

God's presence in an open society.

Theological theses on the religious dimension of September 11th

Christian Bauer

On September 14th a central memorial ceremony was held in the New York Yankee Stadium: a multireligious, patriotic liturgy at whose centre stood the American star-spangled banner. This religious dramatisation of the *Stars and Stripes* in those days of terror proves that September 11th was at least a matter of religion: a matter of a violence of religious origin, whose trail of blood runs from Manhattan via Kandahar to places which are not yet known. Once religion comes into play, there is a need to criticise its potential malignancy, so that people are able to get out of the vicious cycle of religious violence. One year after September 11th these theological theses would like to contribute to the project of shedding light upon this 'depraved part'¹ of all religions by emphasising eight basic differences which constitute religion and cause its characteristic dangers. Therefore current terms are to be used against their everyday usage in a strictly formal sense as instruments for analyzing sacred and profane phenomenons of religion.

I **The danger of religious ambivalence: between 'fascinosum' and 'tremendum'**

In their everyday life, people experience the power of the *Holy*² as something extraordinary, that magically attracts them and repels them at the same time—but never lets them go. It is precisely this inescapable difference which constitutes religion, at the centre of which, according to Rudolf Otto's classic definition, there is the mysterious experience of a 'mysterium fascinosum, tremendum et augustum'. September 11th revealed this constitutive ambivalence of the Holy, because it unveiled the double face of religion: the face of mighty violence, embodied by the pilots of death, and the face of powerless hope, embodied by the New York firemen. All religions bear this Janus's head, because throughout the length of their history they have always produced both: deeds of love as well as acts of violence.

II The danger of religious violence: between love and hatred

Violence is something holy, that leaves people speechless in the difference between fascination and fright—and which is therefore structurally linked with religion. The consequence of this connection between religion and violence, discovered by René Girard³, is that all religions are confronted with the problem of their potential violence: there is no religion without victims and sacrifices, for they either demand the lives of innocent victims or they themselves offer sacrifices in resisting violence. Therefore, in interreligious dialogue, no religion—not even ours—can be spared the critical question about its sacrificial victims. Wherever this does not take place in the name of misunderstood tolerance of a harmless liberalism, there is the danger of this dialogue itself to fall victim to the possible violence of religion.

III The danger of religious offerings: between victims and sacrifices

There is a decisive linguistic difference between victims and sacrifices, which also exists in French, Italian and Spanish but not in German: *victims* are ‘passive’ victims of alien violence, whereas *sacrifices* represent ‘active’ sacrifices of their own selves. *Victims* are offerings in a profane sense, who can achieve a religious meaning, whereas *sacrifices* are offerings in a religious sense, who might also gain a profane meaning. Those dead New York firemen, who are now honoured as American saints, belong to the first category, whereas the pilots of death, who are revered by fanatical Moslems as Islamic martyrs, belong to the second category. If this latter, religiously-loaded term of *sacrifice* comes into play, it is crucial to make a distinction between God and idols.

IV The danger of religious idols: between gifts and counter-gifts

According to Marcel Mauss, religious as well as profane sacrifices follow the logic of exchanging gifts⁴: the pilots of 11th September sacrificed their lives in the certainty of receiving the reward they have earned for their gift in paradise. A central principle for dealing with this sacrificial logic is quoted in the New Testament: “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath”⁵. Once a religion demands inhuman sacrifices, this maxim of Jesus requires decided resistance in the name of God. When the gift of a religious sacrifice is not exchanged for a gift in return which is an “effervescence de la vie”⁶, then we can say, almost infallibly, that it is not God who is at work but an idol—and the danger of fanaticism comes up.

**V The danger of religious fanaticism:
between the sacred and the profane**

Religion is, according to Mircea Eliade⁷, a force emanating from the difference between the *sacred* and the *profane*. It represents the might of holy things, which—especially in the vicinity of violence, sex and death—orientates the profane system in its social as well as personal structures: there are holy places, holy times, and holy people. This dividing line between *Fanum* and *Pro-Fanum*, which is constitutive for religion, marks the temptation to *Fana-ticism*, to which all religions are equally susceptible: to pervert bearing witness to God’s presence within one’s own religion into an exclusive ‘Extra ecclesiam nulla salus’

**VI The danger of religious images:
between power and impotence**

The religious might of the profane images of 11th September represents something sacred, that brought innumerable people under its spell on television screens around the whole planet. Theology mustn’t deny the power of this globalised experience, but it should approach it in a critical way. For example, the famous composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was no longer capable of maintaining such a distance: he has fallen under the conflicting spell of the pictures of 11th September, as his remarks about the events show: “What happened there was the greatest work of art that there has ever been. [...] Some artists try to go beyond the boundary of what is at all thinkable and possible, so that we wake up, so that we become open for another world.”⁸

**VII The danger of religious discourse:
between construction and deconstruction**

In the tradition of the biblical prohibition against making images of God theological discourses have to follow the “*via triplex*”⁹ of St. Thomas Aquinas. This triple way allows a witness to the presence of God in time and space on the way of positive theology, but at the same time it qualifies this witness in the sense of negative theology—and to transcend both ways on the “*via eminentiae*”. This is necessary in order to keep open a space for the presence of God in the permanent uncertainty of construction and deconstruction of the God-discourse—of that discourse on the *Deus semper maior* beyond all religions, who by definition eludes human reach.

**VIII The danger of religious identification:
between God and religion**

If we want to talk about this ‘eminently’ transcendent God in the case of September 11th, we must speak of religion also—but it is not always a

matter of God when we are concerned with religion. A striking example for this basic difference was the ‘religion’ of nazism in Germany, which forced Dietrich Bonhoeffer to speak of a “Religion-less Christianity”¹⁰ in resistance to the evil of this profane religion. Biblical exegesis and religious studies prove that God is a “latecomer in the history of religion”¹¹, who marks a difference in relation to the violent potential of all religions. A critical theology, enlightened about the potential for religious violence, must emphasise this difference in the name of the one God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Conclusion: empty centres and God’s presence

Thinking back to the American liturgy of patriotic *civil religion*, centred around the one flag, we are reminded of quite different flags. These were to be seen a decade ago on the streets of Leipzig, Prague and Bucharest: their centre was nothing but a large hole, because hammer and sickle, symbols of the profane religion of communism, had been cut out of the national flags. This ‘empty centre’¹² of an open society, the subject of the struggle of 11/9 of the year 1989, is to be defended in connection with 9/11 of the year 2001 against all fanaticisms coming from any side —for God’s sake, whose presence in our world is a permanent empty space.

- 1 cf. G. Bataille: *La part maudite. Essai d'économie générale*; in *Oeuvres complètes*. Vol. VII; Paris 1992, 17-179.
- 2 cf. R. Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford² 1950.
- 3 cf. R. Girard: *Violence and the sacred*, Baltimore 1979.
- 4 cf. M. Mauss: *The Gift: The Form and Reason for exchange in Archaic Societies*, New York—London 2000.
- 5 Mk 2:27.
- 6 G. Bataille: *Le part maudite*, 20.
- 7 cf. M. Eliade: *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, San Diego-New York 1968.
- 8 translated from the quotation found on <http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/special/auf/9595/1.html>.
- 9 via positionis—via negationis—via eminentiae (cf. Thomas Aquinas: *De pot.* 7, 5).
- 10 cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, London 1971.
- 11 G. van der Leeuw: *Phänomenologie der Religion* ‚Tübingen‘ 1977, 133.
- 12 cf. R. Herzinger: *Republik ohne Mitte. Ein politischer Essay*, Berlin 2001.