

Public Theology, Violence, and Responsibility

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Friends, we need to talk about violence.

I know, you're probably thinking, we talk about violence all the time. We deplore the violence visited upon other people's bodies,¹ the rhetorical violence which justifies it,² the epistemic violence with which its victims are prevented from claiming knowledge or the privilege of interpretation over their own experiences.³ Less frequently, though slightly more than never,

¹ See, e.g., the essays collected in Andrew R. Murphy (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, Malden: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2011; Michael Jerryson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; and especially Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 77: “It is not easy for humans to kill others. To participate in mass killing in war is destructive of individual psyches and of the larger community’s mental health”.

² See, e.g., Kelly Denton-Borhaug “The Language of ‘Sacrifice’ in the Buildup to War: A Feminist Rhetorical and Theological Analysis”, *Journal of Religion & Popular Culture* 15 (2007), 2, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.15.1.002>; Vincent Lloyd, “The Rhetoric of Political Theology”, *Political Theology* 13 (2012), 741–750, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v13i6.741>; Yvonne Friedman, “Christian Hatred of the Other: Theological Rhetoric vs. Political Reality”, Cordelia Heß & Jonathan Adams (eds.), *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015, 187–201, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110346473-014>.

³ See, e.g., Courtney T. Goto, “Experiencing Oppression: Ventriloquism and Epistemic Violence in Practical Theology”, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2015-0051>; Ian James Kidd, “Epistemic Injustice and Religion”, *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd, José Medina & Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, 386–396, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315212043>; Jo Henderson-Merrygold “Queer(y)ing the Epistemic Violence

some of us might even talk about the spiritual violence of forced forgiveness.⁴

But, friends, nearly all this talk about violence is about the violence committed by and enacted against other people – even if those people are our ancestors, fellow citizens, or coreligionists. We deplore it from a safe distance; we are able to deplore it precisely because of the safety that distance grants us. This is academic neutrality:⁵ the safety distance grants us is not merely safety from violence itself, but safety from being implicated in violence, as either victims or perpetrators.

Except, of course, it isn't. The epistemic violence we deplore from a safe distance is the foundation on which the walls of neutrality we rely upon to shield us from being implicated in that violence are built. It is our very sense of academic responsibility: to objectivity, empiricism, the view-from-nowhere;⁶ to the idea of the academy as a meritocracy, our own highly privileged positions as somehow earned; to the maintenance of the institution of the academy as such and the moulding of the generations that come after us

of Christian Gender Discourses”, *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion*, eds. Caroline Byth, Emily Colgan & Katie B. Edwards, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 97–117, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72685-4_6; Sarojini Nadar & Tinyiko Maluleke, “Of Theological Burglaries and Epistemic Violence: Black Theology, Decoloniality, and Higher Education”, *The Ecumenical Review* 74 (2022), 541–560, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12730>.

⁴ See, e.g., Rebecca Ann Parker & Rita Nakishema Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002; Hellen Moon, *Liberalism and Colonial Violence: Charting a New Genealogy of Spiritual Care*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023.

⁵ The uses and misuses of “academic neutrality” are widely chronicled, including an extensive treatment in Stephen H. Aby & James Kuhn, *Academic Freedom: A Guide to the Literature*, London: Greenwood, 2000; see also Avner De-Shalit, “Teaching Political Philosophy and Academic Neutrality”, *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 1 (2005), 97–120, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878505049837>. For the role of academic neutrality in obscuring academic complicity in conflict situations, see e.g. Nathan Katz, “Academic Neutrality’ and Contemporary Tibetan Studies”, *The Tibet Journal* 8 (1983), 6–9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43300104>; Joan Wallach Scott, et al., “On Academic Boycots”, *Academe* 92 (2006), 39–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40253493>; Anne de Jong, “The Gaza Freedom Flotilla: Human Rights, Activism and Academic Neutrality”, *Research Ethics and Social Movements*, eds. Kevin Gillan & Jenny Pickerill, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315742403>; Hilary Aked, “Whose University? Academic freedom, neoliberalism, and the rise of ‘Israel Studies’”, *Enforcing Silence: Academic Freedom, Palestine and the Criticism of Israel*, eds. David Landy, Ronit Lentin & Conor McCarthy, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 39–66; Arsène Saparov, “Normalizing conflict – concealing genocide? Expert neutrality in the Armenian Azerbaijani conflict”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2024), 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2384138>. Concerns about neutrality also appear across a number of the chapters in Rian Venter & Francois Tolmie (eds.), *Transforming Theological Knowledge: Essays on Theology and the University After Apartheid*, Bloemfontein: UJ Press, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920382261>.

⁶ See the classic critique in Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding, 2004, 81–101.

to the service of that institution; to our work as vocation,⁷ rather than merely labour – it is this sense of responsibility which entangles us, unavoidably, in the violence which we constantly deplore, and which turns our deplored from the ethical stance we wish it to be into a denial of reality which betrays every single value we think we stand for. And worse than betraying our values, through this denial we betray one another. Constantly. Insescapably. Irrevocably.

How dare we?

I have been thinking about these things – the relentless violence of the world,⁸ our unavoidable implication in it, and the very specific ways that our sense of academic responsibility makes us not merely implicated bystanders⁹ but direct agents of violence – a great deal over the past year, from the 7th of October when the violence of the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank that most of us have learned to treat as background noise, a constant low frequency hum that serves as the backdrop to the sharper, more arresting screams from other, more novel sites of violence that we haven't spent our lifetimes learning to unhear, from when that low hum found harmonic resonance with the screams of 797 murdered Israeli civilians and 251 hostages. I've been thinking about it in the face of constant, relentless demand from both colleagues and institutions that we should only listen to one note in that chord of terror, and I hear it in the demand I make of my own students that they understand the context. There are few things that soothe the academic soul more effectively than understanding context – and there is so very much context for us to understand. Context, I think, is the wax we stuff in our ears to drown out the sounds of screaming so we can better tend to our vocation. It is the rose-coloured glasses that we wear to help us unsee the blood on our own hands.

⁷ The distinction between labour and vocation, as well as its role in the precaritisation of academic jobs, has been the subject of extensive commentary, such that once again I can only gesture at a few examples: George Morgan & Julian Wood, "The 'academic career' in the era of flexploitation" in Emiliana Armano, Arianna Bove & Annalisa Murgia (eds.) *Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods: Subjectivities and Resistance*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315593838>; Ruth Barcan, "Paying Dearly for Privilege: Conceptions, Experiences and Temporalities of Vocation in Academic Life", *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 26 (2017), 105–121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1358207>; Fabian Cannizzo, "'You've Got to Love What You Do': Academic Labour in a Culture of Authenticity", *The Sociological Review* 66 (2018), 91–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026116681439>.

⁸ Again, this is a widely discussed concept but see especially Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

⁹ See Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998, 76.

It is also the only thing we have to hang on to. What distinguishes theology from other disciplines, is, after all, our context: the consciousness we carry of speaking from and into a specific tradition.¹⁰ What distinguishes good theology from bad theology is the way we put that consciousness to use: do we draw on our tradition as a resource that helps us to meet together and work together in the world as it is – the world which Hannah Arendt reminds us is preconditioned on the basic fact of human plurality?¹¹ Or do we use it to fence ourselves in, as an excuse to avoid honest conversation and collaboration with people who do not share our same starting points? Where do we draw the line between speaking from a tradition and epistemologically privileging arguments that favour the tradition from which we speak? When we insist on the importance of understanding context, are we really willing to enter into the context of others? Or are we just eager to make our context understood by everyone else?

In Pirke Avot, Akiva ben Mahalalel says:

Mark well three things to save yourself from error: know from where you come, and where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning. From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, of worm and of maggot. Before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning? Before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.¹²

I was told to be bold, here (an instruction which I suspect Ulrich might be regretting by this point), so let's go for it: I think that it is very dangerous for theologians to take ben Mahalalel at his word. Specifically, I worry about the way that we use the idea of God, and particularly the idea of God as the final judge. I think we use the idea of eschatological judgement to get us off the hook – to defer to the next world, if it exists, accountability for the violence that we do in this one.¹³ We do this especially when we talk

¹⁰ See Alana Vincent, “The Necessity of a Jewish Systematic Theology”, *STK* 92 (2016), 159–170.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, New York: Doubleday, 1958, 8.

¹² *Avot* 3:1.

¹³ E.g. Melissa Raphael, “‘Cover not our Blood with thy Silence’: Sadism, Eschatological Justice and Female Images of the Divine”, *Feminist Theology* 3 (1995), 85–105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509500000808>; Hans Boersma, “Eschatological Justice and the Cross: Violence and Penal Substitution”, *Theology Today* 60 (2003), 186–199, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360306000204>; Alan Revering, “Eschatology in the Political Theory of Michael Walzer”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33 (2005), 91–116, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0384-9694.2005.00184.x>; Roko Kerovec, “The Embrace Of Justice And Peace: Concerning The Tension Between Retributive And Eschatological Justice”, *Kairos: Evangelical Journal*

about violence as sacred, or religious; we invoke the idea of God as a way of cloaking this violence with the air of inevitability, rather than confronting violence as a choice.

A human choice.

Our own choice.

The day before the event for which this talk was prepared, I was at Umeå, teaching our Grundkurs moment Judendom och Islam, reading together with my students accounts of the Akedah. And we read Bereshit Rabbah, where after the angel intervenes to save Isaac's life, God tells Abraham "when I said to you: "Take you your son", I did not say: "Slaughter him", but rather, "take him up". I said this to you in affection. You have taken him up and fulfilled My words, now take him down".¹⁴ In this telling, the violence in the story is presented clearly as belonging to Abraham – not an expression of his piety or obedience, not an intrinsic part of his human nature, not inevitable, not unavoidable; what this telling makes clear is how many opportunities Abraham had to do something different, to ask more questions, to register a protest, and how many ways he chose not to.

How do we do theology in times like these? The same way, it turns out, as we have always done: with blood on our hands and the sound of screaming in our ears. Some of the blood is our own – but not all; not even most of it. Some of the screams are ours, too. Where do we come from? Blood and screaming. To where do we go? That depends on the choices we make in this moment. To whom are we accountable? Every single person who came before us and will come after us. Our task is precisely not to fiddle about with the sacred, the raised above or set-apart,¹⁵ but rather to meet that awful, fearsome, and endless responsibility: to stand accountable before one another. ▲

of *Theology* 3 (2009), 9–22, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/215453>; Ilsup Ahn, "Deconstructing Eschatological Violence Against Ecology: Planting Images of Ecological Justice", *CrossCurrents* 67 (2017), 458–475, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26605817>; Lisa Marie Bowens, "God and Time: Exploring Black Notions of Prophetic and Apocalyptic Eschatology", *T&T Clark Handbook of African American Theology*, Antonia Michelle Daymond, Frederick L. Ware & Eric Lewis Williams (eds.), London: T&T Clark, 2019, 213–224; Michael P. Jaycox, "Nussbaum, Anger, and Racial Justice: On the Epistemological and Eschatological Limitations of White Liberalism", *Political Theology* 21 (2020), 415–433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2020.1747810>.

¹⁴ *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:8.

¹⁵ E.g. senses 2 and 3 as identified in Matthew T. Evans, "The Sacred: Differentiating, Clarifying and Extending Concepts", *Review of Religious Research* 45 (2003), 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512498>.

SUMMARY

This article argues that the main task of public theology in the contemporary context is to reject appeals to divine agency as legitimate responses to the violence of the world.