

Religion and modernity in a secular city: A public theology of *différance*

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Seeking the good often authorises and legitimises certain forms of violence: violence that defines the state (Benjamin's law-founding violence) by the exclusion of others and the violence that coerces or binds (*religare*) the public into a common understanding of the good at the exclusion of other interpretations of that good (Benjamin's law-maintaining violence). The secular modern state has never been without religion functioning as *religare*. The modern state, often seen as a peacemaker, is founded on these two forms of 'legitimate' violence against what is other or different, just as the peace, prosperity and good of the state is sought through the elimination of the different and a unification of the state under the banner of a 'common' good. This 'legitimate' violence will always produce the counter-violence of difference (i.e. excluded others) seeking a legitimate place within the common space of the republic (Benjamin's divine violence). With the rise of religious fundamentalism, institutionalised religion has been allowed to return to the public debate. Is the call for this return one that further sanctions legitimate violence by eating and sharing the fruit of knowledge of good and evil? Is the call the church is hearing one that seeks to clarify and clearly define the good that will bind us (*religare*) into a stronger and more prosperous and peaceful city – onward Christian soldiers marching as to war? Or is there another calling, one that requires us to be Disciples of Christ – with the Cross of Jesus going on before – entering the space of violence beyond the knowledge of good and evil as peacemakers? In this article, I sought to understand this 'peacemaking' space by bringing into dialogue Žižek's interpretation of Christianity with Derrida's interpretation of hospitality.

Introduction

The theme of the conference,¹ 'Religion and Modernity in a Secular City', brings together old enemies who have battled with each other for the right to define the good (peace) of the city. The modern secular city tried to marginalise religion from the public sphere by clearly defining religion as a private matter. Once religion was removed from the equation, the rest of the world (i.e. the public sphere) was believed to be 'controllable' and/or manipulable through the power of secular modern reason. In this article, I will challenge this clear division between religion and secular reason by defining the public space of the city in three basic arguments:

- I will challenge the ideological (mythological) justification of the marginalisation of religion from the public sphere in the rise of the secular state.
- I will argue for the inherent religiosity of the so-called secular late-modern capitalist state and thus argue that it is a misnomer to speak of a 'return' of religion, as religion has never left, but has only changed its dogma.
- I will propose an alternative Pauline reading towards defining the public space beyond good and evil.

The ideological (mythological) justification of the secular state

The city, as a public space, is defined by some or other interpretation of what is believed to be good. Whoever interprets or defines this good has the right to defend this good coercively, as Kant (1996:131) argued: the good end (*telos*) of the state (city) has to maintain itself perpetually and to do this it must defend itself coercively. In other words, a city must use the power that it has to defend and maintain the good in which it believes. Walter Benjamin (1996) unpacked this coercive defence and maintenance of the good of the state by identifying three forms of *Gewalt*², namely: state-founding and/or law-founding violence, which he understood as mythological violence,

1.The conference, 'Religion and Modernity in a Secular City', was held at the Katolische Akademie in Berlin, Germany on 16–18 September 2010 and was hosted by delegates from the Katolische Akademie and the UK's Manchester University.

2.*Gewalt* can be translated as both 'power', for example, state power or authoritative power, but it can also be translated as 'violence'. Walter Benjamin's (1996) article, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, is translated into English as *Critique of violence*, thus equating or translating *Gewalt* with violence. Such a translation, as Derrida (2002:234) says, is not completely without violence as *Gewalt* can also refer to legitimate power, authority and public force.

state-maintaining and/or law-maintaining violence, and state-destroying and/or law-destroying violence, which he understood as divine violence.

The public space of the secular city is defined through the violence (*Gewalt*) of and against difference, on the basis of the knowledge of what is believed to be good and evil for the public space. So whoever defines the good has the sovereign right to violence – both Benjamin's (1996) law-founding violence and law-maintaining violence. It is within these categories of violence that this article will seek to interpret and understand the relationship between religion and the secular modern city.

Historical setting

The development towards a secular European state cannot be interpreted without recourse to history. For example, Christianity was the state religion in the Holy Roman Empire and thus had the sole right to define the good of the empire, which, in Kant's and Benjamin's terminology, meant that the Catholic Church had the right to use coercive violence within the empire.

Any definition of the good will inevitably need to take place at the exclusion of other definitions and possible definitions of a good. Thus one can argue that any definition of *the good* is already violence against difference as it excludes different possible definitions of the good. This is why Jacques Derrida (2002) argues that law-founding violence and law-maintaining violence are essentially the same, as the violence that defines the good at the exclusion of what is different is the same violence that needs to defend and maintain this good by keeping the excluded difference excluded. Christianity had the sole right to use law-founding violence and law-maintaining violence in the Holy Roman Empire and so it is logical that, at some stage, the excluded difference (other) would rebel against this exclusion.

At the time of the rise of the secular European state, it was the princes and kings of Europe who felt marginalised within their own kingdoms with regards to the right to coercive power or violence to define the good of their kingdoms. They wanted, using *Gewalt* if need be, to wrest the *Gewalt* from the Catholic Church so as to define (found) and maintain what is good within their kingdoms. Christianity was completely interwoven with the Holy Roman Empire and was offering the mythological justification of the church's right to coercive violence within the empire by arguing that the church is divinely ordained to be the wielder of this violence.

The only way to challenge this justification was to replace the church or Christianity with something else and thereby establish a new foundation for coercive violence necessary to define the good for the state. That which was different (i.e. the kings and princes of Europe seeking to define the good for their kingdoms) had to challenge the mythological legitimisation of this law and/or state, so as to replace it with something completely new. Benjamin (1996) calls this

challenge of the very foundations and legitimisations of a law and/or state the ultimate crime, as it does not just contravene certain aspects of the law, but fundamentally challenges the law and/or state by questioning the mythological foundation of what is good for the state. Benjamin would therefore describe this as divine violence that destroys the law and/or state.

The mythological foundation of the separation between religion and secular state

Interestingly, Christianity was on both sides of the violence described above – Roman Catholic Christianity on the side of the law-maintaining and/or state-maintaining violence, and the rise of Protestant Christianity on the side of the excluded other. Christianity was implicated in both the violence against difference and the violence of difference. Martin Luther, in his 1523 treatise on *Temporal authority: To what extent it should be obeyed*, split the powers and the realms, arguing that a Christian is subject to two realms of power or coercive violence (kingdoms) that define what is good in two separate spheres, namely the spiritual and the secular or temporal. In the spiritual realm, the church has the right to define what is good and therefore has the right to use coercive violence, but in the temporal realm the church should not wield any power or violence, but leave this to the secular authorities. By drawing on a theological argument to split these two realms, Luther fundamentally challenged the mythological foundation of the Holy Roman Empire. This radical (ultimately criminal) challenge opened the door for the princes and kings of Europe, both Catholic and Protestant,³ to establish themselves as authorities with the right to define (found) the good and then to coerce their kingdoms into obedience. This article will argue that these wars were not religious wars (confessional wars), as if pastors and peasants were fighting because of differing interpretations of, for example, the Eucharist. On the contrary, it was a war about power and the battle for who wields that power within the kingdom. Because the Catholic Church had this power and legitimised it by arguing that this power is divinely ordained, this 'Catholic' foundation had to be challenged and the way to do that was to separate Christianity from public life, or separate Christianity from state-founding and state-maintaining violence.

Luther's treatise opened the door for a necessary new myth on which to found the 'secular' state. A myth that argued that it is necessary to separate spiritual from secular where the secular alone could define a common public good and that the spiritual should focus on the private good of individuals. William Cavanaugh (1995) argues that the term 'religion' was forged in this context. Previously it referred to practices and disciplines of spiritual orders and was always understood in the singular. It is only in this time that it started referring to a set of beliefs which are defined as personal conviction

3. It would be a mistake to simplify the so-called religious violence that erupted in Europe as confessional violence, because Catholic and Protestant kings and princes sought more authority and thus power within their realms. For example, the Catholic princes of Germany, the Habsburgs of Spain and the Valois family of France all sought to wrest more coercive power from the Catholic Church within their realms (Cavanaugh 1995:400).

and can exist separately from one's public loyalty to the state (Cavanaugh 1995:403). This redefinition of religion as a private matter separate from the state was the necessary mythological foundation for the Catholic and Protestant kings, queens and princes of Europe to found (law-founding and/or state-founding violence) their autonomous states free from the authority of the Catholic Church.

Yet whilst this development of the concept of religion was the necessary door to challenge the law-maintaining and/or state-maintaining violence of the Catholic Church, it was not enough to found the secular state (law-founding and/or state-founding violence). The separation of secular and religious needed to be embedded within a mythological discourse so as to justify and legitimise the secular state. The myth that was created was that the secular state arose as the saving peacemaker between the warring religious confessions of Europe. The myth was established by narrating a story where religion is inherently violent and only a truly secular (religiously neutral) state can save the public space from perpetual religious conflict. This myth is continually rewritten and thus co-authored well into the present by various secular theorists, including John Rawls (1985:225), Judith Shklar (1984:5) and Jeffrey Stout (1981:235–242), amongst others, who defined and thereby founded the secular state and liberalism on the myth of the state as peacemaker in a time of religious conflict.⁴ This myth was not only the founding myth but also maintains the state through the belief in the ultimate *good* and necessity of this liberal secular state, namely the secular state as 'a form of public power separate from both ruler and ruled, and constituting the supreme political authority within a certain defined territory' (Skinner 1978:353).

Yet, there is always a logical crack, difference, in the creation of any state-founding and/or law-founding and state-maintaining and/or law-maintaining myth. It is to this gap or difference that I now turn.

The myth exposed: Religion and the so-called secular late-modern capitalist state

Political scientists are in agreement that in late-capitalism civil society, culture, politics and economics are fused together into a single global complex, so that the authority of the local national state is being undermined (cf. Meylahn 2010:320–332). Who or what defines the good has shifted once more, but this time it was not with a violent revolution but a silent shift of legitimising and maintaining violence from the state to global finance markets. The market determines what is good, whilst evil is interpreted as any form of state intervention into the free working of the market (cf. Martin & Schumann 1998:9). The founding myth of this new good

4. Judith Shklar (1984:5) argues: 'liberalism ... was born out of the cruelties of the religious civil wars, which forever rendered the claims of Christian charity a rebuke to all religious institutions and parties. If the faith was to survive at all, it would do so privately. The alternative then set, and still before us is not one between classical virtue and liberal self-indulgence, but between cruel military and moral repression and violence, and a self-restraining tolerance that fences in the powerful to protect the freedom and safety of every citizen'.

is that the market is not something constructed, but that it is an unquestionable given as if it was something natural and inevitable (Surin 1990:45). There has been a revolution of power, yet this revolution can be described as silent, as public opinion still believes power to be in the hands of the democratically elected governments of nation states. This discrepancy between actual power and who is believed to have power becomes clear in the situation in Haiti.⁵ The power is no longer in the hands of nation states, but in the hands of global capital and it is global capital that determines what is good and, consequently, also determines who is evil and wrong, thereby taking for itself the right to describe certain states as rogue states (cf. Derrida 2005). The latest recession experienced by most of the financial superpowers and the subsequent call for more control is clearly a call to curb the coercive violence of global capitalism. More power needs to be given to international institutions in order to institutionalise (state-founding and/or law-founding violence) the nation state-destroying violence of the market. As long as it is un-institutionalised, in other words has not translated its coercive state-destroying violence into concrete state-founding violence, it remains untouchable and elusive.

How religiously neutral are these so-called secular powers (secular state and global capitalism) that determine the city? With the rise of fundamentalism, and specifically the 9/11 terror attack, a renewed emphasis is placed on religion and the question is raised whether religion should not be allowed to return to public debate.⁶ This article argues that this is a misnomer, as religion has never left the public debate but has only changed its dogma.

Demythologising the religiously neutral state

Although one can probably argue that public debate concerning the common good of a city or state in a liberal democracy is confessionally neutral, as no single religious denomination has the explicit right to coerce public debate violently in accepting their interpretation of the good, implicitly it is impossible to keep religion⁷ out of this debate. Cultural and social theorists⁸ would argue that religion, functioning as the individual's and communities' relationship with ultimate Reality, plays an important role in the formulation of the common good. Ultimate Reality therefore plays an important part in defining the common good and this ultimate Reality can be interpreted as different

5. In his article, 'Democracy versus the people', Žižek (2008) reflects on the situation in Haiti, where the president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced into exile. The international community interfered and forced their conceptualisation of democracy upon the people of Haiti. The good that a particular nation state strives for is now placed under the coercive *Gewalt* (state-forming and state-maintaining violence) of global institutions promoting global capitalism, where certain values are seen as the only possible good that nation states can strive for, namely the value of the market, scientific progress, the importance of choice (consumption), and these values tolerate no rivals (Beiner 1992:20–28).

6. Jürgen Habermas (2002), who is one of the great thinkers of the secular (religiously neutral) states, changed his mind with regards to religion and public debate after the events of 9/11.

7. Religion in this article is understood in broader terms than just confessional religions; it is understood as McBrien (1987:11) defines it: 'the whole complex of attitudes, convictions, emotions, gestures, rituals, symbols, beliefs, and institutions by which persons come to terms with, and express, their personal and/or communal relationship with ultimate Reality (God and everything that pertains to God)'.

8. Richard John Neuhaus (1984) argues that religion is part of politics because politics is a function of culture and at the heart of culture is religion.

things for different people, for example, for some it can be God, but for others the market. The politics and the culture⁹ of a state are founded (state-founding violence) and maintained (state-maintaining violence) on some understanding of what is believed to be good for the state. This forms the basis of the network of obligations or *religare* (Neuhaus 1984:250–251) and these *religare* can only derive their legitimisation from the fact that they express ‘what people believe to be their collective destiny [common good and/or common sense] or ultimate meaning’ (Neuhaus 1984:256).

Global capitalism as a religious phenomenon

If the ultimate Reality is the market, how does this compare with religion? Philip Goodchild (2002) argues that capitalism, and specifically late-capitalism’s finance markets, can certainly be interpreted as a religion in and of themselves. The cultural values that individuals might prize are only accessible through the medium of money (Goodchild 2008:10). Money, in turn, only has value in motion and thus this motion must be upheld continually, which is what happens on the finance markets where trillions of dollars move around the globe on an hourly basis in the present and, more importantly, in future, as speculation. One can certainly argue with Goodchild that this financial value is essentially religious.¹⁰ This imperial or totalitarian religion of money can only function as long as it is not interpreted as a religion amongst other religions, but as *the* ultimate Reality which cannot be questioned and thus can be interpreted as totalitarian or imperialistic. This imperialism becomes clear in the relationship between the market as religion and other religions and the rise of fundamentalism, which, ironically, has been the motive for the return of religion to public debate.

The rise of fundamentalism as a logical consequence of global capitalism

This imperial universal religion wears the mask of religious tolerance as there is a great emphasis on freedom of speech and freedom of choice from the multicultural and multi-moral, multi-ethical, multi-spiritual, multi-religious market of possibilities; yet, this freedom is just the rhetoric of pluralism and tolerance to mask the uniformity and homogenising tendencies of the universal religion of capital. Žižek (1997) argues that this tolerance and pluralism is a symptom of a universal religion of capital, in other words, it is not an alternative, but it is a product and necessarily part of its logic. For example, the ‘subject of free choice’ in the so-called tolerant multicultural, multi-moral and multi-religious sense, can only emerge as such as the result of an extremely violent process of being uprooted from one’s particular life-world and transposed into the life-world of a consumer, who consumes religious and cultural goods (Žižek 2005:118). The individual is thus disembodied from his or her particular religious and cultural life-world and forced to embrace the

individualised concept of self as a consumer of religious and cultural goods. This has become clear over the last few months in Europe in the whole debate around the wearing of the burka by Muslim women. A woman is allowed to wear the burka if she wears it out of ‘free choice’, as an expression of her individual eccentric self, in other words, she is allowed to wear it if she wears it as an individual consumer of religious goods. If, on the other hand, she wears it out of respect for her religion she is labelled a fundamentalist. This ‘freedom of choice’ is a pseudo-choice because you can only choose it if you first accept yourself as an individual consumer. Thus, the so-called non-violent tolerance of pluralism comes at an extremely violent price that coerces individuals to interpret and understand themselves as consumers of cultural and religious goods. The market coerces individuals to interpret themselves as a consumer; you cannot interpret yourself according to the values of ubuntu, or the Muslim faith or Christianity as you will then be labelled a fundamentalist and, at worst, a terrorist. What you are allowed to do is to pick and choose from ubuntu, Christianity and any other faith which you as consumer of religious goods fancy, but you must remain a consumer and not become a Christian or Muslim, whose faith determines your whole existence.

It is in the light of the above that the rise of fundamentalism needs to be interpreted. It is not a return to pre-modernity or an anti-movement to global capitalism, but is its symptom. It is a symptom of the universal capital’s law-founding violence and law-maintaining violence.¹¹ So, in a sense, there is a return of religion as and of religious warfare (so-called terrorism), but not in the sense of the liberal democratic Christian-influenced West against the Muslim other, as some would like us to believe; rather, the warfare (violence) is internal to the universal religion of capital. If theology wants to be public it will need to address this religion. As such, I will now turn to the so-called return of religion to the public debate after 9/11, mainly reflecting the idea of consensus in the work of Jürgen Habermas (2002, 2003).

The myth of the secular state and consensual public debate

The shock of 9/11 brought the world to the realisation that religion cannot and should not be excluded from public debate, but needs to be included to strive towards consensus and thus peace and stability.

The idea of consensus formation in public debate is founded on the idea that the space for the debate is a neutral and respectful space, as Habermas (2003:6) argues when he states that the condition to be allowed to partake in the debate is, ‘to recognise and accept the voluntary character of religious associations’. This so-called open, neutral and tolerant space allows debate on any topic as long as it does

9. Clifford Geertz argued that religion is the ground or depth-level of culture (Neuhaus 1984:132).

10. ‘It is credit: an offer of value in advance. It cannot be understood according to an eternal ontology as accumulated wealth; it cannot be understood according to a temporal ontology as “value in motion”. Both appeal to the promise of a future return. Being transcendent of material and social reality, yet the pivot around which material and social reality is continually reconstructed, financial values is essentially religious’ (Goodchild 2008:11).

11. Žižek (1997:45) argues that ethnic and religious ‘fundamentalism and xenophobia are not only not “regressive”, but, on the contrary, offer the supreme proof of the final emancipation of the economic logic of market from the attachment to the ethnic Thing’. In another article, he argues that the Milosevic regime was not the opposite to the New World Order, as some liked to interpret it, ‘but rather its *symptom*, the place at which the hidden *truth* of the New World Order emerges’ (Žižek 1999:79). He has a similar interpretation of the 9/11 New York terror attack (Žižek 2002).

not question the very religious foundations of the space, namely late capitalism as was seen above. This consensual space, Habermas (2002:65) argues, should no longer be defined solely by the old oppositions, rational science and religion, as that debate always favoured so-called rational objective science, but it needs a mediator – common sense. A common language needs to be found to move beyond the old divisions. Religion is allowed back into the debate by actively playing a role defining and determining common sense and good; yet, Habermas (2002:73) continues to argue for secularisation, that is, not a secularisation that seeks to destroy religion, but rather one that translates the religious values into rational and neutral language of common sense. This ideal of Habermas is described by Matustik (2004:8) as Habermas's Enlightenment dream of the linguistified God: into the empty space vacated by the transcendent divinity, he projects the ideal communication community. This dream of peaceful consensual co-existence through dialogue, tolerance and respect for the other is portrayed in Rachid Bouchareb's 2009 film, *London River*. The film's lead characters, Elisabeth Summers and Mr Ousmane, can translate their religious differences into a common language, which they find in the similarities of their personal narratives with regard to their spouses and children, as well as viewing their scratched hands as a result of their work with nature. In this common language they find respect, tolerance and consensus and thus a mutual way forward. Yet, the ultimate Reality, consciously or unconsciously, continues to play an important role in common sense spoken in a common language and cannot be ignored. Thus, if the ultimate Reality is the market and consumption, this will determine the consensus of the public debate – as became clear in the debate concerning the wearing of the burka. The ideals of tolerance, respect of Otherness and consensus are part and parcel of the logic of global late-capitalism.

Even once the myth of the neutral common sense debate has been exposed there is still an internal power imbalance that cannot be avoided. The different parties that enter the public debate are not equally powerful.¹² The old principle so poignantly stated by La Fontaine (1988:23): 'The strong are always best at proving they're right' still holds, or as Pascal (1910:104) argued: 'and thus being unable to make what is just [good] strong, we have made what is strong just [good]'. Even if one could try and equalise the power imbalance, difference would remain and conflict cannot be resolved as this can only occur through the construction of a 'we' and a 'they'. It seems that, no matter what, the moment one eats of the knowledge of good and evil one enters into violence of judgement, exclusion and condemnation. What is needed, Žižek (1997:50) argues, is, 'to paraphrase Kierkegaard, to accomplish a political suspension of the Ethical', in other words to go beyond good and evil. How does one move beyond good and evil in seeking the common good in the modern city?

12. There is a difference in power and thus this space needs to be interpreted within the 'historical and contingent character of discourse that construe our identities and constitute the language of our politics; language that is constantly modified, that is entangled with power and needs to be apprehended in terms of hegemonic relations' (Mouffe 2002:98–99).

The liberal ideology argues that tolerance and respect is the way to move beyond good and evil by identifying that which is common between the differing groups. The liberal tolerant ideology is to move beyond good and evil to the personal narratives and realise that we are not that different after all. Thus, we can respect Otherness, as long as this Otherness does not challenge the liberal tolerant view of so-called respect and tolerance of plurality. Commenting on Steven Spielberg's 1988 film, *The Land Before Time*, Žižek (2003:277) argues that this message of collaboration-in-differences is ideology at its purest. The move is simple, instead of imposing on the other our vision of what is good or right, our universality, 'the shared space of understanding between different cultures [religions] should be conceived of as an infinite task of translation, of constant reworking of one's own particular position' (Žižek 2003:278) towards greater understanding. Žižek (2003) continues by arguing that:

actual universality is not the never-won neutral space of translation from one to another particular culture [religion], but, rather, the violent experience of how, across the cultural divide, we share the same antagonism.

(Žižek 2003:278)

Here Žižek argues that to move beyond good and evil, or beyond this universal ethic of so-called respect for Otherness, is to identify with the symptom. Identifying with the symptom is not the classical critical and ideological move of recognising the particular content of the abstract universal notion, for example, to recognise that human rights actually means the rights of the White male owner, but it is to denounce the neutral universality as false by identifying with that which is excluded, the 'abject' of the concrete positive order.¹³ In these thoughts there seems to be an echo of the final judgement as portrayed in Matthew 25, where judgement is no longer on the basis of knowing and practicing the universal good, but purely on identifying with the excluded, the exception, the abject of the universal good, that is, not trying to identify with the universal law of the good, but seeking that which is excluded by that law. The challenge is to identify with that which is outside or beyond the law (marginalised, ostracised by the law), to identify with the surplus meaning, the different. How does one identify with the different and thereby define a new good? The answer is that it is not about defining a new good per se, but rather that which is proposed in Rancière's notion of *singulier universel*: 'the assertion of the singular exception as the locus of universality which simultaneously affirms and subverts the universality in question' (Žižek 1997:51). The *singulier universel* exposes the universality in question; it exposes the law of the universal, but not by promoting a new universal or good.

The aim needs to be to move beyond good and evil, because as long as there is a division between good and evil, irrespective of how this good is founded or constructed, even by consensus, the agreement (common good) reached 'will thus be partial, based on acts of social regulation and

13. Žižek (1997:51) argues: 'one pathetically asserts (and identifies with) the point of inherent exception/exclusion, the "abject", of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality, as the point which belies the existing concrete universality ... identifying universality with the point of exclusion'.

exclusion' (Hillier 2003:42). There will always be 'surplus meaning' (Dyrberg 1997:196) that cannot be controlled, as it is not included in the 'we'. This surplus meaning will challenge the 'we' based on consensus. One cannot get beyond this inevitable power imbalance and thus there will always be the violence of exclusion of what is different and, at some stage, this different will violently protest and challenge the 'we' from which it is excluded. The proposed response to 9/11 or the July 2005 bomb attack on London, as portrayed in the film *London River*, is not the answer, but simply part of the problem.

The hope placed in language as false hope: The violence of language

Benjamin (1996) argues that the only place to look for non-violence is in the sphere of relationships amongst private persons based on language.¹⁴ This seems to be the message of the film *London River*, as so much hope is placed in language and ideal communication. In this paper I have discussed the work of Jürgen Habermas and realised that his communicative ideal is exactly that – an ideal – and is thus removed from historical political reality. In *London River*, speech and communication does indeed bring two strangers together in response to the July 2005 terror attack on London. Is this the ideal response to such acts? Or is this response but another act of violence inherent in language itself? Derrida (1978:125) argues that in language there is an arche-violence¹⁵ that is tied to the very possibility of language itself.

Žižek¹⁶ (2008b), agreeing with Derrida, proposes that we need to be aware of this violence and to think this violence. Following Hegel, Žižek argues that we need to think language against language and thus he comes back to Benjamin and the two forms of violence (mythic and divine). The violence of language to which Derrida and Heidegger refer is mythic violence (*sprach-bildende Gewalt*) with the force of myth as the primordial narrativisation or symbolisation, or, to put it into Badiou's (2000) terms, the violent imposition of the transcendental coordinates of a World onto the multiplicity of Being. Once Elisabeth Summers and Mr Ousmane, the characters of *London River*, have learnt to translate their differences into what is common, a world of respect and tolerance is created. This *sprach-bildende Gewalt* can be compared to the law-founding violence that is based on a specific understanding of the good, which acts as the necessary myth, primordial symbolisation, with which to

justify the law-founding or law-maintaining violence against what is different.

One needs to be aware of this violence of language, but there is also another form of violence, namely language-destroying violence (*sprach-zerstörende Gewalt*). Žižek (2008b), reflecting on the thoughts of Lacan, who returns to Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum*, argues that there is also the violence of thinking (and of poetry) and this can be compared to Benjamin's divine violence as *sprach-zerstörende Gewalt*. In other words, to think (*cogito*) is not the self-transparency of pure thought, but 'paradoxically, cogito IS the subject of the unconscious – the gap/cut in the order of Being in which the real of jouissance breaks in' (Žižek 2008b:9). This theme is portrayed in Wim Wender's 1987 film, *Himmel über Berlin*, where the angel Daniel wants to break free from the repetitive eternal spiritual life and enter into the flow of contingency and time. The internal difference that exists in the word-centred life of spirit, and which is exposed by cracks and the gaps that continually escape translation into word, is *différance* that creates *Geschichte* – to have a story. Daniel speaks to his angel friend, Cassiel, about entering the flow of time and not eternally pursuing the good, but embracing also the evil. He wants to have a story.

Žižek (2008b) argues that one needs to focus on (think) the destroying twisting of language in order to enable a trans-symbolic real of a Truth to transpire in it. So, yes, there is a language that can make for peace, but not where Benjamin and Habermas seek it, but a language of pure mathematics, of poetry. Is this still language? Derrida would probably call it by another name, but what is in a name? It is about thinking the *différance*,¹⁷ being open to the *différance* and thereby seeking not an absence of violence, but an economy of violence that does not strive for equilibrium, as it is not static, as *différance* is both difference and deferment. This is exactly where the difference lies between Derrida's *différance* and Žižek's minimal difference or pure difference, or the gap or cut. Žižek, equating *différance* with pure difference, denies the important movement and force in the thinking of *différance* (Sands 2008:531). Žižek (2006a) argues that pure difference is not between the other and the same, but it is the difference within the same.¹⁸ The difference or gap remains, but it is empty of force and movement because of Žižek's interpretation of Derrida. I believe that *différance*, as Derrida interprets it, is the site of the return of Christ-like faith in the public debate. As such, I will now turn to the political theology of Saint Paul in dialogue with Žižek and Derrida.

14. Benjamin (1996:245) argues that there is a 'sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of "understanding" language'.

15. Arche-violence, the primordial violence, appears with every articulation (Derrida 1978:148), as in every articulation there is choice, classification and thus also exclusion of that which does not fit, which is different. In other words, speech without choice, classification and differentiation would not be speech, because it would say nothing.

16. 'This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence' (Žižek 2008b:2) Žižek refers back to Heidegger's interpretation of the essence of language not as the core truth of language, but the essencing ability of language and he says: 'A fundamental violence exists in this "essencing" of language: our world is given a partial twist, it loses its balanced innocence, one partial colour gives the tone of the whole' (Žižek 2008b:3). Because of this essencing character of language, Heidegger spoke of language as the house of being. This metaphor has been taken further, specifically within psychoanalysis where one can speak of language as the torture-house (Žižek 2008b:3-4). This violence is a given and it cannot be avoided.

17. 'Difference is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return' (Derrida 1982:6).

18. This pure difference Žižek interprets in the relationship between God and Son in the incarnation where the limitation or difference has shifted from without God to within God, and thus the idea of a transcendent God, is removed and only an immanent materialist interpretation is possible. In his book, *The parallax view*, Žižek (2006a:109) offers a description of God that can be compared to his interpretation of *différance*: 'Perhaps "God" is the name for this supreme split between the Absolute and the noumenal Thing and the Absolute as the appearance of itself, for the fact that the two are the same, that the difference between the two is purely formal'. Because of his static view of difference, Žižek can argue that the Christ event has happened and is not something to be expected, but is a past event. He says: '... while Christianity, far from claiming full realization of the promise, accomplishes something far more uncanny: the Messiah is here, he has arrived, the final Event already took place, and yet the gap (the gap that sustained the messianic promise) remains' (Žižek 2006b:232-233).

An alternative Pauline reading towards defining the public space beyond good and evil

So often the church and Christianity have understood that their task is to go and fight the good fight in the name of some or other good – onward Christian soldiers marching as to war. This *as to* is, of course, vitally important. It can either be understood as war – in other words, to enter into the perpetuating violence of the knowledge of good and evil, or it can be understood *as to, but not exactly*, for then comes the next line, which certainly is vitally important when interpreting the first: ‘with the cross of Jesus who has gone before’.

Is there a way beyond good and evil? Is there a way for theology that does not march to the beat of war drums in the name of one or other good against an evil? It seems from the above that there is no such way – only an economy of violence, as Derrida argues, or to learn to live with differences – a tolerance and respect for Otherness. There is no way, because the very moment a way is chosen there already was violence of choice based on some judgement of what is good or better. But what if judgement is deferred? What if judgement is deferred into a future to come, as in Derrida’s justice or democracy both to come, based on *différance* as both difference and deferment? There is a space of deferment between an act and its judgement¹⁹ – a liminal space of grace.

In this liminal space, the crime or sin would be judgement, based on knowledge of good and evil, as it would be idolatry. The universalisation of a law is idolatry, as the law, founded on a myth of the good, becomes an autonomous power opposed to God, in the sense that one does not need God anymore if one knows the good. Paul’s classic argument that the law leads to sin, should therefore be interpreted as: the law, based on a specific interpretation of the good, leads to the violence of boasting, judging, condemnation and death. Law gives rise to the dominion, the passion to dominate and use coercive violence (Rm 6:14). Paul suggests an eschatological judgement, not based on law, but based on the secret thoughts according to the Spirit.

It is for this reason that Paul comes to the congregation in Corinth and says that the only knowledge he has is the knowledge of Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). In other words, he does not come with knowledge of good and evil, but with Christ crucified, which is foolishness to those who seek universal wisdom and a stumbling block to those who seek particular signs (cf. 1 Cor 1:23–24). This Christ that Paul proclaims was crucified as the ultimate criminal, in Benjamin’s sense of the ultimate criminal, as the one who does not contravene some or other aspect of the law, but who threatens the very founding and preserving myth of the law. The ultimate criminal is the one who threatens the good that justifies and legitimises the coercive violence

19. ‘Life itself consists in the delay between deed and judgment. It is in the time that remains, between and beyond synchronic universals, that one may be saved. It is a time of pure contingency, beyond reason’ (Goodchild 2008:24).

of the law: divine violence. Divine violence is not violence as law-founding or law-maintaining, but as law-destroying. The ultimate criminal is the blasphemer who blasphemes the good that authorises and legitimises the law-founding and law-maintaining violence. Christ was crucified as the ultimate criminal. Christ and the Cross are the exceptions, the abject and the exclusion of the universal that threaten the law of the universal.

A public theology of *différance*

Žižek (2008b) argues that this is the way forward: to identify with the exclusion or the exception, as this is the singular universal that exposes the law of the universal. The cross is the foolishness that frustrates the logos, the language, so that the trans-symbolic truth (that which is excluded, the exception) can transpire (Rm 2:2). Could the cross be compared to what Lacan says is other than language, namely writing or a matheme (Žižek 2008b:11), the *différance* that exposes the law of the universal logos and thereby opening it up for what is still to come?

This event changes everything, but not in the name of a new good. So where does this leave Christians who follow Christ as they enter public debate? It leaves Christians in the liminal space of grace where judgement is deferred no longer on the basis of good works, but on the secrets of the heart. Is the heart secretly worshipping the law of death, or is the heart fully dependent on Christ as the suspension of the law of death? How does this translate into action if action is unavoidably violent? Action and communal public living need to be based on the acknowledgement of this dependence on Christ and the deferment of judgement and thus it is, and can only be, in weakness and faith. This utter dependence on Christ can only be translated as worship: a worship that is beyond good and evil. Public theology as worship is a non-violent (not law-founding or law-maintaining) deconstruction (law-destroying violence) from the liminal space of deferred judgement.

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