

*Towards a theology of violence, beginning with the 'word of the cross':  
a methodological reflection*

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**'I must seek forgiveness for every word of theology I write' - Jean-Luc Marion**

It may be taken for granted that the world is a violent place, and that human beings are violent. That is the testimony of the evening news, certainly, but also of many hundreds of organizations now dedicated to monitoring violence in the name of human rights. Yet these are not the only witnesses. Crucially for our purposes in the *Theology and Culture Project* this year, theology itself may be understood as a witness to violence. If we are Christians, I contend that we should listen to this particular witness first of all. For, unlike the accounts of the evening news and the human rights monitors, theology may not be so easily dismissed as the merely perspectival construction of human beings as they 'enworld' their world according to particular ideological interests. As human and perspectival as it undoubtedly is, theology nevertheless claims an authority for itself which is, paradoxically, not its own to possess or control. It claims to participate in a word and witness which arrives *extra nos*, as it were, from God. One might restate that traditional Reformation claim in Derridean terms by saying that theology, necessarily human as it is, nevertheless contains the trace of something anarchically divine, a word or witness which may not be controlled by its own means of production but, rather, interrupts and exceeds those rules according to a logic which is rather *more than* necessary. If this is so, then theology ought to be listened to because (quite uniquely in the world of discourse) it may well represent something other than its own ideological captivity (although it is patently captive in this way as well).

Theology witnesses to the reality and power of violence, first of all, in its nascent self-description as 'the word of the cross' (1 Cor 1.18). That phrase indicates that theology is a word or address (*logos*) whose ultimate concern is itself a violent event, namely, the cross (*tou staurou*) of Jesus who is called the Christ. That Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate may be taken as the founding event of Christian faith, in both an historical and existential sense. Why? The answer is somewhat paradoxical—that the death of Jesus is also the death of God, and this death somehow inaugurates an absolutely new beginning (*creatio ex nihilo*) for the world and its people (1 Cor 1.28; cf. 2 Cor 5.17). This implies, of course, that the event of the cross may not be separated, theologically, from those other events which we call 'resurrection,' 'ascension' and 'pentecost'. For the New Testament consistently places the event of the cross in this larger paschal framework

precisely in order to claim that the power of violence is far from absolute. Jesus died violently, in a struggle with the powers of this world, and in him we all die (Rom 6.3). Yet this death is also the death of violence itself, a spending of its power to the point of depletion. What remains *after*, but also exceeds *within*, the logic of violence is Christ ‘the power and wisdom of God,’ a power and wisdom expressly manifest in that which human beings, in ordinary discourse, would call foolish or weak (1 Cor 1.24, 25). Unveiling the excessive or ‘superabundant’ power that inheres in apparent powerlessness will, I suggest, be a central concern in our deliberations this year.

In doing so we shall of course need to come to terms with both the violence and foolishness of theology itself. As a word that participates in the violence of the paschal events themselves (Jüngel), theology is certainly not in a position to claim that it is absolutely free of violence. Theological claims live from the paschal events, and are therefore capable of manifesting terrible violence as well as extraordinary grace. Theology can be performed in such a way that it effects a kind of violence towards the very cosmos Christ came to save. The work of various theologians of liberation, as they have patiently uncovered the undeclared but pervasive ideological concerns at the heart of many traditional theological formulations, has made this fact painfully clear. Yet, even as it intends to deliver a liberating word for the victims of such theology, liberation theology has often found itself unwittingly subject to the very power it denounces: accomplishing the ‘return of the repressed’ only by repressing its own totalitarian strategies. What Derrida said of Lévinas is also true of liberation theology, that the critique of violence is more often than not the very definition and exemplar of violence: the writing of a world in which the speaker casts his or herself as the omniscient narrator. Theology must seek to rid itself of any such vice, recognising that even as it lives from Christ it does violence to Christ, and therefore, in Christ, to the cosmos as a whole (Matt 25.45; Col 1.17). Theology will only be able to fulfil its sacred vocation as it participates in the liturgy which worships Christ as the *mystery* or sacrament of the world, seeking God’s forgiveness for every word written as though such words were the very scars which mark Christ’s crucified body; and yet depending upon the excessive power of God’s grace to transfigure such markings into a form of witness to the resurrection: a power which submits to violence precisely in order to exceed its logic, thus subverting the tendency of violence to make for nothingness, and only nothingness.

Buried in that last paragraph is a notion that will prove, I think, crucial for our consideration of violence in all the business of life. It is the specifically Pauline notion that it is the cosmos as a whole, and not only its Christians, which lives in and from Christ (whether the cosmos is aware of it or not). This suggests a specific method for our theological deliberations. Before we pretend to

understand the phenomena of violence ‘in itself’ or from itself (thus *phenomenology*), let us insist that such understanding will not be understanding apart from that sense that violence is what it is ‘in Christ’. That is to insist that Christians are not free to understand violence, or anything else in the world, apart from the narratives of faith into which we have been baptised, and in which we live and move and have our being. That is not to say (as some indeed claim) that Christians cannot seek to understand what non- or extra-Christian interpreters make of the world. It is simply to recognise that truth which late- or post-phenomenology came to recognise for itself: that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted world. Each of us approaches the world as a reality that precedes and exceeds us, as a world already given in tradition, story and community. For Christians this means putting aside any pretence at objectivity (whatever the older sciences might say) and simply recognising that there is no way to step outside of the frameworks we inhabit in order to know things as another knows them. I should point out, also, that such a stance should not be taken to imply that it is impossible to be genuinely changed or transformed by the arrival of something entirely ‘new,’ as from an irreducibly ‘other’—for it is the central claim of Jews and Christians that God is precisely this other who can interrupt and transform even our most solid mythologies. On the contrary, it is our very experience with God that should teach us that another’s account is likely to impact and change us—and especially in ways that are difficult to assimilate into our preferred systems and mythologies.

Acknowledging the inescapability of our own totalities should not, therefore, be taken as a claim that we never change in either heart or mind. On the contrary, it is to claim and acknowledge that changes happen in spite of, or *extra nos*, to our intentions. Changes happen slowly and according to a logic that approaches the human self ‘under the radar,’ as it were, beyond the reach of our epistemic strategies. This suggests a rather surprising, perhaps even shocking for some, relationship between violence and change: that changes happen precisely by a certain kind of *violence*, by the invasion of the self by another who perseveres in otherness, and is therefore resistant to simple nomination as *either* an angel or a devil. That we are saved in and through acts of violence—that the angels are often devils—is inescapably true, I think, if one takes the foundational metaphors of the faith seriously. Whether one reflects upon the death of Egypt’s firstborn in the Exodus, or the designation of Cyrus, Israel’s destroyer, as the messiah of Yahweh, or whether one considers the crucifixion of Jesus for the sins of the world, or the deconstruction of the human self in baptism and discipleship, it is very difficult to escape the fact that violent actions and images actually *dominate* the landscape of any authentically Christian consciousness. Given that this is so, I do not see how it is possible, if we are Christians, to assume (as many of our contemporaries seem to do) that God will have nothing to do with violence, that violence is God’s *other*, a property or action which is to

be anathematised without remainder in the name of something more pure and wholesome, something variously called ‘love’ or ‘peace’ or ‘justice’. If theology allowed itself to submit to such thinking, then it would also have to surrender the claims I made for theology at the beginning of this paper, i.e. that theology is capable of witnessing to something other than what it produces, that theology is capable (despite everything) of speaking the very word of God. For the writing of violence as God’s other, purely and simply, is an example of exactly the kind dualism that the narratives of faith resisted from the beginning—the specifically Hellenistic dualism that divides body from spirit, law from grace, and the heavenly Christ from the earthly Jesus. What the foundational metaphors of faith teach us, rather, is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself: that it is in the very nature of God to traverse the formal distance between love and violence existentially, and this precisely in order to reveal that violence is never simply evil, that it is possible that even violence, precisely as violence, may become (in spite of itself) the very agent of redemptive love. That is what the word of the cross is witness to.

For that reason, I suggest that we proceed with caution in our analysis of the many manifestations of violence in our world. There is a temptation, readily taken up by so many in our churches, to over-simplify the phenomena of violence in a thoroughly non-theological way. As Craig points out in his own paper, such over-simplification so *often* follows the well-worn paths of ‘left-’ or ‘right-wing’ political analysis (even talk of a so-called ‘Third Way’ does not, I think, entirely escape these templates). How easily the church succumbs to a reading of its own traditions in these terms! What I would personally like to achieve this year is a new kind of humility before the God who was in Christ, a humility that is capable of hearing the word of redemption anew, in categories I have perhaps not even thought of or imagined. And this in the hope that we may be guided, in the power of the Spirit, to a deeper and more profoundly alive hope in *God*—even as the world appears to go ever more deeply into its darkness.