

# On Ghosts and Bodies

## A Response to Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback

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I would like to thank Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback for this immensely rich and suggestive discussion of the relationship between philosophy and religion and of a religion without religiosity. As a kind of supplement, which picks up and perhaps challenges some of the themes of Schuback's paper, I would like to say something about ghosts and bodies. Maybe this also works as a way to show some of a theologian's hesitations in the face of the recently timed philosophical «return to religion».

### On Ghosts

First, ghosts. In the Danish Film-producer Lars von Trier's TV-series from 1994 and 1997, *The Kingdom*, part I and II, we meet, as one of the main characters in the plot, a hospital, *Rigshospitalet* in Copenhagen. *Rigshospitalet* as a building as well as an institution could be seen as an allegory of modern society. It is described, by a voice-over in the beginning of the series, as a bastion of modernity. *Rigshospitalet* is the place where human life is defined. Hospital doctors, researchers and «the finest brains using the most advanced technology» inhabit it. It should, moreover, be a scientific guard against superstition and ignorance. But, the voice-over continues, the basement and the walls of *Rigshospitalet* are starting to crack. Perhaps there has been a little too much pride and arrogance on behalf of the scientists, and the building is coming apart. «No living soul knows it yet, but the portals of the kingdom are reopening», and ghosts are starting to well in.

As in modern society, we find in the top floors of *Rigshospitalet* — according to von Trier — medical science and knowledge together with technology in an ongoing struggle against occultism, superstition, old tradition and pure stupidity. On the bottom floor, however, things are different. Here we meet all sorts of alternative medicine, superstition, religion, ghosts, demons, but also human pain, friendship and emotion. The trouble is that the ghosts are transgressing these borders between high and low, science and superstition, knowledge and sentiments, and thus, are taking over the hospital. What we see in this uncanny and hilarious TV-series is the spiritual war that has been declared by the doctors, a war between science and technology, on the one hand, and ghosts on the other. The doctors are struggling to keep the borders and the floors clean, neat and well defined, but the façade keeps cracking and the ghosts keep welling in, assisted by some of the patients. It is a battle that cannot be won, but in their frustration the doctors use every weapon conceivable, even if this means crossing some of the self-same borders they are defending, including occultism, secret (male) societies for the defence of science and outright lies and breaking of the Hippocratic oath.

Why is the battle not possible to win? To put it quite bluntly: I think the battle is not winnable, because modernity has always been haunted by its ghosts, by what it likes to repress from its consciousness, both historically and at present. Ghosts are ghosts just because they have resisted salvation and transcendence,

whether theological or scientific. The ghosts in von Trier's *The Kingdom* is the other of modernity, which keeps coming back, which it has always toyed with but, which might well strike back at it now when modernity's walls are tumbling down and its borders are being transgressed. One could well say that ghosts are a product of modernity; they are a kind of secular and parodic trace of a theological world that is lost to modernity's particular point of view. Thus, von Trier's *The Kingdom* is not really about the return of God or of religion, but about the malaise of modernity, perhaps even the insanity or the fall of modernity. As the voice-over says, no living being knows what there is to see when the portals of the kingdom swing open — no-one actually knows whose kingdom we are entering.

## On Bodies

Second, bodies. Let me here start with a question: What is a religion? Notice that my question is not «what is religion?» or «what is the religious?» Even though I don't want to deny the legitimacy of the second or the third question, I would like to suggest that my first question is the more primary. The question of what constitutes a religion is a question that seeks for a particular set of practices and discourses that is said to be necessary to identify a particular religion as this particular religion. These practices and discourses are the «body» of a religion, that is, its historical and social existence as an organized site.<sup>1</sup> However, the question for a religion has not always been put as a question for its body, but in modernity rather as a question for its spirit.

Since modernity there has been a search for the «essence» of the particular religions or of the religious in and of itself. The famous Lutheran German historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack held a series of lectures a hundred years ago published as *Das Wesen des Christentums*, which mainly considered Christianity's central essence, which, according to von Harnack, is not

what the creeds say about Christ, but the simple faith of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> In his lectures, von Harnack stressed the moral side of Christianity to the exclusion of all that is doctrinal. Von Harnack's thesis about the essence of Christianity was, not unexpectedly, severely criticized by his more theologically conservative colleagues. To make a long story short, the problem with both von Harnack and his conservative critics is the very modern tendency to interpret Christianity as a particular set of doctrines or moral principles rather than as a living body of practices and discourses. The question of faith often becomes a question of quantity of belief, where more liberally inclined theologians, as von Harnack, would choose the minimum, and more conservative theologians would choose the maximum.

Interesting here is not the half-truths uttered by both sides of the controversy, but rather the changing function of creeds and beliefs. Traditionally, faith was both a gift from God and a virtue to be cultivated in and through the body politics of the Church. Faith, of course, had its noetic aspects, but was not confined to the conscious adherence to a particular set of doctrines by the individual. It was more something like the whole human being's response — both as an «individual» person and as a social creature — to the divine, in his or her particular embodiment in space and time. In the modern Western world, however, faith becomes, more often than not, privatized. The gradual decomposition of the different bodies of faith meant at the same time the spiritualization of faith. Modernisation meant the marginalisation of particular spaces, bodies, practices and discourses; as a substitute for the marginalised religions, modernity invented religion, which, as modernity's other, always has returned to haunt modernity.<sup>3</sup>

Even «mysticism» could be said to be a child of modernity. The early modernity singled out a particular discourse of the mystics in distinction

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michel de Certeau, «The Weakness of Believing: From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit», *The Certeau Reader*. Graham Ward (ed.). Blackwells, Oxford 2000, 215.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. 2. Aufl. Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, Gütersloh 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1993.

from theological discourses, and thus produced a particular form of being religious, namely as a mystic. In the sixteenth century, at the latest, the mystic self withdraws itself from the public space of Church and society into an inner citadel. The mystical discourse narrates an existential drama between God and the soul, rather than the redemption of the world, and thus, mystics is born as something separate from theology. This happens when, in Michel de Certeau's phrase, «the world is no longer perceived as *spoken* by God» but rather «has become opacified, objectified, and detached from its supposed speaker».<sup>4</sup> For Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich, the choice was not between theology and spirituality, between ecclesial exteriority and mystical interiority, between the body and the spirit. One could hardly have the one without the other. But even for the early modern mystics the interior mystical spirit was not autonomous from the exterior body; the existential drama of the modern mystics was still, if they were Christians, a particular Christian drama not reducible to the more universal or abstract category of «mysticism» (which does not rule out mutual influences between traditions). The idea of a mysticism transcending all doctrinal issues between different religions is a quite recent invention. (Although I sympathize with the concern for world peace that often is a corollary of this view, I wonder if this kind of global religion has not again surrendered the body, and thus a source of resistance towards global consumerism.) As one authority on the history of mysticism, Bernard McGinn, puts it: «No mystics (at least before the [twentieth] century) believed in or practiced mysticism.»<sup>5</sup>

To start with the question «What is *a* religion?» or perhaps even «What is *this* religion?» is to start with the question of the vanished body. If we could find our way back to some knowledge of the body, perhaps we could lay some

ghosts to rest. Even though, as I mentioned earlier, I would not wish to deny the importance of the modern question after the religious as such, I think it needs to be said that our abstractions are dependent on particular historical religious practices.<sup>6</sup> I would like to suggest that our question is not just a question of lack of place for religion in modernity, but also a question of the lack or uncertainties of bodies. Is it a ghostly body or the body of a real living faith that we are talking about when we are talking about religion? The investigation of historical traditions could perhaps let us treat the question of what it is that is returning or not in the return of religion with more precision. But this leaves us — theologians as well as philosophers — somewhere between sociology and speculation (not that these two are so far apart). At least we would then heed the warning of von Triers *The Kingdom*: «No living soul knows it yet, but the portals of the kingdom are reopening».



<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, 188.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*. The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. New York: Crossroad, New York 1991, xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. Religion and Postmodernism. Mark C. Taylor (ed.). University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1995) and Thomas A. Carlson, «The Binds that Tie the Ethical and the Religious: Philosophy of Religion after Derrida», *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 74:3 (1998), 132-141.