identification but also to liberate Paul from his

⁸ For an introduction to Rollins' work, see Katharine Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices* (New York: Routledge, [2015]2016).

⁹ Gerardo Martí and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Gladys Ganiel and Gerardo Martí, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement: Exploring the Significance of Peter Rollins and the Ikon Collective', *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions* 1/1 (2014), pp. 39 and 45.

¹¹ Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2008), p. 102.

¹² Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 44; and *The Idolatry of God: Breaking the Addiction to Certainty and Satisfaction* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), p. 99.

¹³ Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, p. 178.

theologization and depoliticization in postsecular theology. As Magnus Zetterholm has observed, “even the most radical philosophical readings of Paul do not build on the most radical portraits of the apostle within New Testament scholarship, and one cannot help wondering about what the results would have looked like if they had.”¹⁴ This article asks whether Paul can thus be the figure of a politics of solidarity that does not efface difference, rather than of a politics of sameness, or an equality without difference.

The Turn to a Postsecular Paul

Too often, postsecular discourse misses how the religious and the secular intersects with other social categories and how the religious-secular binary – among other inherited dualisms and dichotomies – is mapped onto a gendered hierarchy. As Elaine Graham has argued, if the postsecular “invites us to think about ‘what’s missing’ about secular reason”, then it also affords us the opportunity to “acknowledge and correct the (often hidden) gendered nature of our thinking about faith and reason, private and public, sacred and secular, tyranny and freedom.” But gender difference is often missing in discussions of the postsecular. Graham suggests that this has “far-reaching consequences for our analysis of secular modernity” but that it is also “crucial to our deconstruction of such binaries within a post-secular situation.”¹⁵ The difference that gender makes is arguably also missing in the turn to a postsecular Paul, who is portrayed by philosophers like Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou as founding a new universalism that turns on a central difference that is indifferent to differences like gender, and in which believers participate “devoid of all identity”, including gendered identity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 200.

¹⁵ Elaine Graham, ‘What’s Missing? Gender, Reason and the Post-Secular’, *Political Theology* 13/2 (2013), pp. 234 and 237. See also Rosi Braidotti, ‘In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 26/6 (2008), pp. 1-24; and Clara Greed, ‘A Feminist Critique of the Postsecular City: God and Gender’, in Justin Beaumont and Christopher R. Baker, eds, *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 104-119.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 5. See Tracy McNulty, ‘Feminine Love and the Pauline Universal’, in Gabriel Riera, ed., *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 185-212. See also Amy Hollywood, ‘Saint Paul and the New Man’, *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), pp. 865-76. On the importance of Badiou and Badiou’s Paul for the development of Žižek’s political philosophy and radical theology, see Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: Continuum, 2008) and Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*.

Benjamin H. Dunning has recently asked, “given that Paul deals extensively in his authentic letters with a range of embodied issues related to sex, gender, and desire, how are we to understand the tendency of these recent readings to ignore or downplay this aspect of the apostle’s thinking?”¹⁷ I begin this article from the premise that the valuation of particular differences – including but not limited to gender difference – as *adiaphora*, matters of indifference, is a feature of the wider polemic against identity politics that is discernible in the philosophical and political turn to Paul undertaken by thinkers like Badiou and Žižek. If Paul is, for these philosophers, “the indispensable instigator of, and paradigm for, a radical political project aimed at the heart of contemporary imperial capitalism”, as Theodore Jennings has remarked,¹⁸ then Paul must be the figure of class struggle rather than of communitarian identity politics.

For Žižek, the political landscape established by multicultural, liberal-democratic, globalized capitalism is only properly challenged by class struggle, not by identity politics. The goal of the latter is portrayed as the co-existence of a proliferation of victimised identities to be tolerated as postmodern “lifestyles” within the existing ideological order.¹⁹ Groups of victims demanding recognition within the system leave it unchallenged and unchanged. Indeed, they provide it with ever expanding niche consumer markets for continued economic exploitation. By contrast, the properly political is “less the demand of a social faction or community to be integrated into the existing order than something which touches on a transformation of the order as a whole.”²⁰ Socioeconomic class is, therefore, the structuring antagonism of these philosophers’ projects and of their readings of Paul. Class struggle and identity politics are constructed as oppositional according to a hierarchical distinction between the properly political Act and mere politics. A relative value is thus coded onto each of them. This devaluation of particular identities is why many of these thinkers turn so frequently to Galatians 3:28, which Žižek glosses as follows:

“There are no Greeks or Jews, no men or women ...
there are only Christians and the enemies of Christianity!”
 Or, as we would have to put it today: there are only
 those who fight for emancipation and their

¹⁷ Benjamin H. Dunning, *Christ without Adam: Subjectivity and Sexual Difference in the Philosophers’ Paul* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 2.

¹⁸ Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., ‘Paul and Sons: (Post-modern) Thinkers Reading Paul’, in David Odell-Scott, ed., *Reading Romans with Contemporary Philosophers and Theologians* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2007), p. 86.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999[2008]), p. 249.

²⁰ Alain Badiou, ‘Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, in Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001[2002]), p. 109.

reactionary opponents; the people and the enemies of the people.²¹

For Žižek's Paul, the universal difference of Christian/non-Christian divides all particular identities from within, whether cultural (Greek or Jew), biological (male or female) or political (slave or free). For Žižek, class struggle cuts a line of demarcation and antagonism within each of these identities, rendering the differences between them *adiaphora*.

While Žižek presents class struggle as the adoption of a "subjective stance" that creates a universal difference dividing particular identitarian differences,²² precisely how this stance, once adopted, might intersect differently with different identities and experiences is omitted from discussion. In the service of an argument for class struggle's politicization of economic inequality, identity politics is portrayed as depoliticized and aneconomic, even complicit with capital. But such a characterization also necessarily obscures the actual histories of identity-based traditions of thought and political movements, such as third wave feminism, for example, which includes analyses of how different intersectional identities experience privileges and oppressions relating not only to sexism, misogyny, homophobia and racism but also to economic differences and cultural categories of class and social status. Such a characterization also severs economic justice from social justice, whereas identity politics properly understood, while taking specific identities (women or people of colour, for example) as the point or points of departure for politics, nevertheless takes aim at interconnecting forms of oppression – like patriarchy, white supremacy, or colonialism – that are also vital to the continued operation of capitalism.

The polemic against identity politics extends itself to the dismissal of the value of feminism, other identity-based traditions of thought – queer, postcolonial, critical race or disability/crip – and intersectional analysis not only for the contemporary political moment but also for the turn to Paul. Such erasures of difference preclude the possibility of readings of Paul that could inspire identifications between, and solidarities amongst, identity-based political movements against oppression and injustice. While the turn to Paul has facilitated on-going discussions between political philosophers and cultural theorists, on the one hand, and theologians, biblical scholars, and historians, on the other,²³ I propose that one of the key tasks

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 45.

²² Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 273.

²³ See, for example, Odell-Scott, *Reading Romans with Contemporary Philosophers and Theologians*; John D. Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff, eds, *St Paul Among the Philosophers* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009); Douglas Harink, ed., *Paul, Philosophy and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010); Peter Frick, ed., *Paul in the Grip of the*

in the interdisciplinary endeavour to read Paul is to attend also to what is currently missing in this work, by undertaking identity-based interpretations of Paul and by attending to Paul's own practices of identity and identification. This necessitates not only reading Paul beyond the turn to Paul, and reading him *with* identity-based traditions of thought and activism, but also reading Paul beyond *both* the standard interpretations of Paul upon which the turn to Paul in contemporary political philosophy tends to depend *and* the so-called New Perspective within biblical and historical studies of Paul, which, as I shall show shortly, does not escape the standard theologization of Paul. In turn, this could enable us to more significantly probe the potential for Paul to inform and inspire political subjectivities and solidarities between different identity-based political movements under and against neoliberal, neocolonial, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, globalized capitalist imperial rule. I agree with Ward Blanton's observations that philosophical interest in Paul often revolves around "new and old questions about how one construes hope in emancipatory community formations",²⁴ but I suggest adding the missing question of whether identity-based political movements are indeed antithetical to such hopes for solidarity, resistance and freedom.

Peter Rollins' Postsecular Theology

For Rollins, today's postsecular situation represents something of an emancipation from both religion and the secular, as well as from this binary itself. His postsecular theology aims to break our addiction to the certainties and satisfactions offered by both inherited Christianities and modern atheisms. While Christianity and atheism have each become positive identities or worldviews, being "in Christ" for Rollins more properly names the act of laying down identity and worldview: "in Christ there is neither Christian nor non-Christian."²⁵ There is neither religious nor secular, for all are "one" in postsecularity (Gal.3:28), with Christianity and atheism held "as if" not held (1 Cor. 7:29-31). But there are several moments within Rollins' theology where his work risks playing for his popular Christian audience what Žižek calls the therapeutic rather than critical role of religion.²⁶ They can maintain their faith whilst acknowledging disavowed beliefs

Philosophers: The Apostle and Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013); Donald Loose, ed., *The Apostle Paul in Modern Philosophy, Bijdragen* 70/2 (2009); and Blanton and de Vries, *Paul and the Philosophers*.

²⁴ Blanton, 'Paul and the Philosophers', p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁶ 'In this new global order', Žižek writes, 'religion has two possible roles: *therapeutic* or *critical*. It either helps individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the

and repressed doubts, and they can accept the instability of both religious and secular worldviews and identities only in order to better function within, rather than critique or contest, their postsecular situation. This risk arises precisely in Rollins' move from a more mystical, apophatic theology to a more materialist, radical theology.

Rollins often begins from the Žižekian-Chestertonian premise that there is "only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist",²⁷ but he takes care to clarify that the existential atheism that he sees as central to Christianity is not, or at least does not require or result in, intellectual disbelief in God. Since his work demonstrates a constant concern with a critique of religion as idolatrous and ideological, this claim can be read as an attempt to highlight how modern atheism does not go far enough, still retaining at its (therefore religious) core the belief in a big Other – a point Žižek also makes. But here, as elsewhere, Rollins' theology might not do enough work to rid his readers of what Žižek calls "the secret hope" of Christ's cry from the Cross – that there *is* a God who has abandoned them.²⁸ For example, in his first book, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, Rollins proposed what he called "a/theism" as a form of negative theological discourse that affirms a God who is "bigger, better and [more] different than we could ever imagine."²⁹ Humanity's inability to conceptually grasp God arises from the hyper-presence of God, and Rollins retains this earlier understanding of divine absence as an icon to divine presence in later works, writing, for example, that experiences of the absence of God are "the fundamental way of entering into the presence of God" or "the means of affirming God as dwelling in every place."³⁰ God does not exist as what Rollins calls a "sacred-object" that appears to promise an escape from the world but as what he has begun to refer to, using Tillichian language, as the sacred depth dimension of objects that we already have within the world.³¹ But readers can interpret such remarks as a pan(en)theistic affirmation of God as the metaphysical Ground of Being. They can read his later theology through an interpretive lens constructed through their reading of his earlier work, and this

voices of discontent'; *The Puppet and The Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), p. 3.

²⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 145; cited in Žižek, *The Puppet and The Dwarf*, p. 14.

²⁸ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 171.

²⁹ See Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, p. 101.

³⁰ Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe is Human; To Doubt, Divine* (New York: Howard Books, 2011), p. 24 (italics removed); and Peter Rollins, 'Transformance Art: Reconfiguring the Social Self', in Kevin Corcoran, ed., *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2011), p. 96.

³¹ See Peter Rollins, *The Divine Magician: The Disappearance of Religion and the Discovery of Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015). For Paul Tillich, 'Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions'; *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964[1959]), pp. 5-6.

can lead to the perception that he offers a way to discover the God beyond the conceptual idol "God" and a richer faith beyond instrumental Christianity. After secular modernity, God (or, rather, a certain conception of God) is dead. But in postsecular postmodernity, God may be resurrected, and moved beyond critique, since it is now claimed that critique only holds in relation to the old, dead God, not the new God of this theological postsecular.³² Rollins' work risks being read, therefore, as little more than a way to keep God and faith in God safe, or immune to critique.

And yet, even when the move from negative theology to a more radical, materialist, even atheist theology is more properly understood, Rollins' postsecular theology can still be perceived by his Christian audience to be making the ultimately triumphalist claim that it is the Christian tradition – or, more specifically, its narrative of the death of God and preaching of "Christ crucified" (1Cor. 1:23) – that best exposes the non-existence of the big Other. For Žižek, Christianity is sublated in political organization,³³ but both Žižek's philosophical reading of Paul and Rollins' theological appropriation of it arguably maintain the sovereignty of Christianity even (or especially?) within the postsecular situation. As Žižek quotes G.K. Chesterton approvingly: "Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king."³⁴ But, as Bruno Bosteels has also wondered, "Is there not a risk that, as an unintended side-effect of Žižek's interpretation, all this talk about the 'epochal greatness,' the 'genuine gesture,' or the 'good news' of Christianity as 'the only truly logical monotheism' will simply end up confirming the traditional believers in their beliefs...?"³⁵ Žižek, Žižek's Paul and Rollins' Žižekian theology arguably effect "an ever more pernicious incorporation" of the postsecular into "the fold of the Christian God."³⁶ In other words, they risk a theologization of the postsecular. And, since really

³² As Merold Westphal, for example, proposes, Christians can make use of secular critiques of religion *insofar as* they repeat the biblical critique of idols, but these critiques only hold in relation to the conceptual idolatry of modern theology, the idolatrous God of onto-theology, which these critiques may help us overcome. See Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007[1998]). This book was instrumental in the development of Rollins' Atheism for Lent course. See also Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Ontotheology: Towards a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). Daniel Colucciello Barber notes this operation in relation to other concepts, like 'universalism' or 'Hegel'; see 'Bad Versions' (24 October 2014), <https://itself.wordpress.com/2014/10/24/bad-versions>

³³ Slavoj Žižek, 'Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox', in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), p. 291.

³⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 145; cited in Žižek, *The Puppet and The Dwarf*, p. 15.

³⁵ Bruno Bosteels, 'Žižek and Christianity: Or the Critique of Religion after Marx and Freud', in Jamil Khader and Molly Anne Rothenberg, eds, *Žižek Now: Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), p. 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

existing Christians are the primary audience of Rollins' theology in a way that they are not for Žižek's philosophy, the danger of a new Christian imperialism becomes even greater with Rollins' theological appropriation of Žižek's philosophy and his postsecular Paul.

Rollins' Depoliticization of Paul

Rollins' earlier more mystical and later more psychoanalytic understandings of the political potential of Christianity coalesce in the figure of the converted Saul/Paul, especially in relation to the themes of symbolic identity suspension, identification with Christ as "the one who loses identity",³⁷ and "identifying with the symptom" or with "the identity of no identity."³⁸ Žižek and Žižek's Paul form the fundamental backdrop for these notions. Especially discernible are Paul's declaration that "There is neither male nor female ... for all are one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28), his equation of being "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20) with Christ's "becoming nothing" (Phil. 2:7) and of the Christian community with "the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things" (1Cor. 4:13), and his assertion that God chose "the things that are not" to "reduce to nothing the things that are" (1Cor. 1:28). But Rollins' appropriation of these Žižekian-Pauline tropes ultimately serves to depoliticize Paul.

For Rollins, churches should offer "space in our week where there is 'neither/nor'" (Gal. 3:28), a temporary, liturgical "performance of that Messianic vision of a time when all will be equal."³⁹ While what he calls the "natural cut" divides different groups or "tribes" from each other, each having their own distinct identity and worldview, the Pauline cut cuts each of these groups, identities and worldviews *from within*, separating "those who are willing to hold lightly to their identity from those who wish to retain it at all costs" and forming a new group beyond "tribal" identitarian differences.⁴⁰ Other differences must be added to Paul's list of differences, including that between Christians and non-Christians:

We remain true to Paul's message only by including the various identities that define *our* place, role, and value in society today. This means saying that, in the community founded on Christ, there is neither black

³⁷ Rollins, *The Idolatry of God*, p. 109.

³⁸ Peter Rollins, 'Even the Winners Lose: Some Thoughts on Revolution and Joy' [online] Available from: peterrollins.net/2016/01/even-the-winners-lose-some-thoughts-on-revolution-and-joy/ [accessed 8th June 2016] and Rollins, *Insurrection*, p. 167

³⁹ Peter Rollins, 'The Worldly Theology of Emerging Christianity', in Corcoran, *Church in the Present Tense*, p. 27; and Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, p. 178.

⁴⁰ Rollins, *The Idolatry of God*, p. 106.

nor white, neither rich nor poor, neither powerful nor powerless. More than this we can add that there is neither Republican nor Democrat, liberal nor conservative, orthodox nor heretic. Indeed, in the spirit of the text, we must push further:

There is neither high church nor low church, Catholic nor Protestant, citizen nor alien, capitalist nor communist, gay nor straight, beautiful nor ugly, East nor West, theist nor atheist, Israel nor Palestine, American nor Iraqi, married nor divorced, uptown nor downtown, terrorist nor freedom fighter, for all are made one in Christ.⁴¹

The list of particularities proliferates. For Rollins' Paul, inessential differences are to be added together and then subtracted from the essential.

Rollins' presentation of identities in binary pairs implies that he is working with a concept of identity as a positional, and oppositional, social category – one that Ann Ferguson describes as “an identity we find ourselves assigned to by social definition, usually by opposition to another social category, such as ‘woman’= ‘not-man’”.⁴² As a categorization by others or a position delineated by a specific social context, identity may not be easily set aside, as Rollins acknowledges. But the notion of even temporarily suspending positional identity categories overlooks the complexity of identity as multiple, intersectional and relational and overestimates the possibility and political potential of identity suspension. Rollins laments that “we live in a time in which identity politics holds court”,⁴³ but he does not clarify what he understands identity politics to be, and he does not offer any analysis of the intellectual history or contemporary practice of movements that have taken identity as the point of departure for politics. He wants to solve the supposed problem of identitarian particularisms through their addition to an ever-increasing list of inessential differences, without acknowledging either the power relations between the identities in each binary pair or the way all the identities listed relate to, intersect with and co-determine the others in structural ways that thereby affect how each identity may not only be socially prescriptive, defining place, role and value, and thereby subject to regimes of power, but

⁴¹ Rollins, *Insurrection*, pp. 166-7.

⁴² Ann Ferguson, ‘Resisting the Veil of Privilege: Building Bridge Identities as an Ethico-Politics of Global Feminisms’, in Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, eds, *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 200-201.

⁴³ Rollins, ‘The Worldly Theology of Emerging Christianity’, p. 24.

implicated too in a range of what Allison Weir calls “intersubjective relations” of “transformative identifications” and, therefore, also politically empowering.⁴⁴

For Rollins, identity suspension performs messianic equality, but equality becomes sameness in an effacement of difference that stems from a tradition of readings of Paul as declaring what Daniel Boyarin calls “the new humanity of no difference.” According to Boyarin, Paul was “motivated by an Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced the ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy.” But Christian universalism has been “a powerful force for coercive discourses of sameness.” It “deprives those who have historically grounded identities in those material signifiers” of gender, sexuality, race and class difference “of the power to speak for themselves and remain different.”⁴⁵ While Rollins’ postsecular theology aims at cutting across distinctions between the religious and the secular, atheism and theism, it obscures the differences that gender, sexuality, race, class and ability make. The suspension of gender, for example, does not generate equality or unity or neutrality but, rather, renders maleness and masculinity the norm, since the benefits cis men accumulate in the existing socio-symbolic order do not disappear in suspended spaces – these advantages being greater than a temporary performance of the refusal of maleness and masculinity. Suspended space requires those positioned within the non-normative social categories of not-male or not-masculine to adopt normative maleness and masculinity within the liturgical moment, just as they have historically been required to in other times, spaces and places. It is a practice of sameness rather than a performance of equality.

Rollins also links the suspension of identity to Paul’s identification of the Christian community with those that exist outside the social body (1Cor. 4:13). Being crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20) is about laying down identity, and taking up not Christian identity but what Rollins calls the “identity of no identity” or “class of no class.”⁴⁶ This involves identifying with the excluded and scapegoated outsider, the other, the things that are not, which have the potential to bring to nothing the things that are (1Cor. 1:28). This is the societal symptom, the site of unrest and protest within the social body to which the rest of the body must listen and from which it can learn and come to repentance and conversion, just as Saul came to identify with those he persecuted.⁴⁷ But, in advocating symbolic identity

⁴⁴ Allison Weir, *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 5, 7, 233 and 220.

⁴⁶ Rollins, *Insurrection*, p. 167; and *The Divine Magician*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ See Rollins, ‘Even the Winners Lose’; and Peter Rollins, ‘What Religion Should We Convert To? Leaving Christianity in the name of Christianity’ (Mar 03 2016) [online]

suspension and identifying with the societal symptom, Rollins follows Žižek in associating the properly political gesture with Paul's emphasis on the figures of particular, persecuted identities and bodies (the excluded, the scapegoated, the servants and slaves of Phil. 2:7) as stand-ins for nothing, the things that are not. They thereby repeat the erasure of those whose very effacement enabled the establishment of white Western male identity. Given the construction not only of both religion and the secular but also gender and race under white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal, Western and Christian imperialism, particular embodied identities were historically negated, by way of their positional contrast as not-white, not-Western, not-male, so that white Western men could become *something*. In Rollins' postsecular theology, these embodied identities are then erased again so that white Western men can become *nothing* and, ultimately, since "in the very act of becoming nothing, we identify with Christ",⁴⁸ so that white Western men can remain – despite secular and postsecular disruptions and destabilizations of religion – *divine*.

Just as Žižek stresses the political potential of Lacanian symbolic death by linking it to Jacques Rancière's notion of politics proper as that which is formulated from the position of the excluded "part of no part",⁴⁹ Rollins stresses the political potential of identity suspension by supplementing it with the idea of identifying with the identity of no identity. Briefly, for Žižek, to identify with that "part of society with no properly defined place within it (or resisting the allocated subordinated place within it)" is to identify with the Whole as such and, therefore, with direct belonging, questioning the existing socioeconomic order on behalf of its societal symptom precisely by identifying with the symptom.⁵⁰ But although Christianity might exemplify this logic of identification with the lowest rather than the highest, it nonetheless also "makes palpable" the limitation of this logic, since it combines this identification with an endorsement of the existing order: "nice and brutal, poor and rich, victims and torturers", "honest men and sinners, masters and slaves ... we are all united in Christ."⁵¹ Here, Žižek reads Paul as repeating the logic of multicultural tolerance at which his own political philosophy takes aim, and Rollins' repetition of Galatians 3:28 exhibits a similar logic. Although he maintains that Paul is here "describing a collective where ... everyone has equal access to the universal",⁵² Rollins appears to understand universality as equality:

Available from: peterrollins.net/2016/03/what-religion-should-we-convert-to-leaving-christianity-in-the-name-of-christianity/ [accessed 8th June 2016].

⁴⁸ Rollins, *Insurrection*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ See Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁵⁰ Žižek, *The Puppet and The Dwarf* p. 65; see Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 269.

⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 55; and Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 275.

⁵² Rollins, *The Divine Magician*, p. 148.

his Paul committed himself to “equality for all (the universal)”⁵³ such that, in Christ, there is neither rich nor poor, powerful nor powerless, “oppressor nor oppressed.”⁵⁴ This is an example of the conventional interpretation of Pauline universalism as constituting equality within what Žižek calls “one happy human family.” But Žižek has Paul stress, instead, not the tolerance or equality or unification of those who are “one in Christ” but the “one big divide” between those who are “in Christ” and those who are not.⁵⁵ It is “*the difference Christians/non-Christians itself which, as a difference, is universal.*”⁵⁶

However, the corresponding figure for a universal difference that cuts across particular differences within Rollins’ postsecular theology is the antagonism between those who hold onto their identity and those who lay it down, between “those who are open to change and those who hold stubbornly to their tribal identities.”⁵⁷ Rollins translates Žižek’s universal difference as a figure of socioeconomic or class struggle (Christian/non-Christian) into the difference between those who embrace doubt and those who repress it. By equating universality with *equality* rather than with class struggle, and by including differences that could act as figures or stand-ins for class struggle *within* the list of differences that are instead considered *inessential to this equality*, Rollins cannot make what Žižek would consider the more properly political and Pauline move of *politicizing inequalities* between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, oppressor and oppressed. Instead, Rollins depoliticizes socioeconomic difference.

Beyond the Theologization of Paul

For Rollins, as for Žižek, Paul is at the centre of any proposal regarding the radicality of Christianity, and they are heirs to a tradition of interpreting Paul according to “the logics and rhetorics of the radical break and the new start.”⁵⁸ With Paul, something new happened, a break with – or within – Judaism: the emergence of Christianity as a new religion, as the critique of all religions, including Christianity, or as the only proper religion of atheism.

The standard interpretation of the relationship between Paul and his Jewish context is that he made a radical break with Judaism in order to advocate

⁵³ Rollins, ‘What Religion Should We Convert To?’

⁵⁴ Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, p. 170.

⁵⁵ Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009[2006]), p. 35.

⁵⁷ Rollins, *The Divine Magician*, p. 149.

⁵⁸ Ward Blanton, ‘Mad with the Love of Undead Lief: Understanding Paul and Zizek’, in Frick, *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers*, p. 199.

justification through faith and a law-free gospel of grace. But this Paul emerged as the theological solution to theological anxieties about law and grace, merit and reward, and justification by faith and by works-righteousness, leaving Judaism a theological foil for Christianity. This normative opposition between Judaism and Christianity was the starting point for both biblical exegesis and the historical study of Paul for a long time.⁵⁹ But the need for a New Perspective on Paul had become increasingly clear after the Second World War, which had made explicit the links between Christian theology and anti-Semitism and given rise to new post-Holocaust approaches to Jewish-Christian relations and an awareness of the Christian anti-Judaism that could be found even in feminist and other liberation theologies.⁶⁰ And yet, while the New Perspective stressed not the rupture but the relation between Paul and Judaism, here too Paul ultimately makes a break with Judaism and the idea that “the works of the law” (Gal. 2:16), understood as markers of Jewish identity or of the ethnic boundaries of God’s covenant people, create a distinction between Jews and non-Jews. For this Paul, it is not the covenantal relationship between the Jews and God that is incompatible with faith in Jesus, but Jewish identity, since being “in Christ” is a new identity that claims to make all others redundant. According to this Paul, the problem is Jewish particularism: the tendency to define the covenant in ethnic terms. The solution is Christian universalism, which expands the covenant to include all, regardless of ethnic identity.

In standard interpretations of Paul, he breaks with Jewish legalism for Christian grace; in the New Perspective, and the turn to Paul in political philosophy, he breaks with Jewish ethnicity, identity or particularity for Christian universalism. But both these interpretative frameworks constitute what Smith and Whistler might call a theologization, a contamination of biblical and historical study with the anti-Judaism and imperialism of normative Christian theology. Although the New Perspective appeared radical relative to traditional interpretations of Paul, it continues to construct what Richard Horsley describes as “a parochial-political and legalistic-ritualistic ‘Judaism’ as an Other-religion over against true, universal

⁵⁹ For an introduction to the history of anti-Judaism in the formation of standard interpretations of Paul, see, for example, Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, pp. 1-94.

⁶⁰ Kathy Ehrensperger writes that, ‘in attempting to liberate Christian theology from patriarchal interpretation, feminist theologians often unconsciously had built their views on anti-Jewish images of Judaism drawn from mainstream theologians of whom in other respects they were very critical’; *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminisms and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), p. 40. See further, pp. 19-27. See also Judith Plaskow, ‘Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy’, in Evelyn T. Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone, 1982), pp.250-54; and Susannah Heschel, ‘Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology’, *Tikkun* 5/3 (1990), pp. 25-8 and 95-7.

and purely spiritual religion; Western European Christianity.”⁶¹ Identifying the contamination of biblical and historical scholarship by normative theology in part motivated what Magnus Zetterholm terms “radical” new perspectives on Paul. In attempting to move beyond the New Perspective’s emphasis on the difference between Judaism and Christianity, more radical exegeses of Paul’s letters move beyond earlier paradigms by identifying Paul’s main concern as the grafting of non-Jews onto the tree of Israel.⁶² Commonalities between sometimes diverse readings of Paul’s universalization of Judaism are that he primarily, or solely, addressed non-Jews and attended to questions about how non-Jews should relate to the Torah and how Jews and non-Jews should relate to one another within the Jesus movement as a moment *within Judaism*.

But Davina C. Lopez identifies this aspect of more radical perspectives on Paul as a point where a residue of the “overtheologization” – the Christianization or Christian imperialism – against which they are reacting can still be detected.⁶³ Focusing on the relations between Jews and non-Jews utilizes a Christian theological distinction that prevents a properly critical examination of who the Gentiles are and, therefore, of who Paul is as apostle to the Gentiles. For Lopez, Paul does not address non-Jews or nascent Christians, defined by their positional identity as non-Israelites in oppositional difference to the Jews. Rather, the Gentiles are “the nations.” In a reading of Paul to which I shall return shortly, Lopez draws not only on historical textual sources but also on visual representations personifying the nations conquered by the Roman Empire as “racially distinct female bodies” to argue that Jews should be included in what is therefore a primarily *political* rather than a *Christian theological* category consisting of *all* the conquered nations, including the Jews.⁶⁴ Salvation is therefore not salvation from either Jewish legalism or Jewish identity but from Roman rule.

Failing to take the Roman Empire into account leads to the depoliticization of Pauline studies, but postcolonial interpretations and what Lopez calls “empire-critical” approaches give more serious consideration to the ancient imperial context of Paul’s Letters, which positions Paul as opposed to Roman ideology from a Jewish standpoint. As Horsley remarks, “The most significant way in which a postcolonial reading of Paul disrupts the standard essentialist, individualistic and depoliticized Augustinian-Lutheran Paul, consists in the rediscovery of the anti-imperial stance and program evident in his letter.”⁶⁵ Musa W. Dube describes

⁶¹ Richard A. Horsley, ‘Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies’, in R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), p. 154.

⁶² Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, p. 161.

⁶³ Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 181, n. 27.

⁶⁴ Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, p. viii.

⁶⁵ Horsley, ‘Submerged Biblical Histories’, pp. 167-8.

“reading for decolonization” as a process involving an “awareness of imperialism’s exploitative forces and its various strategies of domination, the conscious adaptation of strategies for resisting imperial domination, as well as the search for alternative ways of liberating interdependence between nations, races, genders, economies and cultures.”⁶⁶ Postcolonial biblical criticism is “a dual reading project” involving “deconstruction (decolonization) toward reconstruction (liberation).”⁶⁷ It is about both resistance and solidarity.

Whereas Badiou, Žižek and Rollins focus on a Paul who breaks with Jewish Law (Badiou) or universalizes the particular Jewish stance towards it (Žižek and Rollins), thus repeating the theologizations effected by both standard interpretations of Paul and the New Perspective on Paul. But other philosophical interpretations accord more closely to work beyond the New Perspective by centring on Paul’s anti-imperialism.⁶⁸ However, the intersections of power, gender, sexuality and race remain missing in these works also. By reading Paul with feminist, queer and other identity-based traditions of thought, as well as postcolonial, empire-critical and other liberationist traditions of thought, we might be able to better address and redress the theologization and depoliticization of Paul. Lopez, for example, draws on empire-critical, postcolonial, feminist and queer theoretical frameworks of interpretation to highlight “the gendered, sexualized, and racialized texture” of Roman imperial ideology to, in turn, further clarify the political nature of Paul’s mission to all the nations under Roman rule.⁶⁹ I will argue in the rest of this article that her study also helpfully illuminates a range of identity practices as a politics of solidarity amongst the different conquered nations, in contrast to Rollins’ postsecular politics of sameness or equality without difference.

Paul’s Gendered Identity Practices

In his overview of recent research published on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, D. Francois Tolmie notes that 3:28 is the verse that receives the most attention from scholars. Of the three pairs in this verse, it is the male and female pairing that is

⁶⁶ Musa W. Dube, ‘Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)’, *Semeia* 75 (1996), p. 38.

⁶⁷ Jae Won Lee, *Paul and the Politics of Difference: A Contextual Study of the Jewish-Gentile Difference in Galatians and Romans* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), p. 51.

⁶⁸ Blanton, ‘Mad with the Love of Undead Life’, p. 207. See Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleida Assmann trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); and Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, p. xii.

the most frequent focus of study. And the most common question asked of it concerns whether the phrase implies the abolition or adiaphorization of gender difference.⁷⁰ But by attending not just to Paul's statements about gender but to the gendered nature of Paul's discourse more generally, Paul's own gendered identity practices emerge as a focal point for questions surrounding resistance and solidarity that have the potential to liberate Paul from his theologization and depoliticization in Rollins' postsecular theology.

While several studies have identified the ways in which Paul subverts Roman political discourse,⁷¹ Davina C. Lopez considers the gendered nature of literary and visual Roman imperial ideology by combining empire-critical and gender-critical approaches. She thereby identifies more clearly the changes in Paul's self-presentation of identity from conquering Roman to conquered Jew, "strong penetrating male to weak penetrated female."⁷² The gender instabilities in the text indicate how Paul had perceived himself as above others in his zeal against the assemblies of God (Gal. 1:13-14). He then sees himself as on the bottom, defeated and suffering rather than dominant and heroic (see 2Cor. 11:23-27, for example). Given the gendered personification of the conquered nations in Roman textual sources and visual representation, Paul comes to purposefully present himself not only as a different kind of man but also as a woman, and especially a suffering mother. Lopez concludes that the "power differential of interest to New Testament studies should shift from *Jews* over against *other nations* to *Romans* over against *all the nations including Jews*."⁷³ As gendered, the key distinction in Paul (Rome/nations, rather than Jews/Gentiles) becomes more clearly political and not merely theological or religious.

But Paul does not just come to recognise his identity as an oppressed Jew under Roman occupation. He comes to identify with the other oppressed nations besides Israel. Paul therefore also passes from broken man and defeated woman to labouring mother whose pains (Gal. 4:19) are a symbol of her attempt to birth new types of social relations amongst and new forms of solidarity between the many defeated nations together on the bottom. Beverley Roberts Gaventa has proposed that references to Paul's identity as "a female-identified male" – as a woman in

⁷⁰ See D. Francois Tolmie, 'Research on the Letter to the Galatians: 2000-2010', *Acta Theologica* 32/1 (2012), pp. 118-57; and 'Tendencies in the Interpretation of Galatians 3:28 since 1990', *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 19 (2014), pp. 105-29.

⁷¹ See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, 'Rhetoric and Empire – and 1 Corinthians', in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 72-102. See also Dieter Georgi, 'God Turned Upside Down', in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 148-57.

⁷² Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, p. xiv.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

labour and a nursing mother – should not be treated as disparate images, nor as a variation on paternal imagery, but instead as a neglected theme relating to the birthing and nurturing of the new communities. She ultimately links passages like Gal. 4:19 to other Pauline texts that can be related to the question of leadership within the new communities,⁷⁴ but Lopez sees the gendered positions that Paul takes upon him-/herself as reflecting more generally “how one behaves in relation to others within a larger framework that is expressive of power and privilege.”⁷⁵ And so, in contrast *not* to a Jewish particularism but to a Roman universalism of peace established “from the top’ through violent domination, Paul is called to formulate an alternative ‘universalism from the bottom, a *universalism through solidarity among the defeated*.”⁷⁶ The universal difference here is not that between (Jewish) particularity and (Christian) universality but more clearly that between Roman universalism and a universalism formulated through solidarity among the conquered nations and resistance to Roman imperial rule.

Lopez suggests that focusing on relations between Jews and non-Jews can overshadow the anti-imperialist stance that Paul is cultivating amongst both Jews and non-Jews under and against Rome. But other scholars locate in Paul examples of a pluralist approach to negotiating non-hierarchical social relations between Jews and non-Jews, and these examples might figure the kind of solidarities that Lopez’s “mother Paul”⁷⁷ wants to see amongst the different conquered nations. For example, where the dominant approach within Pauline scholarship highlights the inconsistencies and contradictions in Paul’s remarks regarding the Law, Peter J. Tomson uses his study of Jewish legal traditions to show how Paul uses his letters to maintain the communities to whom he wrote through specific strategies tailored to each community’s circumstances.⁷⁸ Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Romans, for example, reflect discrete situations in which he formulates a notion of difference that depends on the existing social relations of each of these two communities. As Jae Won Lee concludes in her study of table-fellowship in these two letters, having perceived Gentiles as “different” in Galatians and Jews as “different” in Romans, Paul’s responses illustrate that he “understood the meaning of difference in contextual and relational ways rather than in essentializing and universalizing ways.”⁷⁹ Those who occupy the strongest position in the power relations within the communities are asked to accept those

⁷⁴ Beverley Roberts Gaventa, ‘Our Mother St Paul: Toward the Recovery of a Neglected Theme’, in Amy-Jill Levine, ed., with Marianne Blickenstaff, *A Feminist Companion to Paul* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), pp. 96 and 97.

⁷⁵ Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, p. 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷⁸ Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halaka in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

⁷⁹ Lee, *Paul and the Politics of Difference*, p. 165.

in the weakest position; the strong change their practices to accommodate the weak rather than asking them to give up their differences.

But it is important to note in addition that this means that specific questions about difference – about food laws, circumcision, and temple worship, for example – relate to the question of “how marginalized people express profound disidentification with the dominant structure’s expectations.”⁸⁰ If, for example, the Gentiles, the other nations under Rome, were to become circumcised or exempt from the emperor cult like the Jews, then it would still be possible for Rome to police the boundaries of resistance to Roman rule. So Paul says that non-Jews do not have to become Jews. But local communities in which those who are not circumcised associate with the circumcised are harder for the conquerors to police, since the conquered thereby refuse to adhere to the conqueror’s policing of the boundaries of the resistance.

Paul’s identity practices are further elucidated as strategies for solidarity by feminist, queer of colour and disability/crip theorizations of the notions of *dis-identification* and of *identifying with*. For José Medina, for example, group identities or social categories are dependent upon networks of similarities and differences. Dis-identification can occur when we come to see the differences between ourselves and other members of our identity group, or when we see the similarities between ourselves and members of another identity group.⁸¹ In other words, in dis-identification, we see ourselves as not fully at home in our identities. It is what Judith Butler calls an experience of “*misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong.”⁸² But, more than this, dis-identification challenges established mechanisms of belonging, destabilizing the very networks of similarities and differences that establish and sustain the signs of group identity, disturbing the boundaries of home. According to José Esteban Muñoz, dis-identification can be a strategy of identification for those with multiple intersecting marginal identities that not only “crack[s] open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”⁸³ While dis-identification is principally theorized as an identity strategy undertaken by what Muñoz terms “minoritarian” subjects in relation to dominant or “majoritarian” ideologies, it can also be an important part of identification between minoritarian subjects as well, as Sami Schalk has argued.

⁸⁰ Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, p. 226 n. 18.

⁸¹ José Medina, ‘Identity Trouble: Disidentification and the Problem of Difference’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 29/6 (2003), pp. 655-80.

⁸² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 219.

⁸³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 31.

Identifying with other minoritarian subjects is about “having acknowledged and prioritized political and personal connections to a group with which one does not identify as a member.”⁸⁴

In relation to his identity as Roman conqueror, Paul comes to see differences with Roman oppressors and similarities with conquered Jews, in a *dis-identification* that ultimately leads to an *identification as* one of the conquered nations and to *identifications with* the Gentiles, the other conquered nations. This is, then, a process of conversion not from Jewish identity to Christian identity but within his Jewish identity, from conquering Roman Jew to conquered Jew alongside the other nations under Roman rule. Deploying the symbolic codes of Roman imperial ideology, Paul mounts a politico-religious critique of Rome and, precisely through subversion of these raw materials, articulates an alternative positionality as defeated man, penetrated female and, suffering mother – a disempowered politics formulated from this position. But minoritarian subjects can themselves occupy both weak and strong positions relative to other minoritarian subjects, and so, while both Jews and Gentiles are minoritarian nations under majoritarian Rome, Paul’s identity practices involve both an identification *of* power relations amongst Jews and Gentiles in different situations and an identification *with* the weakest or least powerful in each situation. Paul writes that, “To those under the law I became as one under the law”, “To those outside the law I became as one outside the law”, and “To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak” (1Cor. 9:19-23). As Lee has shown, Paul undertakes identity practices in order to express “equality with difference” through “solidarity with the ‘weak’”.⁸⁵ In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul identifies as part of a “we” that is *Jewish* (Gal. 2:15) and then identifies with the *Gentiles* as those that are different; in his Letter to the Romans, Paul identifies as part of a Gentile “we” (Rom. 15:1) and then identifies with the Roman *Jews* as different. Each identity practice is conducted amongst minoritarian subjects under the majoritarian Roman Empire but performed through different identifications *as* and *with*. By identifying with the Gentiles in Galatians and the Jews in Romans, Paul seeks to maintain each in their differences, precisely in order to sustain what Alison Weir would call a resistant “we” that does not efface difference.⁸⁶

Rather than merely adding together these different identities as inessential to the struggle against Empire, Paul concerns himself with *identifying the dynamics of privilege and power* at work amongst the conquered nations under Empire; with the

⁸⁴ Sami Schalk, ‘Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies’, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33/2 (2013), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3705/3240#> (no pagination). See also Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 37.

⁸⁵ Lee, *Paul and the Politics of Difference*, p. 162ff.

⁸⁶ See Weir, *Identities and Freedom*.

identity positions and practices that are possible *between* the nations; and with the *context-specific identifications* that can foster solidarities *against* Empire. Imitating Paul's own practices of dis-identification with Empire (strong, heroic, penetrating, male), identification-as conquered (weak, defeated, penetrated, female) and identification-with other conquered others in conceiving of, birthing, nurturing and sustaining new communities of resistance and solidarity (labouring and nursing mother), the nations are to *dis-identify* themselves from the power structures of Empire, *identify as* one of the conquered nations under Empire, and *identify with* the others in solidarity against Empire. While Rollins' postsecular theology risks both an erasure of gender and racial differences, among others, and a depoliticization of socioeconomic and class difference, attending to more radical perspectives on Paul's gendered identity practices illuminates how Paul's opposition to Roman imperial ideology might inspire a politics of solidarity that does not erase difference.

Conclusion

This article began from the premise that the erasure of difference in the turn to a postsecular Paul is a feature of a wider polemic against identity politics and that such an erasure precludes readings of Paul that could inspire identifications between and solidarities amongst identity-based political movements for social and economic justice. This point of departure was designed to keep our focus on the missing question of whether class struggle should indeed be indifferent to other differences. Although comprehensive examination of this question is beyond the scope of the current article, I contend that radical perspectives on Paul are fruitful for continuing explorations of the relationships between identity-based political movements and class struggle. I have proposed that, in moving beyond the turn to Paul in political philosophy to read him with identity-based traditions of interpretation and beyond the New Perspective in biblical studies to read him with an empire-critical lens, we can pay attention to questions of identity and difference *and* solidarity and resistance.

One example of such an approach within the radical perspective on Paul focuses not upon specific verses about women, sexuality and gender (such as Gal. 3:28) but on the gendered nature of Paul's language more generally. Paul's gendered practices of dis-identification, identification-as and identification-with cultivate a politics of solidarity amongst the different conquered nations under imperial rule, in which attention to and analysis of questions of difference in different contexts are an important part of the process of birthing and nurturing anti-imperialist collectives under and against the Roman Empire. But our understanding of "empire" here should not remain, as Stephen D. Moore has remarked,

“reassuringly ancient and remote.”⁸⁷ Reading Paul as “our contemporary” as Badiou suggests,⁸⁸ we can instead explore a set of interlinking identity practices that relate to the possibility of identity-based resistance to and solidarity under contemporary neoliberal, neocolonial, white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal, globalized capitalist imperial rule without effacing the complexity, multiplicity, intersectionality and relationality of identity or of our identifications with values and ideals, with individuals and collectives and with a commitment and orientation to a resistant “we.”⁸⁹

I have been suggesting that such approaches to Paul are potentially productive for the continued examination of the relationship between identity-based political movements and class struggle. But I have also been asking, firstly, whether Rollins’ postsecular theology remains – even when understood as a post-Christian, even atheistic, radical theology – a depoliticizing theologization of Paul and, secondly, whether postsecular theology might be liberated from such a depoliticization and theologization through the inheritance of an alternative spirit of Paul. But this begs further questions about what I am interested in liberating Paul *for*. Why would I want to deploy a liberated Paul to in turn liberate popular Christian discourse and practice from its own theologization and depoliticization of Paul? What would any contemporary politico-Paulinist movement want with Christianity or the churches? While I do not have a religious stake in Christianity, I do want to suggest that Paul can inform and inspire specifically *postsecular* solidarities between religious collectives who have historically claimed him among their heritage and wider identity-based movements for justice that have historically eclipsed religious difference, including secular feminism.⁹⁰ But truly postsecular solidarities between philosophical and political Paulinisms and actually existing churches can only proceed *without* the theologization and depoliticization of Paul that I have detected in Rollins’ theology, which extends a measure of immunity to Christian communities and risks a new Christian imperialism, implying that, while God might be dead, at least it is the Christian religious tradition that best exemplifies the death, disappearance or, rather, non-existence of God. Interpretations of Paul that seek to give material body to a postsecular Paulinism which does not repeat this theologization and depoliticization are part of the task ahead.

Katharine Sarah Moody is Research Associate in Philosophy at the University of Lancaster.

⁸⁷ Stephen D. Moore, ‘Paul After Empire’, in Christopher D. Stanley, ed. *The Colonized Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 22.

⁸⁸ See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, pp. 4-15.

⁸⁹ On these identifications, see Weir, *Identities and Freedom*.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Braidotti, ‘In Spite of the Times’.

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