

# Doing theology with and amongst living bodies in contested spaces

*Johann-Albrecht Meylahn*

Space is always situated in time, and time defines space. Therefore, in contemporary global geo-political time one could perhaps define space as contested space. European space is contested, NATO is contested, the world is being reconfigured into new spaces and blocs (for example BRICS). We are living in a time of post-and de-colonial thought, which is trying to re-define space or create space for alternatively defined and identified bodies and bodies of knowledge. Time-spaces are filled with bodies, and they give to those bodies an identity and place. On the other hand, bodies carry out time-spaces and thereby, in a sense create, such time-spaces as a place or rather a home of and for these bodies, or else the place serves as a place of exclusion and marginalisation. One could say that there is a close connection between bodies and spaces and the consequent identity politics of those spaces, as they become places of either belonging or of not-belonging and exclusion.

## Introduction

In Europe, we are currently witnessing how space, both political and cultural (religious), is being challenged by the migration and displacement of bodies. New bodies, different bodies and even political no-bodies enter into, or attempt to enter into, this space. Their presence calls for new interpretations and identifications, and therefore, question the politics of identity of that place. Bodies of different colors, bodies with different practices, bodies speaking foreign languages, bodies worshipping differently, as well as maimed bodies, hurt bodies, war-torn bodies, the family body fragmented, orphaned bodies, widowed, broken, hurt and scarred bodies, and angry bodies press against the borders of these places, asking for, pleading, demanding space and thereby challenging the geographical, cultural, economic, religious and political borders of that place. It is not only the geographic-political borders that are being challenged, but with them the epistemic boundaries as well. These new bodies challenge the norms of the

Johann-Albrecht Meylahn is Professor of Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Pretoria in South Africa, where he teaches pastoral care and congregational studies. Before teaching at the university, he worked for numerous years in the inner city of Tshwane (Pretoria) in a multi-cultural congregation. His research focusses on the conversation between theology and philosophy.

*oikos-nomos* and thereby question the limits of the hospitality of that particular place. This chapter will rethink this interaction between space-bodies and the politics of place with the help of Alain Badiou (2009), who specifically focuses on language-body dualism, which he calls democratic materialism. The central question addressed in the chapter is as follows: What can practical theology contribute to this *re-formation* of space, if it understands itself as *doing* theology with and amongst living bodies in contested spaces seeking a place?





## Forming space-time for bodies: the creation of *Zeit-Spiel-Raum*

The theme of the 2017 International Academy of Practical Theology conference in Oslo is *Reforming: Space, Bodies and Politics*, yet before one can reflect on reforming space-time for bodies, and consequently politics, it is important to understand the formation of space-time. Thus, I will start by reflecting on the forming and/or creation of space-time, or the carrying out (*Austrag*) of a world, namely the bringing together of space and time as the stage for bodies, a world for bodies and the politics that identifies, categorizes and stratifies such bodies.

For Heidegger (1971) it is language, and for Ricoeur (1984) it is narrative that brings time and space into relation with each other in the creation of a *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* (see Caputo 1993, 30), thereby creating a world for bodies both animate and inanimate as well as bodies of knowledge, or *tekhne* in Stiegler's (2015, 30–31) sense of the term, as the externalization and individuation of the human as noetic being. It is language, narrative, that carries out (*Austrag*) a world of and for bodies with its dimensions of time and space.

Lévi-Strauss (1985, 219) argued that it is myth that turns time into space. According to Nancy, “with myth, the passing of time takes shape, its ceaseless passing is fixed in an exemplary place of showing and revealing” (1991, 45). Walter Otto argued that myth and *Sprachgesang* are fundamentally one and the same thing (Otto 1962, 285), that the speaking of language and myth are one and the same, that which conveys a world. Nancy again: “Myth is very precisely the *incantation* that gives rise to a world and brings forth a language, that gives rise to a world in the advent of a language” (1991, 50). World, language and community are intimately connected, as myth and community are bound together, precisely because myth arises only in “community and for it: they engender one another, infinitely and immediately” (Nancy 1991, 50).

A world, a *Zeit-Spiel-Raum*, is the creation of the *Sprachgesang* of a particular community, binding that community to its world, binding (*religare*) the community to its myth or logos (Nancy 1991, 54), while at the same time incanting it.

A world is brought about via the bodies (things) that populate it (see Heidegger 1971, 200f), and it is the world that gives specific place to each body in that population (*ontology*), sorting and stratifying

the bodies according to hierarchies based on power. The body without organs is stratified into organs (identifiable bodies) (see Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 11; 2011, 150). What binds this world is the myth (logos),<sup>1</sup> which also gives a specific place, a status, to different people thanks to the role of power. As Stiegler (2014, 55–56) argues, “language is always accompanied by power”. Badiou (2009) argues that it is the logic of the *ontology* that gives a specific place to each thing (*onta*) of that *ontology*.

Various spaces, various worlds, have been created by different myths, such as that of nation-states and collections of nation-states like the European Union, NATO, United Kingdom, or BRICS. Each of these worlds is brought about via a *Sprachgesang*, the silent speaking of language, the silent myth, or the logos of that world. Yet, these myths, the logoi of such worlds, are not recognized as myths, but are seen as the way things are. They present themselves *as if* they are given, *as if* they are natural, as the way things truly are: as facts. Through a change in the population of bodies, these worlds have now become contested spaces. They have become contested spaces because the bodies (*onta*) in these specific spaces, the people, are changing, or rather different people are moving into these spaces, and are therefore changing the *onta*. Once the *onta* has sufficiently changed, it begins to challenge the *ontology* of those spaces. It challenges the myth, the logos, of such spaces.

Are these spaces really changing? This is certainly a fear that is being exploited by numerous populist and neo-nationalist movements, but is it truly changing the space? Badiou argues in his book *Logics of Worlds* that true change occurs when the epistemology changes; otherwise, it would make more sense to speak of modification (Badiou 2009, 259). In other words, are these changes in the population of bodies changing the epistemology of these spaces, or is it only a modification? Are the different bodies that are moving into these spaces changing the *oi-*

1 Nancy argues that myth and logos are one: “In myth the world makes itself known, and it makes itself known through declaration or through a complete and decisive revelation” (Nancy 1991, 48). She adds: “The greatness of the Greek—according to the modern age of mythology—is to have lived in intimacy with such speech and to have founded their logos in it: they are the ones for whom *muthos* and *logos* are ‘the same.’ This sameness is the revelation the hatching or blossoming of the world, of the thing, of being, of man in speech” (Nancy 1991, 49).



*kos-nomos*, the law, the norm, of these spaces (*oikos*)? Is the economy of these spaces being transformed?

If one takes Badiou's understanding of "true" change seriously, then at the moment these spaces are not changing, but are, at best, only being modified. Badiou argues that for change to truly occur an exception is required, "an exception to the laws of ontology as well as to the regulation of logical consequences" (Badiou 2009, 360).

In a sense, that is what one is experiencing in these contested spaces, a challenge to the epistemology, a challenge to the myth of Europe, the myth of NATO, the myth of the United Kingdom, the myth of BRICS, the myth of the West and Western civilization. For years, new people could be absorbed into the ontology of Europe, with minor or major modifications, in Badiou's language, but all of a sudden it seems that a transformation of epistemology is required; with a change in epistemology, the *oikos-nomos* transforms and the economy will be transformed. A change in epistemology is required in terms of how one *thinks* (epistemology), how one individuates, how one singularizes, how one categorizes in these spaces the laws and norms of thinking, the carrying out of global changes as the *tekhnē* changes: the exteriorization of human intellect. All of these different bodies—bodies of different colors, bodies with different practices, bodies speaking foreign languages, bodies worshipping differently, as well as maimed bodies, hurt bodies, war-torn bodies, the family body fragmented, orphaned bodies, widowed, broken, hurt and scarred bodies, and angry bodies—are challenging the body-politic of these spaces as well as the bodies of knowledge (epistemologies) and the regulation of the logical consequences (*oikos-nomos*) of these political bodies.

## Reforming politics: the transformation of a body-politic: polis

Aristotle says that we live in cities—this is the *political* way of life—not for reasons of need, but for a higher reason itself without reason, namely to "live well" (*eu zein*): here "well" means neither a comfort, nor a having; it is the ownmost difference of man, which means also, for Aristotle (but for Plato as well), the sharing of a *logos*. (Nancy 1991, xxxviii)

The being *in* common of a city, of a *polis*, is based on the idea of creating a common identity, or of being bound (*religare*) into a shared *logos*: the myth of the

community, being bound (*religare*) into and by the *Sprachgesang* of that space (world) while singing (*tekhnē*) the song of the community and thereby creating the community, individuating the community, while also individuating oneself and thereby becoming subject, noetic spirit, in community.

Stiegler (2014, 45) unpacks this becoming of a singularity, individuation, as a process that is both psychic and collective, that is within a community, and later he adds technology (exteriorization) (Stiegler 2014, 51). In other words, he posits a three-fold process: psychic, collective and technological. This becoming of the self through the collective could be understood as the *work of the community*, this labor or *tekhnē*, as the social construction of the community (Stiegler 2015, 34). A process of individuation (psychic) always occurs within a "we" (collective) through the work (*tekhnē*) of externalization.

The role of the collective, the work of the community, represents the secondary and tertiary retentions and protentions (see Stiegler 2014, 52). The work of the community, the *tekhnē* of the community, represents these retentions and protentions in the various bodies of knowledge (epistemology) and constructions that give meaning to the ontology of that world. It is with these knowledges that the strange and the stranger can be encountered and even expected and defined as *the* other. The problem is when the other is no longer a singular other, but becomes an increasing population of others. This increase in the population of the *other* eventually becomes a question of how many others can the *same* accommodate before the same is "destroyed"?

According to Derrida (2000), true hospitality is impossible because at a certain point the host is taken hostage by the guest and the home (*oikos*) is taken over by the guest, who in that sense becomes the *hostis*: the enemy. Is it not the threat of the enemy that constitutes the city, asks Carl Schmitt (see Derrida 2009). Is that not what we are currently experiencing with the rise in populism and neo-nationalism: that the foreigner, the migrant, the refugee, is not welcomed as a guest, but is interpreted as an enemy, one who will threaten the integrity (the norms, the laws of the *oikos*) of the *polis*? The foreigner, migrant, refugee seeking *hospitality* is interpreted as the *hostis*, an enemy of the polis, coming to destroy the body-politic, the norms, the values of the city.

A radical hospitality, a radical love of the other, a welcoming of the other, is politically impossible unless we rethink the meaning of the political, as Jean-



Luc Nancy (1991) argues in *The Inoperative Community*. A reformation of the political is needed to create space for different bodies.

I believe that practical theology can find itself in this task.

## Reformation of space: doing theology with excluded, marginal bodies

Is it the task of practical theology to create space for different bodies? The answer depends on how one understands and interprets practical theology. What is necessary is both a *Theos* and a logos, that is, a *praxis* interpreted as *poiesis*.

If *Theos* is interpreted as the creator, the religion that binds people into a community, which provides the secondary and tertiary retentions and protentions, if *Theos* is understood as divine *Sprachgesang* that creates the world, the space for bodies, then I believe it would be difficult for theology to play such a reforming role. As such, theology interpreted as *Sprachgesang* is always exclusive; the *Sprachgesange* is always violent since it is the language of the powerful, those who decide what is good, who is right and who the enemy is and who, therefore, needs to be excluded. A *Sprachgesang* that brings about a particular world is the myth, the logos, of the powerful. It is for this reason that Nancy seeks a different kind of myth, but not a non-myth, as a non-myth would only be the myth of the absence of a myth and again it would be related to power. Therefore, what is needed is not a non-myth, but rather an insistent interruption of myth, even the interruption of interruption, which Nancy has found in literature (see Nancy 1991, 61). Literature, poetics, as sacred and therefore perhaps a different interpretation of the divine, opens the door to a different kind of theology.

A myth interrupted, or a logos interrupted, a religion interrupted, is not necessarily interrupted by something, as that something would need its own myth to become visible, to be revealed or unconcealed. Therefore, the myth is not interrupted by something outside of itself, but is interrupted by the realization that all is myth (see Nancy 1991, 52). It is interrupted at that precise moment when one realizes that all is myth and that one cannot escape myth, nor should one seek to escape it, as any attempt at escape would only become possible through a myth of escape.

## Myth interrupted and the impossible possibility of community and/or church

Myth interrupted is the realisation that all is myth. Would such an interruption have the possibility of bringing about a new type of community or a world? Would the myth-interrupted be a kind of *Sprachgesang*? No, because the moment it carries out (*Austrag*) it would no longer be an interruption, but a myth itself. Can identity, community, be found in myth-interrupted? Maybe this is the challenge for the Church, to be an interrupted community, or an interruptive community *in* the world, but not *of* the world (see Meylahn 2012). It would need to be a community that has an identity, but only an identity as sinners (idolaters), sinners who are only (*sola*) justified through Christ, grace alone and faith alone. It would need to be a community whose identity is always and only the identity of the sinner (idolatry), but justified, *simul justus et peccator*. But its justification would be a “foreign” justification, as it would come through grace, faith and Christ alone.

Nancy offers an interesting interpretation of a different politics, different than the politics of Carl Schmitt, who understands being *in* common as “no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity and sharing this (narcissistic) ‘lack of identity.’ This is what philosophy calls ‘finitude’” (Nancy 1991, xxxviii).

I would disagree with Nancy and argue that a lack of identity is impossible, as it is contrary to the noetic spirit of being human, and a “lack of identity” could also become an identity: a nihilistic identity. Therefore, I find his idea of myth interrupted more useful than the idea of a lack of identity.

Yet, Nancy unpacks what he means by a lack of identity, saying that he is not seeking to establish a myth of lack-of-identity. Accordingly, “finitude, or the infinite lack of infinite identity, if we can risk such a formulation, is what makes a community. That is, community is made or is formed by the retreat or by the subtraction of something: this something, which would be the fulfilled infinite identity of community is what I call its ‘work’” (Nancy 1991, xxxviii-xxxix). A community’s constant striving, its *tekhnē*, which is the individuation of the community, is an unfinished task. Human beings cannot escape this task nor be liberated from it, the eternal return to idolatry, but the realization, that all is myth is a liberation in itself, but one without the liberation becoming a new myth. It is a liberation not from or to something, but liberation as continuous



interruption, without the interruption becoming myth.

For Nancy, community is made from that which retreats from it. This is the work of the being-in-common. This is the work of the political, which can never be presupposed, but which is continually exposed, if the political is the binding into what is common or binding into the *work* of the being-in-common. The work of the political is the work of being exposed—exposed to the “voice of interruption”, of “shattered” love, of the “coming” of “joy” and of “places” of “dislocation”, and it is always the same bond (the *bonding* of the political work): “a bond that forms ties without attachments, or even less fusion, of a bond that unbinds by binding, that reunites through the infinite exposition of an irreducible finitude” (Nancy 1991:xl).

The work of the political is the in-common of the community as it continually redefines itself via the victims of previous definitions.

In this sense, community becomes resistant to exclusion, resistant to the belief that one has incarnated (immanence) the essence or the true identity of oneself or one’s community.

According to Nancy, “community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence. Consequently, community is transcendence: but ‘transcendence’ which no longer has any ‘sacred’ meaning, signifying precisely a resistance to immanence (resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violence of subjectivity)” (Nancy 1991, 35).

Nancy refers to the interruption of myth as literature, writing. In his words: “literature interrupts itself: this is, essentially, what makes it literature (writing) not myth. Or, better, what interrupts itself – discourse or song, gesture or voice, narrative or proof – *that* is literature (or writing). Precisely what interrupts or suspends its own mythos (that is to say, its *logos*)” (Nancy 1991, 72).

For Badiou, an exception is required, as already mentioned earlier, and the exception is that which breaks open the democratic materialism (language-body dualism). This exception is, for Badiou, truth (2009, 4). Truth alone is not enough, however; it needs subjects who are faithful to the truth (see Badiou 2009, 53).

For Laruelle, these truths together with their faithful subjects are probably too mythic, and therefore, he rather seeks generic victims, victim-in-person (see Laruelle 2015a). The focus on generic vic-

tims rather than on actual or particular historic victims is important because historic victims would only be identifiable in the language of their specific myth, which allows them to appear, or to be, unconcealed. Yet, historical or actual victims always provide an occasion to think about the victim-in-person. Generic victims would perhaps be similar to what Laclau refers to, in reference to Hegel’s “peoples without history”, as being entirely outside historicity (Laclau 2007, 40).

They are equivalent to what Lacan called *caput mortuum*, the residue left in a tube after a chemical experiment. The break involved in this kind of exclusion is more radical than the one that is inherent in the antagonistic one: while antagonism still presupposes some sort of discursive inscription, the kind of outside that I am now discussing presupposes exteriority not just to something within a space of representation, but to the space of representation as such. (Laclau 2007, 140)

Historic victims or faithful subjects can only become visible (unconcealed) through their own myths, and it is for this reason that one should seek out literature rather than myth. Literature is fiction that is aware that it is fiction and does not present itself as logos, truth, or founding myth. This is also what Laruelle (2015b) sought in his Christo-fiction. The Christo-fiction provides the literature that introduces the victims, the faithful subjects, but without these victims and faithful subjects becoming again myths of a new world order, but rather the occasion for continuous interruptions of the myths of the current world orders.

Following Nancy, as already mentioned earlier, I turn towards literature or writing, and in a sense the holiness or the sacredness of literature as being a divine space: it transcends the current world order, but without becoming present, incarnate, within its own *Sprachgesang*, but rather by disrupting, interrupting, the power of the dominant *Sprachgesang*.

Divine places without gods, with no god, are spread out everywhere around us, open and offered to our coming, to our going or to our presence, given up or promised to our visitation, to frequentation by those who are not men either, but who are there, in these places: ourselves, alone, out to meet that which we are not, and which the gods for their part have never been. These places, spread out everywhere, yield up and orient new spaces: they are no longer temples, but rather the opening up and the pacing out of the temples themselves, a dis-location with no reserve henceforth, with no more sacred enclosures – other tracks, other ways, other places for all who are there. (Nancy 1991, 50)



What would the praxis be in such interrupted myths? What would the praxis be of such literature? Badiou argues for faithful subjects, subjects who are faithful to literature alone without becoming fanatics of a new myth. This is maybe only possible if one turns to a praxis of love.

Love does not call for a certain kind of thinking, or for a thinking of love, but for thinking in essence and in its totality. And this is because thinking most properly speaking, is love. It is the love for that which reaches experience; that is to say, for that aspect of being that gives itself to be welcomed. (Nancy 1991, 84)

As Nancy nicely explains, love is the extreme movement, beyond the self, of a being reaching completion” (Nancy 1991, 86).

## Conclusion

In this sense, theology, the praxis of being a church, the praxis of being a *reforming* church, could provide the world with the literature of love so as to continually interrupt and disrupt the spaces, and through such disruptions, *reform* spaces. The Church’s role could be, as a community of the literature of love, to interrupt spaces so that these spaces are opened up by offering hospitality to previously excluded bodies. What is important here is the notion of a literature (fiction) of love and not an orthodoxy or an orthopraxis, as any kind of correct dogma or correct praxis is exclusive. With this story of love (Christ’s love), the Church can be an instrument of disruption, even as it continually reforms itself.

## References

- Badiou, Alain. 2009. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*. Translated by Alberto Toscano, London: Continuum.
- Caputo, John, D. 1993. *Demythologizing Heidegger*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. 2011. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari Felix. 2009. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London: Penguin Books.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2009. *The Beast & the Sovereign, Volume 1*. Translated G. Bennington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2000. *Of hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1971. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Alfred Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 2007. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Laruelle, François. 2015a. *General Theory of Victims*. Translated by Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet. Cambridge: Polity.
- Laruelle, François. 2015b. *Christo-Fiction: The Ruins of Athens and Jerusalem*. Translated Robin Machay. New York: Columbia University Press
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1985. *The View from Afar*. Translated Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss. New York: Basic Books.
- Meylahn, Johann Albrecht. 2012. *The Church Emerging From the Cracks: A Church in, but not of the World*. Bloemfontein: Sun Media.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1991. *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Otto, Walter, Friedrich. 1962. *Mythos und Welt*. Stuttgart: Klett.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. *Time and Narrative, vol. 1*. Translated Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 2015. *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Katastrophé of the sensible*. Translated by Barnaby Norman. Cambridge: Polity.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 2014. *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*. Translated by Barnaby Norman. Cambridge: Polity Press.