

A RESTLESS NOMINATION: BADIOU AND THE TOPOLOGY OF FUNDAMENTALISM

TRAVIS E. ABLES

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

JANUARY 19, 2006

*Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?*

*Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.*

*And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.*

Constantine P. Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians"¹

A basic assumption underlies this paper: that we fail to take fundamentalism seriously as a political and a theological phenomenon. But my operative assumption here is that the conceptual apparatus that is constitutive of modern Christian fundamentalism is premised on a certain *episteme*, to borrow Foucault's term, that has direct bearing on our own ecclesial and political being. It represents the shadow-side of modern Christianity and we do well to attend to the warning it constitutes. Need we mention the violence which it inscribes on the bodies of its subjects as legitimation for such a study?

¹ In Constantine P. Cavafy, *Selected Poems*, rev. ed., trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 [1975]), pgs. 18-19.

A word on scope. A fully articulated theological accounting of fundamentalism is the subject for a monograph, not an essay. The present paper presents the first of three examinations of the contemporary nature of fundamentalism, the remaining two being the self-reflexive traditionalism of primitivist ecclesial narratives, and the linguistic composition of the bifurcated fundamentalist subject. In addition, I shall be employing two of those beloved scholarly fictions: ideal types and synchronic analyses. A full account would of course read fundamentalist literature for the actual discursive contours of its self-understanding, as well as undertake the diachronic task of an archaeology of the historical conditions of fundamentalist self-constitution. Finally, by “fundamentalism” I am referring to contemporary American Protestant fundamentalism and evangelicalism, and am bracketing considerations of the extension of this analysis to *other* fundamentalisms.

Thus in what follows my object is simple: to understand fundamentalism’s topology in its own self-constitution of a boundary-defined, totalizing community organized around a discursive center, and the relationship of that self-constitution vis-à-vis the cultural and political configurations within which it is situated.

BADIOU ON THE QUESTION OF NAMING THE VOID

I shall take as a point of departure the thought of Alain Badiou, in the wager that his philosophy of the event and the subject it composes will yield access to the considerations raised above. Specifically, I am looking to the function of the void in Badiou’s system as it adumbrates a certain topology of subjective constitution, and the simulacrum of that void, the plenitude, in its relationship to that constitutive center. I will hence focus primarily on Badiou’s *Ethics*.²

Let us configure our reading of Badiou as a question of *nomination* or predication. This is a movement of naming the *event*, which is an irruption of the utterly new and unknown in the

² Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001).

situation in which it occurs. The event is the aleatory occurrence of a *supplement* to an existent situation that “compels us to decide a *new* way of being.”³ An event is undecidable and unnameable – it cannot be subjected to criteria of rationality and deliberation, for this would be to submit it to the norms of the situation with which it breaks. Following Lacan, Badiou states that an event – or rather, the truth-process that issues from it - punches a hole in knowledge.⁴ “Between thought and the real there is a hole, an abyss, a void.”⁵ It is an utter break. But what it *can* do is compose a subject within that situation. For truth is not a matter of linguistic claims or judgments; it is rather a *process* in which the fidelity to the event demands that one relate to the situation from the perspective of the evental supplement or trace. The subject is *composed* as the bearer of a fidelity. Now a subject is not a psychological subject; it can be a community or a group of persons. What subjects are, fundamentally, are the “local occurrences of the truth-process,”⁶ those whom the fidelity of the truth-process crosses or traverses, that person or group that is seized by the truth-process, the echo of the evental supplement that calls new ways of being forth from the void of the situation. Such an evental fidelity Badiou terms the “universal power of subjectivation.”⁷ For Badiou, the truth-process provides a mode of *naming* the situation anew, a figure of nomination that provides a new space of being and counting the multiples of that situation.

The event is situated around (or actually, on the edge of) a void. This is the unknown, the unnameable, of the situation. On one level, this is an ontological inscription by Badiou of a simple fact: the event, the new, is the irruption of something that *was not* in the situation

³ Ibid., p. 41, quoting from his own *L'Être et l'événement*. Emphasis original.

⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

⁵ Badiou, “Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,” in *Infinite Thought*, trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 65.

⁶ *Ethics*, p. 44.

⁷ Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 90

previously – the occurrence of what was lacking. Yet on a deeper level, the void or the unnameable “is the point where the situation in its most intimate being is submitted to thought,”⁸ but that no knowledge (the derivative transmission of a truth) can circumscribe; it is the inexpressible *real* of the situation. It is the question of a *space* against which thought must situate itself: “every theory consists of a localization of the void which authorizes truth, of its placement, and of the construction of its algebra and topology.”⁹

Another way of describing the Badiouan void would be to characterize the void as a figure of the limits of thought. The void is that which is beyond language and knowledge, the infinite real that provides the potency of the new but cannot be contained within the fidelity of the truth-process. Ultimately, truth is a matter of generic multiples, of a singularity that can be counted universally; but precisely because of the limited nature of nomination an infinite space or set must lie beyond the singularity of the truth-process. For a truth-process is *always* singular. Although we can (and must by virtue of its universal potentiality) *anticipate* the idea of a completed generic truth, such a truth is inaccessible – it is “uncompletable.”¹⁰

Evil for Badiou is directly derivative of the Good, of the truth-process – its remainder and shadow-side. The form (or name) of evil is threefold: *simulacrum*, *betrayal*, and *disaster*.¹¹ We shall concern ourselves with the simulacrum and the disaster, which are closely related. At root of both is evil as “the forcing of a nomination at the point of the unnameable...the will to name *at any price*.”¹² The event calls forth its not-there as new. But the event disappears, leaving in its wake a trace, the name. The simulacrum of the resultant truth-process is instead configured

⁸ Badiou, “Philosophy and Truth,” in *Infinite Thought*, p. 49. We must note here that the theoretical basis of all this lies in Badiou’s mathematical ontology, based on set theory, an explication of which lies beyond the scope of this essay.

⁹ “Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,” p. 65.

¹⁰ “Philosophy and Truth,” p. 48.

¹¹ *Ethics*, p. 71; cf. “Philosophy and Truth,” p. 50.

¹² “Philosophy and Truth,” *ibid.*; emphasis original.

around a *plenitude*, which instantiates, not the generic universality of the truth-process, but instead a particularity or substance of the situation. “No eventual One can be the One of a particularity.”¹³ A *truth-process* is universalizable beyond the scope of the particularity of the situation; a *simulacrum* universalizes that particularity as the substance of the truth. “It is imperative that universality not present itself under the aspect of a particularity.”¹⁴ Put differently, the simulacrum is founded on a center that, in fundamental opposition to the void, the inexpressible real, is *instantiated* and *named by force*: the “other” that must be *voided* to universalize the terror of the simulacrum. Badiou’s example is the Jew in that exemplary simulacrum, Nazi Germany: an empty referent whose function was purely to receive a predicate that legitimated its erasure in the Nazi totalism of its own communal particularity. Another example: the locution “terrorist” in the War on Terror.¹⁵

Evil as disaster concerns the nomination of the situation from the perspective of a truth with the unattainable goal of a total naming by virtue of the subject-language of the truth-process. Yet because every truth in its composition of the subject rests on the human animal which is the interested surplus of the disinterested subject, “every attempt to impose the total power of a truth ruins that truth’s very foundation.”¹⁶ Or, as he puts it in his work on St. Paul, “an eventual rupture always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a ‘not...but.’”¹⁷ The absolutization of a truth-process, the totalitarian claim of its nominating possibilities, is *disaster*. The situation *always* exceeds the language of the subject. There is always a remainder which the truth-process does not name, the unnameable, the possibility of the Real irrupting once again. This links back explicitly, in my reading, with the void, and it is that which prevents the

¹³ *St. Paul*, p. 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁵ See “Philosophy and the ‘War against Terrorism’,” in *Infinite Thought*, esp. pgs. 111-15.

¹⁶ *Ethics*, p. 84.

¹⁷ *St. Paul*, pgs. 63-64.

absolutization of a truth. A truth-process is infinite, but it is not totalizable. To force the naming of the unnameable is the evil of disaster, and it too is a movement of terror.

Hence, to sum my reading of Badiou's ethical configuration of the void: to name the void is to instantiate a plenitude that, first, totalizes the particularity of the community by placing *other* particularities under erasure, and second, installs a simulacrum as constitutive and centering of that community, which simulacrum is necessarily a voided name expropriated from those negated particularities.

THE FRONTIERS OF FUNDAMENTALISM: THE ELECT AND ITS OTHERS

Let us now leave Badiou for a moment and limn a basic schematic of a fundamentalist system. I will here provisionally define fundamentalism as a *boundary-defined reactionary community founded on the negation and exclusion of its cultural situation and constituted by a self-reflexive doctrinal discourse*.

Let us take the last element first. Protestant fundamentalism is premised on a certain modernist configuration of propositional truth, faith as cognitive assent, and doctrinal rectitude combined with a naïve biblical primitivism and literalism. This is a standard assessment. But the upshot of fundamentalism's doctrinal composition is an intense discursive self-reflexivity. Fundamentalist discourse is notable for its self-reinforcing, unfalsifiable system of thought. For example, rejection of a doctrinal tenet is adjudicated in terms of *subjective constitution*: to dissent from the teaching of the ecclesial elite is to be "deceived" or "rebellious," subjective terms with epistemic implications. Further, fundamentalism is wholly *defined* (in the strict sense of the word) without remainder by the criterion of doctrinal rectitude. The individual's status as a member of the elect community is determined by the assent (and internalization) of the imposed theological discourse.

This promulgates a certain knowledge and language that is purely circular and curved in upon itself; to poach on Derrida, the semiotic *loci* of fundamentalist doctrine refer to each other in a never-ending chain of signifiers – a continual deferral of any meaning outside the pure surplus of theological language. Doctrinal proposition refers to doctrinal proposition, without any inherent or necessary reference to ecclesial *life*, liturgic *praxis*, or theological *reality* (to say nothing of divine *presence*). As doctrine operates as the sole sufficient descriptor of Christian existence, fundamentalist discourse folds in upon itself in a play of significations whose only function is to reinforce the tenacity of the system. We might say, echoing Cavafy, that fundamentalist doctrinalism is characterized by a certain *restless* nomination, a compulsion *to name*, that which will not let be the unnameable, *be*.

This restless doctrinal nomination has one basic function: the constitution of boundaries that demarcate the elect community vis-à-vis the “world,” or the condemned and reprobate society that surrounds the fundamentalist community. The defining feature of a fundamentalism is that it represents an *elect space* in the midst of ungodly society. Put another way, a fundamentalism is a rigorously defined particularity that precisely in that particularity represents an aspiration of universalization of that local semantic content. For a fundamentalism must always have a highly specific and singular form, and just as elect that *form* signifies the non-transformable *same*. Because definition here – and I continue to use this term strictly – isolates a particular that is given shape in the linguistic nomination of its self-constitution in a *language that is folded in entirely upon itself*, the demarcating function of the doctrinal system simultaneously *isolates* and *imposes*; the election of the community demands the reprobation of the cultural space out of which it arises by the sheer power of that which it names – that which it names *itself*.

Fundamentalist discourse then inscribes the condition of boundary as the constitutive feature of that community. Fundamentalism is a *boundary-defined* community. Here we are at the very heart of modern Protestant fundamentalism, and once again, the descriptor “modern” is far from accidental. The function of doctrine – a function to which the significance of cognitive truth claims, personal assent, and theological description is entirely secondary – is to clearly demarcate the contours of the elect community. For a language does nothing so much as define the native speaker in opposition to the barbarian at the gates. The theologemes of fundamentalist communities are only secondarily god-talk, and primarily and constitutively a *rhetorical topology*, an inscription of election and membership upon the skin of those who have given their assent to the received speech, the branding of a *name* upon the forehead of those saved from the wrath to come.

Doctrine, then, theological rectitude, has as its primary function definition, demarcation. Positing this enables one to understand what is perhaps the most bewildering characteristic of modern fundamentalisms to non-adherents: the valorization of marginal issues as criteria of militant orthodoxy. At the turn of the twentieth century, *The Fundamentals* focused on accepted core Christian theological issues like the divinity or resurrection of Christ; but what most of the energy in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was exerted on were relatively minor issues like the virgin birth, the literal occurrence of the miracle narratives of the gospels, and the timing and character of the end-time millennium. Today, of course, parallel marginalia likewise compose the subject of vociferous debate for fundamentalists and evangelicals: doctrinal issues like a highly specific doctrine of scripture (verbal, plenary inspiration with the entailment of strict inerrancy of the original manuscripts) or the timing of the “rapture” prior to the millennium. But more significantly, the status of *persons* and *bodies* becomes definitive. Gender

roles and the ordination of women, and preeminently the status of the homosexual person, are *the* militant issues for modern fundamentalisms. Far from marginal importance of course, for the woman or the homosexual – yet curious issues to stake the greater part of the theological energy of a movement attacking such that the *structurally definitive discourse of the community* becomes the language of misogyny or homophobia, a grammar that is embedded in the speech and psychopathology of the everyday life of the adherent. And of course such questions eventuate in what, to the outsider, seem banal absurdities – the boycotting of Disney or *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or any given offensive pronouncement from luminaries like Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell being only the most obvious examples.

But this dynamic is far from accidental. For such issues compose *boundary conditions* of the fundamentalist community. The position one takes, as an adherent of the dominant theological speech, in its inscription in the language of fundamentalist discourse, in the *nominating praxis* that this discourse undergirds, functions as an *identity signifier* in precise parallel to the sociological cohesion of the fundamentalist group. Why do certain films increasingly become sites of battle in the culture wars – *The Passion of the Christ*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Million Dollar Baby*? The reasons, considered at least genealogically, are at a far remove from the question of the “family values” presented in the film. Such rhetorical gambits of course constitute the material content of the relevant soundbites – but the *topological function* is the continual agonistic debate over the cultural identity of the fundamentalisms. It is notable that such debate has increasingly taken on the form of the pure spectacle of ideology – it has in certain segments of our society become nearly compulsory to see, e.g. *Narnia* purely for the purpose of taking sides – a pilgrimage of self-naming, of the self-constitution according to the accepted parameters that compose the task of identity signification.

For as comparative religionist David Chidester has shown, a boundary is never a simple site of demarcation.¹⁸ Rather it represents a *frontier* – an in-between space of contested knowledges and power. In colonial systems, a frontier was a contest of nomination – it marked the *space* outside of which the control of the colonial power had not yet been asserted, a control configured very much in the inscription of classification and ordering, in giving a *name* to the social and religious realities of the barbarians beyond the power of the colonial outpost. Chidester shows, for example, the process whereby African indigenous peoples were denied to possess a religion, were later “discovered” to have a religion, and then subsequently given a name for their religion in accordance with Protestant missionary categories, all in precise correlation with the political needs of the imperial power at the time. “Religion entails discourses and practices for creating sacred space, as a zone of inclusion but also as a boundary for excluding others...[it] inevitably involves dehumanization and exclusion.”¹⁹

A boundary is a contested space of knowledge, a space that excludes and condemns the outsider, while at the same positing a *vector of hybridity*. For in the process of definition, of erecting limits (for as we know, to posit a limit is always to posit what *lies beyond* that limit), a fundamentalism must necessarily subjectively constitute itself over against the excluded other. An opposition is erected – saved and unsaved, elect and reprobate, church and world – the terms of which mutually instantiate and condition each other. This is the basic structure of a boundary-defined community. Yet this has two unintended but structurally intrinsic effects. The *first* is that of a certain hybridity, for it is not the case the names can be given to the barbarian at the frontiers without a semantic rebound; the giving of a name that is *not-us* structures the *us* such that the

¹⁸ See, e.g. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), drawing in part on the work of Homi Bhabha.

¹⁹ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. viii.

not-us becomes *constitutive of the us*. The implication of this is quite clear: fundamentalism is dependent upon its others for its existence. A boundary-defined community would be meaningless without the chaotic cultural semiosis out of which it carves its sacred discursive space. And because this is a matter of language, which as we have known at least since Heidegger always imposes its will on the speaker, the fundamentalist topology cannot but become a site of a certain *tropology* – the reprobate languages begin to poach on the sovereign territory of the sacred community.

In a very real and ironic sense, then, fundamentalism constitutes the ultimate form of culture Christianity today.

The second effect of the oppositional structure of the boundary-defined community has a similar but distinct effect. It should be clear what the existence of an opposition means for those of us who think after Derrida. An opposition is always a hierarchy of one privileged term – this of course is clear in the case under consideration. The privileged term of such an opposition exposes itself in the event of deconstruction as founded upon the repressed term of the binary structure, and in the inevitable return of the repressed the latter is revealed to be constitutive and central of the composition of the privileged term. The boundary-defined fundamentalist community is constituted by that figure which it has named as its contrary. And this is always a specified content, in precise relationship to the degree of demarcation the community has inscribed itself within. The figure of excluded becomes the discursive center – the *absent* center that nonetheless in its plenitude instantiates the simulacrum of the reified particularity – of the elect community. This touches upon what Derrida has described as the “autoimmunity” of religion, its alliance with modernity (Derrida says, “tele-technoscience”) by which it globalizes itself (universalizes its particularity) against which it reacts: “declaring war against that which

gives it this new power only at the cost of dislodging it from all its proper places, *in truth from place itself*, from the *taking-place* of its truth.”²⁰ The autoimmune movement is one in which the body destroys its own immunity in protecting itself against the pathogen, and in so doing incorporates the pathogen into itself. This focuses, for Derrida as for us, on a question of *place*.

SPACES OF REPRESSION: FUNDAMENTALISM AS SIMULACRUM

It is of course ironic, if not problematic, that I am thinking together Badiou and Derrida in making my central claim. Let us then in this last section inquire how the previous discussion of Badiou illumines our sketch of fundamentalist topology and suggest the possibility of a *rapprochement* between these two thinkers.

The heart of what I am arguing for here reduces to this: that the subjective structure of fundamentalism is based on that polarity which it constitutes as its other. Fundamentalism *has no being* apart from this excluded and repressed figure. And this figure functions as the discursive center of the fundamentalist community. To quote Badiou once again, *apropos* of his paradigmatic case, Nazism: “The Nazi category of the ‘Jew’ served to name the German interior, the space of a being-together, via the (arbitrary yet prescriptive) construction of an exterior that could be monitored from the interior.”²¹ In our current cultural moment, in fundamentalism’s current exemplification, that figure is the homosexual person.

Recall Badiou’s argument concerning the void and the plenitude. If we were to posit the church as the truth-process corresponding to the Christ-*event* (it certainly is this, if not of course much more), its ecclesial center would in fact be the void – the space of potentiality out of which its becoming is continually generated by the Spirit given in the event of eucharist. Such a church would be disallowed as a matter of eschewing eschatological presumption from claiming

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 82.

²¹ *Ethics*, p. 65.

possession of a total truth that in its *formal particularity* would be universalized.

Fundamentalism would then comprise the *simulacrum* of the ecclesial truth-process that institutes the *disaster* of the absolutization of its simulated truth-process. And by virtue of the Badiouan structure, the totalism of a simulacrum demands that the void – that which configures the truth-process under the sign of contingency and singularity – be substantized with a plenitude that must be given a specifiable predicate – a nomination that constitutes that plenitude as the center of gravity around which the fundamentalist system erects its frontiers of exclusion but that *in the same movement* is the means of the absolutizing of fundamentalism's onanistic particularity. The utility of the plenitude is precisely the means that it provides for the exercise of terror on a specifiable and intimate internal content that stands as proxy for the repressed other that the totalizing of the particular must place under erasure. In today's fundamentalism, again, the homosexual is that plenitude.

What this means then is quite simple: the homosexual is the center of fundamentalism today. Boundary conditions migrate into the center of fundamentalist discourse, become *identity signifiers*, and as such become the very *subjective being* of the fundamentalist community. The center of fundamentalism is no doctrinal claim or system – this constitutes its boundaries and discursive structure. But its center is an aleatory corollary of its restless tropology: an instability of rhetorical terror that is based in that repressed *not-us* that precisely in its objectification *subjectifies the fundamentalist*.

This then is why, in my reading, Badiou and Derrida tack very close together on the question of the being of that which destabilizes a system by its covert inclusion. Both have close to the heart of their philosophy – and, I think, neither would deny this – that which was given a name already in Freud: the return of the repressed. The highly charged ambiguity that is always a

certain sign of this phenomenon is nothing if not a manner of expressing what I above called the vector of hybridity in the fundamentalist system – the simultaneous condemnation of and dependency on its cultural situation. Perhaps we have here the beginning of an insight into what we know today as the religious right in all its paradox.

The question then becomes this. If fundamentalism is a simulacrum, the potency of a terror visited upon the barbarian at its gates (a barbarian that is revealed to be enthroned in its inmost sanctuary), if the boundary-defined community has disaster as its necessary condition, how might we – *must* we – posit the church such that it configures its cultural and political being as the bearer of a fidelity to the trace of an originary event of revelation and redemption? What are the conditions and possibilities of an ecclesial political praxis? Will we have the courage and the reverence to refuse to name the unnameable at the altar? With what do we guard against the totalism of an eschatological presumption that absolutizes in terror our ecclesial particularity? In short, how is the liturgic space of our ecclesial identity going to be defined if not in the imposition of boundary? And if the suggestion above that the homosexual person constitutes the plenitude of the fundamentalist simulacrum is correct, might it not follow that our comportment in the current fight for justice in the church for the homosexual person have a direct bearing on the validity of *our* claim to be church?

In sum, then: what to do with the barbarian at the gate?