

# Religion and Violence: Plea for a 'weak' theology *in tempore belli*<sup>1</sup>

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Only a few minutes after the events of September 11, 2001, the perfidious terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington were being linked with the religious sphere. It made no difference whether it was the slogan of "battle of the cultures" (S.P. Huntington) which made the rounds of the mass media or whether the public took a look at the simplistic Islamic thoughts of Mohammed Atta, which the pilot of death had left behind in his will, or whether it was in the context of the political war rhetoric which accompanied the allied attack on Osama bin Laden and the whole of Afghanistan, or whether it was in the statements made by church officials at the innumerable memorial services for the victims of the attacks: religion was or, rather, is, always involved.

The questions are obvious: What is this link between violence and religion about? Is there a potential for violence which is structurally inherent in the religious – *outside* or particularly also *within* the concrete religions of revelation: Judaism, Christianity and Islam? Does the terrorist attack on the twin towers of Manhattan – symbols of globalized capitalism – demonstrate the reawakening of "religious mania" (as the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* put it)? These and similar questions challenge (Dominican) theologians to give their opinions about this, since each religion determines its relationship to violence through its particular theology (cf. H.-J. Sander).<sup>2</sup>

1. The logic of the crime of September 11 is not fundamentalist in the sense of a religious rationality which is turned backwards. Even less is it progressive. The terrorist violence stems neither from opposition to modernity nor is it seeking to make the world holy (according to R. Girard, it is holiness, of all things, that constitutes the inner connection between religion and violence!), nor is it attempting to restore dogmatic foundations of faith, nor does it anticipate a utopia. The dogma of the terror of New York and

Washington is violence. Nothing else. What makes this violence which occurred in a totalitarian way on September 11 so dangerous is the exclusion of whatever or whoever is different, just like all violent practices of absolutist politics. For where violence acts in the name of totalitarianism, it also destroys totally – as the masses of rubble at “Ground Zero” so brutally demonstrate. The absolute violence with which the world was confronted on September 11 does not have an intention; in that respect it is an expression of “nihilism” (J. Manemann). The rationality of terror is nothing else but terror, in other words the “terroratio” (J.Ph. Reemtsma). The (pseudo-)religious rhetoric which surrounds September 11 is merely a camouflage for totalitarian violence!

2. Even though we may interpret the attacks on New York and Washington as actions that were not religiously motivated, it is nevertheless obvious that the terrorist logic of total destruction hides under the magic hat of religion to make itself invisible. So the question is, what makes religion so prone to be used as a hiding-place for the violent, what makes it so suitable and so attractive for this? And how can religion, how can actual religions prevent themselves being requisitioned like this?

One possible answer I find in Jacques Derrida’s essay “Foi et Savoir”, written in 1996. Beginning with an analysis of various manifestations of political-religious violence (especially in so-called religious wars), Derrida – like, incidentally, R. Girard as well – allocates violence within the religious sphere. Against the form of violent religion that has been so analyzed, Derrida puts forward the view of a “different” religion: he reconstructs a “religion without religion” (Ch. Lienkamp), a religion which is free of all particularly religious things, a Messianism (“the Messianic”) without Messianism. Such a new, emptied religion appears – according to Derrida – in the name of justice and democracy against all forms of political-religious violence, against all war. The way by which religion itself will become different is “désertification”, desert-ing, retreating into the desert.

The Christian tradition knows such religious self-emptying, turned against its own dogmatic “strong” convictions, for example in the form of the apophatic, so-called negative theology. Or we encounter it in mystical theology, whose texts often conjure up the picture of the desert.

3. Following Derrida, my plea is for the historical revelation religions to reflect more on their own dogmatic-positive rational “other”: on their own traditions of negation and ambiguity, perhaps

even of the (pseudo-)heretical. Above all, I am thinking in this connection of the mystical theologies that already have their place, as historical traditions, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam – often, however, disputed by the ruling dogmas. A rediscovery of this moment of “weak”, ambiguous theology could perhaps, in the future, prevent Judaism, Christianity and Islam from becoming, against their wills, a hiding-place for pseudo-religious, self-generating violence.

The Christian tradition can call on great representatives from the Order of Preachers to fulfil this theological task: such as Thomas Aquinas and the undoubtedly apophatic traits that are in his theology as well as the mysticism of Meister Eckhart. So, to carry out “weak” theology today in company with Thomas and Eckhart means, in tempore belli, to consciously oppose through theology the home-made violent portions of religion, in order to be equipped in this way both critically and self-critically according to the instructions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ concerning justice and democracy – in short: to vouch for a “Christian humanity” (E. Schillebeeckx).

1 Translated by Bonifatius Hicks OP.

2 On the following subject cf. J. Manemann, Religiöser Wahn oder Wahnsinn aus Irreligiosität, in: *Orientierung* 65 (2001), p. 213-214; Ch. Lienkamp, Gewalt und Religion, in: *Orientierung* 65 (2001), p. 209-212, 214-217; J. Derrida, Foi et Savoir. Les deux sources de la “religion” aux limites de la simple raison: J. Derrida / G. Vattimo (Éd.), *La religion*, Paris 1996, p. 9-86; E. Schillebeeckx, Religion und Gewalt, in: *Concilium (D)* 33 (1997), p. 565-578; H.-J. Sander, Die Zeichen der Zeit in Gewalt und Widerstand. Zu einem Grundbegriff der Theologie in der Welt von heute, in: *Orientierung* 59 (1995), p. 92-96; R. Girard, *Das Heilige und die Gewalt*, Zürich 1987.