

The Violence of God: Before and After

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In the times in which we live there are many voices that cry out for divinely sanctioned violence. Whether it be in the taped discourses of Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, or in the justifications for war in Afghanistan and Iraq articulated by the current US administration and its fundamentalist cheerleaders, we hear that God is on the side of those who wield powers of indiscriminant violence in the name of the deity.

How does the name of God come to be associated with violence? And is there an alternative way of naming God that points us away from violence?

In this paper I will first attend to some of the voices from early Christianity, the voices of those who are called “church fathers.” I do this to notice how insistently they call upon us to think of a God without violence, a God who stands not in continuity with, but in utter contrast to, the violence of empire and nation.

I will then turn to the construction in pre-modern Europe of a very different view of God, one that makes God to be so associated with violence as to make the wielders of human violence to seem like the very representatives of God.

Finally I will turn to consider some of the ways in which the association between God and violence are brought into question in our own time. While this occurs in many ways in the theological and philosophical reflection of the last decades, I will pay particular attention to some of the ways in which this deconstruction of the association of the divine and violence is brought to expression in the work of Jacques Derrida.

Throughout, what will be evident is that the way the name of God is deployed is regularly connected to the behavior of those who are called

upon to imitate the divine as the image and reflection of God in the world.

Part One: Patristic Theology of the Non-Violent God

We may begin with one of the most remarkable documents of the early church, an anonymous letter addressed to one Diognetus, who has been plausibly construed as a sort of stand-in for the Emperor Hadrian in the early second century.

“As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Saviour He sent Him, and as seeking to persuade, not to compel us; for violence has no place in the character of God.”¹⁾

Note that “violence has no place in the character of God” and that this is connected to the idea that God’s son comes “to persuade” rather than to rule. This perspective is elaborated a bit further on:

“And do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing. For it is not by ruling over his neighbours, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found; nor can anyone by these things become an imitator of God. But these things do not at all constitute His majesty.”²⁾

Once again the insistence that violence has nothing to do with God. Moreover, one cannot imitate God through rule or dominion, for “these things do not at all constitute [God’s] majesty.” Let us pause here to underscore that what is at stake is the majesty or what we might term the sovereignty of God, yet this is expressly opposed to dominion and thus to any form of violence. What is at stake is precisely the majesty and sovereignty of God, one that is manifest in persuasion rather than compulsion, in what the author calls God’s philanthropy, God’s friendship with or toward humanity.

Thus the author will go on to insist that one may and must become an

1) *Epistle to Diognetus* (7)

2) *Epistle to Diognetus* (10)

imitator of God precisely through acts of compassion and generosity and indeed humble service toward those who are in need.

Toward the end of the 2nd century the greatest of all biblical theologians of the early church, Origen of Alexandria will maintain:

“And therefore His glory consists in this very thing, that He possesses all things, and this is the purest and most limpid glory of omnipotence, that by reason and wisdom, not by force and necessity, all things are subject.”³⁾

Irenaeus will also write that God does not coerce even the devil who has brought us into his power:

“The Word of God, powerful in all things and not defective with regard to his own justice...” Note that what is at stake is the justice and indeed the power of God. Yet see how this is articulated, for he continues: “did rightly turn against that apostasy (here Irenaeus is writing of Satan who has us in his power) not by violent means, as the apostasy had obtained dominion over us at the beginning...but by means of persuasion, as becomes a God of counsel. Who does not use violent means to obtain what he desires... so that justice may not be infringed upon...”⁴⁾

The justice of God is found then precisely in God’s refusal of violence, indeed in God’s refusal of counter-violence against that power that is now virtually synonymous with violence: namely satanic power.

Irenaeus states absolutely: “There is no coercion with God” (4.37.1)

More than 2 centuries later we will find a very similar perspective articulated by Gregory of Nyssa. He is reflecting on God’s determination to redeem humanity.

“What, then, under these circumstances is justice? It is the not exercising any arbitrary sway over him who has us in his power, nor by tearing us away by a violent exercise of force from his hold...”⁵⁾

The justice of God’s act of deliverance is determined by the renunciation of any arbitrary power, of any force or violence.

This perspective is typically articulated as well in terms of God’s

3) Origen, *First Principles*, 1.10

4) *Against all Heresies*, 5.1.1

5) Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechism*, XXII

dealings with humanity. God does not coerce obedience but seeks gently to persuade us to be good. In this way human freedom becomes the indispensable corollary to the divine justice as persuasive. God always acts so as to free humanity from the coercive power of Satan, not in order then to offer a new coercion, albeit benevolent. Rather God seeks to nurture human freedom to be good as God is good. Thus Nyssa will echo a long tradition when he maintains that “preeminent among all is the fact that we are free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural power...for virtue is a voluntary thing, subject to no dominion: that which is a result of compulsion and force cannot be virtue.”⁶⁾ Later John Chrysostom has God speak to humanity through his Son: “I use no force, nor do I compel, but if any be willing to follow, him I call” (*Homily on Matthew*, 55).

Now I cannot here summon all the writers of the first 4 centuries of Christianity to present their testimony concerning the non-violent God. I should recall that this view is extrapolated to illumine all God’s dealings, even those with nature: Basil writes that God acts toward creation in such a way that God “holds in obedient following and unforced consent the nature of all things that are” (*Holy Spirit*, 8.19). Just as Origen had maintained that it is “by reason and wisdom, not by force and necessity, [that] all things are subject” (*First Principles*, 1.10).

We saw in reading the epistle to Diognetus that humanity is enjoined to follow the example of this non-violent God. Thus throughout this time Christians were forbidden not only to engage in warfare of any sort but also enjoined not to participate in the administration of civil justice in the empire since this might involve them in condemning malefactors to the death penalty. Listen to a late voice of this tradition, the words of Lactantius, whose *Divine Institutes* served as a sort of summa of late patristic theology:

“For when God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because

6) Gregory of Nyssa, *The Making of Man* XVI.11

it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all; but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal" (*Divine Institutes*, 6.20).

Now, it is manifest how far removed we are from this whole perspective of the early church when we recall that it is precisely those who think of themselves as the most conservative Christians who are the most vociferous voices calling for military service and for the continuation of the death penalty in our own society. We have come a very long way indeed from this early Christian consensus concerning divine and human violence.

How are we to account for the unanimity of ancient Christian testimony in this respect, a unanimity that seems so at variance to what for so many today is the commonsense linkage between violence and the name of God?

This critique of divine violence, this insistence that the God of Christians is not violent, is no mere theological fancy. It is also at heart a critique of the violence of empire.

Perhaps it would help to recall something of the violence with which these early Christians had to contend, the violence of the Roman empire, a violence that presented itself as the very face and force of the divine.

For early Christians the force of violence comes to clearest expression in the instrumentality of crucifixion. This was a military rather than a civil penalty. It was applied to those who seemed to subvert the structure and legitimacy of the empire. The idea of crucifixion was to impose a death so public and so horrifying as to make resistance to the empire seem unthinkable. The bodies of the condemned, rebels or escaped slaves, were nailed to cross beams so as to be elevated above the passersby, usually along the roads leading into or out of the city. The bodies were stripped naked and lacerated so as to draw the flies that would cover them. They were left there to die a slow and humiliating death. They were generally left on their crosses long after death, for the bodies to rot and be picked to bits by the crows, and whatever fell to the ground by the dogs. Thus all who passed by

for days and indeed weeks would see displayed the ferocity and implacability of Roman rule. Crucifixion was a savagery like that of the very gods. All who dare to challenge Roman imperial military rule will face a wrath like that of the gods.

Often crosses would bear the bodies of scores, sometimes hundreds of resisters, as had happened in the case of Corinth less than a century before Paul founded his community of Christ-followers there.

This may seem far distant to us in its savagery, but the stratagems of military domination in the service of empire are not as far removed as we would like to think. Note the glorification and invocation of divine violence in the terms “rolling thunder”(to name carpet bombing in Afghanistan) or “shock and awe” in Baghdad. The purpose is always that of striking terror in those who might otherwise dare to defy the enraged fury of the gods, and the image and likeness of god, the imperial instruments of divine fury and wrath.

Now all early Christians, indeed all who dwelt within the bounds of Roman rule, would know from first-hand and gruesome experience the stench and horror of this display of imperial violence. And the Christ followers among them would also know that this is the fate that had befallen their lord, God’s own Messiah; and that it was a fate that could easily befall any who followed one who had so publicly been marked as an enemy of Roman rule.

Thus the cross of Jesus, and subsequently the crosses of his followers, were embedded within this history of pseudo-divine violence. It is against the background of this display of violence in the instrumentality of crucifixion that we must read the early church theologians’ language about God. For what is striking about this language is how insistent they were in portraying a God who renounced everything that smacked of imperial violence.

Thus the insistence upon the non-violence of God is an implicit critique of Imperial rule. It is, one might say, a political theology. Rule by coercion, by force, by arbitrary decree, by violence, is characteristic not of divine rule but of the rule of Satan, a rule that even now is being overthrown by the rule

of the God who refuses violence and rules only by wise persuasion and gentle love.

It is manifest that this perspective comes to be replaced by another: one that will increasingly associate God with violence, indeed with violence itself. It is to a brief history of that sad tale that I now turn.

Part Two: The Violence of God

By the late medieval period, God was being portrayed as sheer will, untrammelled by any consideration of good and evil, or rather the will of God could be portrayed as that which made good and evil and was not to be questioned.

Thus, for example, Duns Scotus, who died in the beginning of the 14th century (d. 1308), could affirm: "The will of God is the norm and the ground [regula et origo] of justice."⁷⁾ Moreover Scotus maintains: "The divine will is the cause of Good, and so by the fact that He wills something it is good."⁸⁾ Thus, instead of God being just and good in accordance with some recognizable meaning of those terms, we have justice and goodness being simply whatever it is that God wills, a will that is utterly independent of any such criteria in advance.

William of Ockham, who died nearly a half century later (d. 1347), took this a bit further, maintaining not only that God's action whatever it is, is good and the good is determined entirely by whatever it is that God happens to will. Ockham can even suppose that God can will the sin of the sinner since God "is not obliged to do the opposite of that which is a sin, because [God] is a debtor to no one."⁹⁾

The consequence is then drawn that if God wills for a man to do that which is a sin then it is not a sin to do it. This is his explanation: "By the very fact that God wills something, it is right for it to be done...Hence if God were to cause hatred of himself in anyone's will, neither would that man sin

7) Pelikan, vol. 4, p. 26; *Rep. Par.*, 4.14.1.8

8) Coplestone 2.2; *Rep.*, 1.48 q.un

9) *Phil. Writings* p.146.

nor would God..."¹⁰⁾

Thus at the level of a certain philosophical theology, one that will be very influential for the Reformation, divine will is made to be utterly transcendent of the good or even the just, not to mention the kind or generous. Thus the stage is set for the possibility of associating the divine with violence in ways that would have been completely unimaginable for early Christian theologians.

How did this come to pass?

1. Of course we should not forget the compromise of Christianity with imperial authority that begins with Constantine.

In the first place this can make the application of lethal force seem to be in harmony with the divine will. Accordingly, the medieval period is punctuated by periods of crusade against those identified as the enemies of God. These crusades certainly had a very complicated set of motives and rationales. But they served to establish the lived plausibility of the union of divine will with military force.

The groundwork for this had been established in the victory that the sign of the cross allegedly gave to Constantine, leading to the association of imperial (military) power with the cross: surely the most ironic reversal in Christian history. And Augustine had reluctantly paved the way for the use of imperial military power against schismatic Christians in North Africa in the Donatist controversy.

Thus the crusades, which were often internal crusades against odd groups of Christians such as the Cathari or Albigensians, seemed to make eminent sense within the emerging frame of reference provided by the association of the divine will with lethal force. This then could be usefully mobilized against the Islamic conquerors of the holy land and, eventually, to destroy the citadel of Eastern Orthodox Christianity as well, the city named for Constantine himself, with whose "conversion" the alliance between God and military force had been begun. This is another of the supreme ironies that mark the history of Christianity.

But there are additional factors which, taken together, help to provide a

10) Copplestone, 3.1, p.116; sent 9E-F

context of plausibility for this transformation.

2. The doctrine of predestination

In the work of Augustine the doctrine of predestination is developed within an overall framework of a theology and philosophy of love. In this context predestination is simply a straightforward application to the divine human relationship of what we also know from interhuman relationships: that the love of the other is pure gift, unmerited favor. The other's love for me cannot be explained by my own wonderful qualities; why me rather than another? is fundamentally not a question but an expression of deep and baffled gratitude.

The divine love is utterly unwarranted by my/our good qualities. This is the import of Augustine's reflections on his own being found by God.

Thus for Augustine to ground the divine favor in one's own merit would be to destroy the grace-like or gift-like reality of this experience. This is why he seems so opposed to the Pelagian perspective. Augustine had been a steadfast champion of human freedom, but when it comes to thinking of the divine favor he is resolute in emphasizing the divine gratuity above all else.

Now read within the context of a philosophy or theology of love, Augustine's reflections on predestination make a certain sense, have a certain intuitive appeal, however much we may be troubled by some of the secondary consequences, what we might term the collateral damage of this approach.

But when this doctrine comes to be revived in the early middle ages, for example by Gottschalk, this general framework recedes from view. We are then left with God's purely arbitrary will that chooses some for salvation and others for damnation in a rigorously consistent doctrine of double predestination. At first when Gottschalk developed this doctrine with a one sided rigor that had not been part of the Augustinian synthesis, his views were greeted with a certain horror and he was imprisoned for his views. He held to them with a martyr's stubbornness, however.

In time it was agreed that Gottschalk must be regarded as correct in his

reading of Augustine (and of Augustine's reading of Paul). Interestingly, however, the official church was never especially fond of this doctrine, so that it becomes a sort of rallying cry for movements of reform. Wycliffe (d.1384) for example made it a central part of his preaching at Oxford, as did the wandering lay preachers who sought to spread his reforms. And we know that it comes to be heavily emphasized by Luther and especially by Calvin in their reform movements.

Now why does it serve as a rallying cry for reform? Because the church had much to gain by telling the faithful that what they did or did not do in terms of obedience to the church and its institutions made a significant difference with respect to eternal salvation. The various ways of bribing support for the church's authority were undercut by the view that God decided upon the salvation of some altogether apart from their merits.

Now my point is not to develop the extraordinarily subtle sets of arguments that render the notions of double predestination plausible or worthy of reflection. (I am after all an Armenian and glad of it.)

Rather I want to point to the way in which such a doctrine leaves to one side the way in which patristic theologians maintained that God seeks to persuade us rather than to force us to accept salvation. By making grace sovereign it has the tendency as well to make will sovereign. And as predestination becomes explicitly double (as it was not yet for Augustine) the divine will is associated with rather gruesomely imagined tortures which, however much they may have been regarded as deserved, will make the divine will compatible with a certain violence.

That God can will the punishment of his enemies, indeed their eternal torture, is a view that has certain real life consequences in the here and now, or at least the then and there of the medieval period.

It was not simply crusade that could be licensed in this way. That God could positively will eternal torment for those he chose to damn could also be developed in ways that made the inquisition, with its burning of heretics and witches, seem almost humane by comparison to the divinely willed eternal torture of the rejected. Indeed one could maintain that the fires that consumed the heretic were by comparison a blessing if by this means the

soul might be purified, leading to a last gasp renunciation of the heresy. Thereby one could burn the body to save the soul. It is important to remember that this was by no means only a Catholic idea and practice but one enthusiastically embraced by Protestants, especially Calvinist Protestants, into the 17th century.

3. God as Cause (Aristotle to Augustine).

In the 13th century theologians in the West became aware of Aristotle through the work of Islamic and Jewish thinkers. This deeply challenged the unrivaled supremacy of a certain Platonism in western theology. It fell to Thomas Aquinas to seek to demonstrate at great length the compatibility of Christian teaching with the method and also with many of the principle perspectives of “the philosopher,” as Aristotle came to be called.

It was within this framework that it became important to reconceive the relation of God to the world in terms of causality. The importance of this should not be underestimated since it would also lay the foundations for the emergence of an independent science of the world, the so-called natural sciences. But it had its first effects in a reconfiguration of God’s relation to the world.

Thomas’s famous five proofs for the existence of God depended upon the reflections of Aristotle upon causality. But the one of these that is destined to play the largest role is that of efficient and thus of first cause.

What this means is that all events may be understood in terms of causality and that the ultimate cause is always God. Now just compare this with the views of so many theologians of the early church that even with respect to created nature God rules not by compulsion or necessity but by the persuasive power alone of wisdom and goodness. In the course of the next few centuries this will come to be understood as if God is not only the first or the final cause but basically the only cause. This is the rather extreme view of particular providence explicitly articulated and defended by Zwingli, who we may also recall was a warrior who led the army of the reformation into battle.

Now it is rather simple to see how the idea of God as will and the idea

of God as cause could coalesce in such a way as to make God responsible for whatever might happen. As we know only too well this use of God 's will as an explanatory principle not only for ultimate salvation and damnation but for all that happens in the world is most often invoked at the point of explaining or accounting for events that cause damage to human beings. Thus for example insurance companies identify as acts of God not winning the lottery but earthquakes and tornadoes. And every pastor knows the invocation of the inscrutable will of God when bad things happen to good people.

Once again the idea of God is developed in such a way as to make events that do violence to life the consequence of divine causality and thus of divine will.

In the late middle ages this connection between divine causality and will on the one hand, and utter devastation of whole populations on the other, was made vivid through the experience of the plague or "black death," which appears to have killed one third of the population of Europe in the most ghastly imaginable ways. The swollen darkened tortured bodies of the dying and the dead were a shared searing experience in every home and hamlet of Western Europe. It is basically impossible for us to imagine this horror that played out in slow motion over the course of several years.

Now how could something so utterly horrific be explained, be understood? By now we have notions both of God as will to save or damn, and as cause of events, of powerful and perhaps especially of violent events. To this only needed to be added the violent rage of God, who is determined to wreak vengeance upon humanity for its manifold sins and wickedness.

Indeed the image of a wrathful God haunts, stalks Europe in these years that lead up to the reformation. And, against that background, we can understand how Luther is entirely consumed by the question of finding a merciful rather than a vengeful, wrathful deity. As a consequence of this quest Luther will understand Paul to mean the forgiveness of sins when he speaks of grace.

Now I may point out as a corollary to this that we get the appropriation of Anselm's understanding of the logical necessity of the incarnation and the

death of the son in such a way that God comes to be thought of as the author of the violence inflicted upon Jesus. This perspective is of course read back onto Paul's arguments, especially in Romans.

Many feminist and womanist theologians have pointed out that this view, taken too literally, leads to an atonement theory that sounds like the justifications often, too often, heard for domestic abuse. But it is no accident that a view of atonement forged within the ideological structure I have been sketching should not shy away from attributing a certain redemptive violence to the ways of God, even at the cost of making it seem that the cross itself was not rebellion against God but God's own act, a fulfillment of the direct will of God.

Now all of these factors taken together will help to make increasingly plausible the view of God as one who exercises arbitrary and thus violent rule. God has been identified with those who rule by force, God's will has been tied to an arbitrary determination of eternal tranquility for some, but also of eternal torture for others, making possible the application of earthly torture as an anticipation of the eternal torment merited by those who God opposes. The identification of God as cause of the world and of all that transpires in the world opens the way for God to be understood as the cause above all of what causes all human suffering, even the suffering of God's own "Son."

In short, God has become almost synonymous with violence. So much so that God now appears as the image and likeness of Roman imperial rule, a rule whose violence the early church had associated not with God but with Satan.

Part Three: The Return of the Pacific God

In the aftermath of the paroxysms of human violence in the first half of the 20th century, violence rather routinely linked with Divine sanction, theological and philosophical reflection has begun to work at ways of dissociating God from violence.

In this way, often without knowing it, the theological and philosophical tradition may be seen to be returning to views of the divine non-violence that were the common perspective of earliest Christian theology.

This fundamental reconsideration makes its way into contemporary thought through a number of avenues.

In the English-speaking world, a world that is the offspring of Scotus, Ockham and Wycliff, a revival of a patristic perspective is to be found in Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*.¹¹⁾ In Part 5 he famously writes: "When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers... The brief Galilean [and we will add patristic] vision of humility flickered through the ages uncertainly... The church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar... the Galilean origin... [and we will add the patristic development of that origin] does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements of the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love..." (520-21). And a few pages later Whitehead will write: "God is the great companion, the fellow sufferer who understands" (532).

In his *Religion in the Making* he will write concerning what he calls purified religion: "it is the difference between the enemy you conciliate and the companion you imitate"¹²⁾ (40). In these words we seem thrust back into the perspective of the letter to Diognetus, accompanied by a metaphysical vision that seems at least somewhat compatible not only with Origen but also with the great Cappadocian creators of trinitarian doctrine. Of course Whitehead was or seems to have been largely ignorant of that theological tradition.

But in Germany during and following the Second World War we find another way of pointing to a different God than the God of violence and utter sovereignty. We hear it in the words of Bonhoeffer, who writes from a Nazi prison that only a suffering God can help. But we find these seeds of a new way of thinking about God brought to most dramatic expression in the

11) *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (London, Macmillan, 1929).

12) Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York, Macmillan, 1926).

work of Jurgen Moltmann, beginning with his book *The Crucified God*. This theological vision has been of utmost importance for me in my own development but I want to turn to a quite different voice that I believe will help us to see the stakes involved in seeking to think a god without violence: the astonishing French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

In thus turning to Derrida I could begin with his early engagement with the thought of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” or his later engagement with the thought of Walter Benjamin in “The Force of Law”, a text that plays an important role in my own work, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: On Justice*. But I turn instead to a quite late text of Derrida, one that appeared in English translation the same year as Derrida’s death.

In 1966 Martin Heidegger gave an interview with *Der Spiegel*, an interview that in accordance with his wishes was published only after his death ten years later.¹³ In that interview he was led to speak about the emergent global technological social reality. The triumph of technology had already then reached the point that the disappearance of the specifically human seemed to be inevitable. In the meantime, of course, this global technology has accelerated to the rhythm of a binary beat as computerization of communication, of economics and of war has made the virtual indistinguishable from the ‘real’. Perhaps a way to grasp what it was that Heidegger was trying to think 40 years ago is to recall the images of the movie *The Matrix*, in which the human has already become but the raw material for the self perpetuation of nano-tech machinery.¹⁴

In this reflection on the globalized technologization of reality Heidegger famously said: “only a god can save us.” By this he seems to have meant first, that humanity as such can no longer save itself from its own self-inflicted dehumanization. The very triumphs of science, of medicine, of economic miracles, of communication, and so on only tighten inexorably the noose of human self-destruction. But if humanity can not save itself, if indeed all its attempts at self-salvation only hasten humanity’s own demise,

13) “Only a God Can Save Us,” *Philosophy Today* (Winter, 1976), pp.267-284.

14) The astonishing admixture of Gnostic, mystery, manichean, and ‘pagan’ along with Christian redemption themes may have added to the movie’s appeal.

then if there is to be salvation for humanity, this can only be accomplished by what he, an atheist perhaps,¹⁵⁾ calls: a god.

And the task of thought, he claims, can only be that of preparing for the coming of such a god, perhaps awakening the hope or at least the yearning for such a coming of a god “of keeping oneself open for the arrival of such a god” (278),¹⁶⁾ perhaps through attaining to whatever lucidity is possible about the specific features of our plight. It is this work that Heidegger speaks of as “the tentativeness and inconspicuousness of thought in contrast to the global power... of technology” (280).¹⁷⁾

Four years ago another philosopher who had in the meantime assumed the mantle of “the world’s most famous philosopher” that had been worn

- 15) Heidegger’s atheism is of the order of an immanentism. Some, like Tillich and MacQuarrie, though in different ways, have sought to identify Heidegger’s talk of Being with a kind of Being itself that can even be spoken of as god beyond god, as Tillich purported to do. But even if the legitimacy of such a move could be established it would in no way answer to what Heidegger here calls “a god” since, as both Tillich and MacQuarrie saw, being is not a god at all, that is, not a being but being itself or as such, the being of beings. “A” god would then have to be a being among beings and not being itself and thus what Tillich and others feared as an idol. That Heidegger is here thinking not of being as such but of “a” being is made clear in an earlier essay “The Turning” based on a lecture given in 1955, in which he writes: “...for the god also is — when he is — a being and stands as a being within Being and its coming to presence...” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* trans. William Lovitt (Harper & Row, New York, 1977), 47.
- 16) This waiting does not assure, still less rest upon the assurance of, the coming of such a god. For what may appear is the final absence of such a god and thus the absence, the lack of any salvation at all, and so the final end of humanity as such. Waiting, watching, may in the end be but the lucidity that clings to some sort of rationality futilely, until the end. Thus in addition to waiting for the coming of such a god the task of thought (and of poetizing as he says) is also a readiness for the absence of such a god and thus for the time of foundering, of *Untergang*, the end of humanity. For hope that is hope and not planning or programming or a surreptitious form of knowledge is precisely uncertain, cannot guarantee its own object of desire. It is rather more like what Paul calls hope against hope.
- 17) The tentativeness and inconspicuousness of thought is precisely correlate to Paul’s speaking of the folly and weakness of the message concerning the cross. Here we anticipate as well the thought of Derrida concerning the weakness of deconstruction, a weakness that is nonetheless a power. And Heidegger wonders about the end “if poetry and thought do not once more succeed to a position of might without force” (277). But what is, might without force? For more on this see my reflections in *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul: On Justice* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005).

decades before by Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, returned to the saying of Heidegger: “only a god can save us”. The context of Derrida’s reflections is what may be termed the post 9/11 world, a world of the globalization of might deployed in the interest of virtual capital that speaks of itself as the “end of history” and which now seems bent on turning the world into the arena of war without end in order to defend the right of some to shop til they drop (our one true patriotic duty) and of a very few others to accumulate the virtual markers of economic success (measured, appropriately, by the number of zeroes that can be attached to any actual number), while the overwhelming majority of human beings are reduced to objects of what Foucault had called biopolitics¹⁸⁾, what Giorgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher, calls naked life, whose destiny is only to be controlled or discarded, and whose image and realization is the concentration camp.¹⁹⁾

Over the last 20 years before his recent death, Derrida had become more and more identified as the thinker of the “to-come,” the thinker whose thought is precisely an attempt to think the coming of justice, of gift, of a hospitality to the coming of what he increasingly identified as a “democracy to come.” And it was to address this question, this hope or this prayer for the coming of a humane social reality that had been condensed in the metaphor of a democracy to come that Derrida had been invited to speak in the shadow cast upon this hope or this prayer by the neoliberal globalization of economics and unending military warfare unleashed in the name of combating terrorism, a combat that only increases the hold of terror itself.²⁰⁾

What does it mean to hope for a democracy to come when democracy has been degraded to such an extent that it is in the name of democracy that the forces of dehumanization are rached up to the fever pitch that characterizes the policies of the United States.

18) Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* Lectures at the College de France 1975-76 (Picador, New York, 2003), pp.239-264.

19) Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998). See also his *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Zone Books, New York, 1999).

20) For insightful comment on this see Derrida’s interview “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003).

It was these policies that had evoked from Noam Chomsky the remark that the US was a rogue state and this provides the title, if not the content, of the reflections undertaken by Derrida : *Rogues*.²¹⁾

Derrida does not fall into the trap of supposing that it is simply a matter of “regime change” in the US, for the forces of neoliberal economics and of cyber surveillance, of virtual warfare of the strongest against the weakest, have little to do with whether or not the cowboy cabal that has taken power in Washington is replaced by a kinder, gentler, or at least more disarming and more articulate and reassuring technocracy.

What is at stake rather is whether there is any hope at all for the coming of a fundamentally other polity, one that hears and heeds the call and claim of justice, of humanity, of life. Can this hope or desire or yearning or prayer even be thought? What could it mean to be faithful to such a desire, to such a prayer? To be responsible to it and for it? To turn toward the coming of that which is worthy of a truly human and humane hope?

It is in this connection that Derrida turns to a complex reflection on, among other things, the question of sovereignty. For sovereignty is the name of control, of capability, of can do. It is in the name of sovereignty, for example, that the US exempts itself from the laws that it piously imposes upon the rest of the world; it is in the name of sovereignty that we call ourselves, as Madeline Albright said: the exceptional nation. But it is also in the name of sovereignty that other nations seek to defend themselves from the predatory financial speculation that calls itself “free trade,” or from the blight of McWorld substitutes for culture, or from the threat of military extermination reserved for those who balk at the imposition of the new world order of the freedom to shop.

Can sovereignty save us? If not the sovereignty of a nation then the sovereignty of a hyper nation, of the union of nations of a sovereign United Nations? Or is this only the consummation of the rule of force, of sovereign power, a dream that becomes the nightmare of total force still in the interests of those with power?

It was the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt who famously

21) Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005).

declared that basic political concepts are secularized theological concepts.²²⁾ And certainly this seems to be true of the idea of sovereignty. For sovereignty is the claim to be in control, a claim that most fundamentally is made of God, the one who is “in control” of creation and of history. It is in imitation of that sovereignty, that omnipotence, that the divine right of kings was maintained in Christian Europe, or of Popes still today. And when that power of kings is transferred to the state, it is still the state that has the monopoly of legitimate force, that dreams of control, whether of a people (in the name of the people) or of the planet.

But the claimants to sovereignty have only tightened the noose upon an expiring humanity: the state, the party, the market, perhaps what is today even called freedom. These sovereignties come heralding deliverance of humanity only to further extinguish the light of humanity, of life itself. For it is in the name of freedom that we have invasion and occupation, in the name of freedom that the Patriot Act tightens the grip of surveillance, in the name of freedom that the peoples of the earth are held hostage to the predatory power of casino capitalism.²³⁾

To hope for salvation has seemed ever to hope for the coming of a sovereign, for the return of the king.

Is there any other sort of hope?

It is here that Derrida returns to the declaration or plea of Heidegger: only a god can save us. But is this not precisely the hope that always delivers humanity over to its own death?

What sort of god could it be that could in any meaningful sense save us, that is, make us more rather than less human, more rather than less responsible, just, humane. Would it not have to be...a god without sovereignty?

Here is what he then writes: “To be sure, nothing is less sure than a god without sovereignty: nothing is less sure than his coming, to be sure”(114).

We must pause here. For the thought of a god without sovereignty is

22) Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Philosophy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.36.

23) *Susan Strange, Casino Capitalism* (London, St. Martin's Press, 1997).

after all not one that can easily be thought, if indeed it can be thought at all. For “god” and “sovereignty” are virtually synonyms. If God is divested of sovereignty, what then remains that might be termed divine? Is not a mighty God, a powerful God, a strong God the very essence of what we dream of when we dream of the coming of God, and perhaps even more when we dream of a God who saves, who comes precisely to save? Is this not always the dream of those who need rescue from the forces that hold them captive? And is it not in the name of this dream, even if it is the dream of the oppressed, that the powerful pretend to rule as viceroys of this saving power? The power of liberation from vulnerability and insecurity. Is it not this very dream of the oppressed that is seized upon always and everywhere by their oppressors to become the very instrument of their power and force? What can deliver humanity, actually existing humanity, from this dream of power, of sovereignty, of control, by which we seek deliverance from the power that afflicts humanity only by falling ever more securely into the hands of that which entraps us?

And so we seem to be caught in a dilemma: if we hope for the coming of a God with sovereignty then we fall into the trap of power, we prepare for the coming of power that enslaves humanity. But if we hope for the coming of a god without power, without might, without force or violence and so without sovereignty, then in what way can this really be a hope for that which can deliver, can save, can redeem?

The much cited tale is pertinent here: seeing the messiah as a beggar among beggars outside the city gates, one asks of him: when will you come? For the being without sovereignty (as a beggar therefore, as the one who is vulnerable and needy rather than in plenitude...) is not the coming, but seems to be the contrary of the coming, the advent, the parousia with power.

Just to make things a bit more complicated we should recall that the ‘work’ of such an advent is said to be to save us. But how can a messiah without sovereignty save? Or is this the only messiah who could deliver humanity from its dream turned nightmare of power, of control, of sovereignty?

Toward the conclusion of the second essay that makes up the volume

Rogues, and so which continues and concludes Derrida's reflections on power and on hope for a radically different kind of social reality, one in which the claim of justice is heeded, but without force or violence, without the dream of sovereignty, he again returns to the saying of Heidegger with which we began. This time he fills out a bit more what a god without sovereignty might mean.

Derrida writes: "In speaking of an ontotheology of sovereignty, I am referring here, under the name of God, the One and Only God, to the determination of a sovereign, and thus indivisible, omnipotence. For wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable sovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, ... it would be a completely different story, perhaps even the story of a god who deconstructs himself in his ipseity"(157).

You will be relieved to know that I will not, on this occasion, seek to clarify the meaning of deconstructs or even of ipseity. I will leave this phrase hanging in the air.

What I will do is to point to just a few of the ways in which the thinking that gathers itself here in the conclusions to these remarkable essays is a thinking of the theological. Indeed it is something like a provocation to what since the time of Luther has been referred to as a theology of the cross, or a thinking of the cross, but the cross of the messianic humanity that was and perhaps still is tortured and executed by the enforcers of empire.

But it is not a thinking of what is familiar to us as religion. It is indeed the sort of thinking that Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*²⁴⁾ was trying to clarify as a religionless thinking, a thinking without and even against religion, including most especially what claims for itself the title of Christianity (328). Bonhoeffer himself had paid tribute in these same pages to Karl Barth for having decisively broken with religion in the name of faith²⁵⁾, for having lucidly recognized and affirmed the radical difference

24) Macmillan, New York, 1971.

25) The fundamental distinction between religion and faith is one that Derrida, who otherwise seems not to know much of Karl Barth, also points to when he writes: "But in the same way as I make a distinction between justice and law, I think you have to distinguish between religion and faith." *Paper Machine* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), 117.

between a faith that is faithfulness to the Gospel and a religion that erects itself as an institution claiming to secure for us our relation to a God who answers to our religious needs. For religion, and I mean of course Christianity, even at its best seems to be almost entirely self-absorbed, catering to the self absorption of those who come seeking a haven from a heartless world. And at its worst it is the ideological helpmate for domination and division.

But faith or faithfulness without religion: what might that mean? And how is it to be thought in relation to the weakness of a god who comes?

Bonhoeffer himself had already begun to think of the weakness of god, of the god whose weakness somehow is the gospel. For God, he writes from prison on July 16 of 1944 “is weak and powerless, and...this is the only way that God is with us and can help us” (360) for “only the suffering God can help”(361). It was this insight that Moltmann sought to think through all the way to the end in his *Crucified God*.

Bonhoeffer also sought to think what fidelity to such a God might mean, fidelity not in terms of religious practices which even if they might exist should be utterly hidden away, as Jesus said of prayer, for example. But fidelity in the world, a fidelity that Bonhoeffer also named as keeping watch with a certain God in his weakness as the disciples could not do in Gethsemane (361). A watchfulness that Dorothee Soelle articulated as “political prayer” in the struggles against a globalized military industrial complex.

I will not seek now to unpack what may and must be said about the astonishing fact that a theology of the cross, a thinking of our world in relation to a god who is crucified, appears outside the church, outside what calls itself Christianity, outside what may be termed a specifically religious tradition.

Instead I will simply point to what seems to me to be at stake in theology today, in both the study and the doing of theology, that is, in theological thinking today.

First I will recall something else that Bonhoeffer noted long ago, that it is often enough the case that one can speak more openly and freely about

theology, about faith, with atheists than is possible with those who call themselves Christians. That among the most fruitful dialog partners for the theologian today are those who like Derrida are rightly regarded as atheists. And that this is perhaps especially true when it comes to dealing with what Paul in Galatians called the truth of the gospel or what in First Corinthians he calls the message concerning the cross, of the foolishness and weakness of God.

And that this is so because what is at stake in theological thinking today is not tinkering with the religious self-understanding of religious institutions and still less with providing nostrums for a narcissistic spirituality but rather trying to think resolutely and lucidly about a future for humanity and for life itself in the face of the menace of self-inflicted biocide. That real theological thinking is directed toward the question of the deliverance of the earth and the earthling from the empire of avarice, arrogance and violence.

And this means that theological thinking is above all a political thinking, a thinking of the call and claim of justice, a thinking of the conditions of generosity and solidarity, of a non-allergic being with one another, a thinking of messianic hope.

But a messianic hope without the dream of sovereignty, even or especially without the sovereignty of God, without a return of the King, without power and might. But rather, a messianicity of vulnerability, vulnerability to the other, to the neighbor, to the stranger, to the enemy, to the unknown and the unknowable. A messianicity, in short, of unrestricted love, without which there is no future at all for life on earth.

And perhaps this must begin, for us, with a renunciation of what has been called God, a renunciation of the dream of one who comes in power to deliver, and a turning instead to that which is most vulnerable in the world; a watching and waiting with that which is most vulnerable, with what the world, indeed the political and religious world, consigns to abjection and death.

In the midst of all our self-preoccupation, our concerns about ourselves, our spiritual needs or our vocation, our institutions or our churches can we take time to prepare ourselves and our world for the coming of the only god

who can save us, the one without sovereignty, without power and might, the one who bids us watch and wait,

The one who is justice without law, gift without return, welcome without condition, whose last name is love.

Abstract

In the times in which we live there are many voices that cry out for divinely sanctioned violence. How does the name of God come to be associated with violence? And is there an alternative way of naming God that points us away from violence? We attend first to the voices of those who are called “church fathers” to notice how insistently they call upon us to think of a God without violence, a God who stands not in continuity with, but in utter contrast to the violence of empire and nation. We then turn to the construction in pre-modern Europe of a very different view of God, one that makes God to be so associated with violence as to make the wielders of human violence to seem like the very representatives of God. Finally we consider some of the ways in which the association between God and violence are brought into question in our own time. While this occurs in many ways in the theological and philosophical reflection of the last decades I pay particular attention to this deconstruction of the association of the divine and violence in the work of Jacques Derrida. The way the name of God is deployed is regularly connected to the behavior of those who are called upon to imitate the divine as the image and reflection of God in the world.