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## FIGHTING HEGEMONY, SAVING THE EVENT: WHY THEOLOGISE WITH JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD AND POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY?\*

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MARTIN KOČÍ

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores reasons for theologising in dialogue with contemporary postmodern philosophy. Elaborating on a particular instance of a theological engagement with Jean-Francois Lyotard, I argue that theology is capable of creatively reflecting on the very question of its own mission. What can we learn from Lyotard and his thought? And more generally, why should (fundamental) theology take contemporary postmodern philosophy seriously and what are the consequences of such an engagement? The offered answers will suggest the concept of thinking as the path of authentic and plausible theology in a postmodern context.

### Keywords

Lyotard; Fundamental Theology; Philosophy; Postmodernism; Theological Method

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The question of why theologise in dialogue with someone implies the question of why theologise at all. Addressing this arduous task through the mediation of Jean-François Lyotard may sound beyond the common discourse. Although there has been recently recognised a certain proximity between theology and contemporary thought under the rubric of the theological turn in continental philosophy, the majority still hesitates or even rejects the relevance of postmodern philosophical thinking for theology *en bloc* for its alleged relativism, liberalism, and even nihilism. Moreover, the authors who

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belong to the theological turn (such as Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien) are, at least to a certain extent, attuned to the religious note. In the case of Lyotard, however, the theologian meets an entirely overwhelming critique of Christianity and its foundations. Despite this, the present essay argues that if theology fails to notice or even intentionally neglects Lyotard, it will miss a unique opportunity to reflect on the very question of its own mission, that is, *why theologise*. I believe it is the case that the focus on reasons for theological engagement with Lyotard will unfold general motives for theologising as such.

The argument proceeds by beginning with a brief review of the (mis)uses of Lyotard in theology, which will provide us with the contextual framework for my thesis. The central part of the essay will focus on the core of Lyotard's venture, which is, first, the critique of hegemonic master narratives, second, the refigured idea of truth drawn from the preceding critique and, third, the presentation of the event of the unrepresentable. Finally, I will address the key question: What can theology learn from Lyotard and his thought? And, more generally, why should (fundamental) theology take contemporary postmodern philosophy seriously and what are the consequences of such an engagement? I propose that this inquiry into the heart of postmodern philosophy – for Lyotard is the one to whom we owe the introduction of the term 'postmodern' to philosophical discourse – ultimately touches upon the very question of the 'why' of theology.

## 1. Lyotard and Theology

Lyotard is known for his contribution with regard to, first, the analysis of the postmodern condition and, second, the devastating criticism of hegemonic narratives (*grand récits*) among which he includes also the Christian narrative.<sup>1</sup> Despite Lyotard's explicit criticism of Christianity and, perhaps more importantly, his reconfiguration of the philosophical paradigm after modernity, the French theorist receives only a little reception in theology. If Lyotard appears in theological discussions, it is usually in the context of one of the following extremes.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993, 23–38; Id., *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1988, 159–161; Jean François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber. *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*. Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999.

Liotard is either resolutely rejected (he is a postmodernist, after all), or his thoughts are taken as assertions about the decline of modernity without any further reflection (and in this sense serves the purpose of Christian apologetics).

The argument for Lyotard in apologetics proceeds as follows. Lyotard criticises modernity and the modern narratives (of emancipation) as hegemonic and violent. The promise of the enlightened future ends up in hordes of victims and unimaginable yet real catastrophes (such as wars, totalitarian regimes, genocides). Lyotard's critique thus reveals the wrong development of modernity and its consequences. Fortunately, from the perspective of Christian apologetics, Christianity is ancient, that is, a pre-modern narrative. Therefore, Christianity not only escapes the postmodern criticism of the modern, but also offers the solution for the empty space of postmodernism which is left after Lyotard's devastating criticism. In other words, the return to the pre-modern Christian narrative, which is surely a grand narrative but of a different kind than those hegemonic narratives of modernity, will remedy the lack of orientation after the collapse of modernity and even answers the questions left open by postmodern criticism. This position can be associated mainly with some theologians of the evangelical tradition. For example, Stanley Grenz restores and re-narrates Lyotard according to the purposes which serve the purpose to attack everything but Christianity, which he exempts from any critique.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Grenz completely misses the point because he focuses on the aspect of something being modern whereas Lyotard's point is the problematic nature of any kind of overwhelming narrativity with the tendency to rule out other narratives. Similarly, James K. Smith finds in Lyotard an ally in the polemic against the secular world (which attacks religion and tries to push Christianity out of the public square), while omitting Lyotard's critique of Christianity as a hegemonic narrative pushing out other religious as well as secular narratives.<sup>5</sup> In other words, this approach to Lyotard, while it can be the case with any philosopher, follows a classical but problematic adagio: *philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

On the other side of the spectrum are authors who reject the relevance of Lyotard for theology. On the one hand, there are those who

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley J. Grenz. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> James K. A. Smith. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2006, 59–79.

reject any philosopher of the postmodern provenience *en bloc* because of the deemed relativism of the postmodern thought within. I find it pointless to comment on this position because it is meaningless to argue with someone's assertions in this. On the other hand, there are those authors who deal with Lyotard and come to the conclusion that his thought is incompatible with the theological discourse. The main representative of this position is Saskia Wendel.<sup>4</sup> Wendel focuses mainly on Lyotard's aesthetics, that is, on the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The latter stands for experiencing the absence in the presence when words, concepts, and language as such fall short. The sublime confronts us with the unrepresentable. Wendel worries that Lyotard stretches openness to the unrepresentable so far that it disregards basic philosophical questions, for example, the question of meaning. In this sense, it can be dangerous to interpret God through the mediation of the Lyotardian sublime. Continuing the line of philosophical aesthetics, Graham Ward reviews Lyotard's work from a theological perspective. In contrast to Wendel, Ward finds a proximity between the aesthetic experience in Lyotard and religious experience (of encountering the unrepresentable God) as it is treated, for example, in the theology of Karl Barth.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Ward does not elaborate on this intuition further and only indicates the possibility to bring Lyotard into theology. Nevertheless, in both cases (Wendel and Ward) we see a somewhat clear-cut division between philosophy and theology that leads, on the one hand, to the refusal to use a postmodern kind of philosophy theologically and, on the other, to acknowledge certain inspirations in the philosophical position, but judged from the side of theology. In one way or another, Lyotard is used in a reduced way while the core of his argument and his critical potential in his own right is overlooked.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from these few examples, Lyotard remains for the majority of theology simply a neglected source. This also applies to the vast and otherwise rich literature on the theological turn in contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> Saskia Wendel. *Jean-François Lyotard: Ästhetische Ethos*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Ward. *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*. London: Macmillan, 2000, 135–140. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230599055>.

<sup>6</sup> The misuses of Lyotard in theology are thoroughly mapped in Phillip E. Davis. St Lyotard on the Differend/Difference Love Can Make. In: Colby Dickinson (ed.). *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring 'the Holy' in Contemporary French Philosophy*. London: T&T Clark, 2013, 125–138.

philosophy. It seems that Lyotard stands in the shadow of his fellow-countryman Jacques Derrida, who is the main point of reference in theological explorations after (the end of) modernity.<sup>7</sup> The exception is the work of the Flemish theologian Lieven Boeve, who engages with Lyotard on a long-term basis and brings him into a critical-constructive theological discussion. The noteworthy result of his work is the monograph *Lyotard and Theology*, which makes a strong statement challenging the reluctance, on the most part of theology, to enter the dialogue with postmodern philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Boeve focuses on Lyotard's scattered but severely critical comments on Christianity and contextualises them into the whole of Lyotard's work. Boeve's perspicacious analysis shows that Lyotard does not primarily attack the institutional, that is, the ecclesial aspect of Christianity as one would expect to find in a post-Marxist thinker. From his close reading of Lyotard's 'most philosophical book' *The Differend*, Boeve draws the conclusion that the most problematic tenet of the Christian religion is its very theological foundations. In concrete terms, Lyotard thinks of the grand narrative of redemptive love which molds Christianity into a closed narrative. This form of Christianity, according to Boeve, is problematic for its universal pretention, teleological legitimation, the claim to absolute truth, and consequently the exclusion of difference. Although Boeve defends Christianity and makes clear that what Lyotard describes is not necessarily true of all Christianity, he self-critically admits that there are many historical instances which confirm the critical perspective of the French theorist. The Inquisition, religious wars, the feudal principle *cuius regio, eius religio*, or more recently the (anti)modernist crisis and bullying theologians for their opinions, aptly illustrates the problem. However, it is possible to discover the same kind of oppression through love in every-day life experience. For example, the debates on excluding remarried Christians from the sacramental life of the Church follow the same logic of an enclosed narrative of love. Without going into the detail of these

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<sup>7</sup> One immediately thinks about authors such as John D. Caputo and Richard Kearney who critically elaborate on Derrida's deconstruction, or about Jean-Luc Marion's dispute with Derrida over the notion of the gift. From a specifically theological perspective, we can refer to an introductory study of Stephen Shakespeare (*Derrida and Theology*. London: T&T Clark, 2009) and to critical constructive engagement with Derrida in Colby Dickinson's *Between the Canon and the Messiah*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Lieven Boeve. *Lyotard and Theology*. London: T&T Clark, 2014.

concrete examples, which are not the main focus of this text, against this background Boeve wants to remind us that Christianity is constantly in danger of lapsing into hegemonic patterns, paradoxically, in the name of love.

Having said that, it sounds challenging that Boeve interprets Lyotard and his postmodern critique of master narratives as a suitable tool for theology and finds there a contextually plausible theological practice without hegemonic and oppressive patterns. Boeve claims that a serious fundamental theological engagement with Lyotard will lead to new conception of difference, otherness and transcendence outside onto-theology and metaphysics.<sup>9</sup>

Before evaluating Boeve's thought-provoking reading of the father of philosophical postmodernism (which I will provide in the conclusion of this essay), I will turn my attention to the crucial aspects of Lyotard's own argument, being the main focus of this article, in order to address the question of 'why theologise with Lyotard' and, ultimately, 'why theologise' at all.

## 2. Lyotard's Philosophical Postmodernism

### 2.1 Master Narratives

Lyotard delineates the postmodern conditions in the following way: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.'<sup>10</sup> According to Lyotard, metanarratives play a decisive role in structuring the social and political reality.<sup>11</sup> Their main function is the *legitimisation* of 'institutions and practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking.'<sup>12</sup>

Religion was the main agent providing such a legitimisation in the pre-modern era. The reference to the transcendent reality called God, 'as was a custom of the day,'<sup>15</sup> functioned as the argument for or against actions, thoughts, and social forms. Modernity, however, challenged the religious means of legitimation in all its parts, and thus recon-

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<sup>9</sup> Boeve. *Lyotard and Theology*, 71.

<sup>10</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, xxiv.

<sup>11</sup> Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Confession of Augustine*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, 36.

figured the entire structure of society and determined new means of legitimation.<sup>14</sup> It is not to say that the legitimation based on religion suddenly ceased to function. The religious narrative continued to work but in changed conditions and in different manners as one of the modern metanarratives.

Modern legitimising strategies share a narrative structure with their pre-modern antecedents. In any case, there is a story. Yet there is a significant difference. Unlike pre-modern legitimising strategies, which Lyotard does not hesitate to call myths, modern metanarratives do not operate with a founding event in the past (for example, the creation of the world and its subsequent decadence), but grounds their function of legitimisation in a future. To put it more precisely, metanarratives pursue an Idea about the future, an Idea to be realised (for example, the classless society, maximal profit, the rationalisation of all means, eternal salvation). Hence, modern narratives implement complex philosophies of history to legitimise actions, thinking and power-structures, in accordance with their main, regulative Idea. The point of Lyotard's analysis is that these modern attempts of integration become totalising and hegemonic: in short, master narratives, meta-narratives, or grand narratives.<sup>15</sup>

The 'metanarratives' [...] are those that have marked modernity: progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labor, the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience, and even – if we include Christianity itself in modernity (in opposition to the classicism of antiquity) – the salvation of creature through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love. Hegel's philosophy totalizes all of these narratives and, in this sense, is itself a distillation of speculative modernity.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Certitude was a necessary requirement, a need stemming from the historical context of [modernity], immersed in wars, a lack of safety and certainty in which one parted with the relatively static society of the Middle Ages.' André Lascaris. Can I Say 'We'? An Encounter Between the Good Samaritan and Three Postmodern Philosophers. In: Stephan Erp and André Lascaris (eds.). *Who is Afraid of Postmodernism?: Challenging Theology for a Society in Search of Identity*. Münster: Lit, 2005, 21.

<sup>15</sup> I use all these terms interchangeably as it is a custom in the literature on Lyotard and his postmodern theory.

<sup>16</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 17–18.

Liotard identifies two modes of master narratives intertwining with each other: the philosophical-speculative and the political. Thus, a particular metanarrative is always a theory put into practice, or reverse-ly, a certain practice legitimised by theory. Knowledge, which in the case of master narratives equals a conviction of possessing the truth, is linked with the claim to exhaustive definitions of the good and the just. Theoretical discourse legitimises political praxis and, vice-versa, political power claims to possess a right knowledge. Everything is interconnected within the narrative. We are circling the circle and Lyotard argues that such grand encompassing theories of everything result in terror because they exclude heterogeneity, differences and, above all, conflicts.

In contrast to modern master narratives, which abruptly impose a predesigned consensus, Lyotard stresses conflicts and their importance for any meaningful discourse about the question of truth. The plurality of opinions on what is true, what should be done, what is just, what is wrong, etc., cannot but imply a clash. However, this is not an obstacle but a very condition of any debate. Master narratives exclude this heterogeneous – polemical – nature of reality. In Lyotard’s wording, the difference – *le differend* – is forgotten.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that the above listed discursive strategies not only forget but intentionally ignore and even delete heterogeneity in the name of one and only one ultimate truth – their truth. In order to enlighten this, I will turn to Lyotard’s language pragmatics.

## 2.2 Language Pragmatics

Liotard extensively elaborates on the use of language and its totalitarian pitfalls in his philosophical masterpiece *The Differend*, a book which is perhaps ‘too voluminous, too long, and too difficult.’<sup>18</sup> The main question reads clearly: what happens in language? The answer proves itself to be much more complicated.

For Lyotard, the default situation is that a *phrase* happens, the event of phrase takes a place. Every phrase belongs to a certain *phrase regimen* (e. g., descriptive, prescriptive, interrogative, etc.). Once there is a phrase, it is clear that some other phrase will follow. However,

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<sup>17</sup> ‘It is precisely this *forgetfulness of the differend* (of the event, the expectation, the ‘relative nothingness’) that produces the hegemonic, totalitarian and oppressive features of the master narrative as a discourse of an Idea’ Lieven Boeve. *Liotard and Theology*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard. *The Differend*, xv.

Lyotard insists that it is impossible to predict what phrase will be linked to the preceding one.

What determines linking then? Lyotard's answer is the *genre of discourse*. 'In the perspective of one discourse the linking is self-evident, and decisions are easily made because they are regulated in order to realize the goal in the most efficient way.'<sup>19</sup> The default situation of plurality naturally implies that there are many discourse genres with different goals and, therefore, many possible rules of linking. The point is not to list all possible linkages but to stress that the linking itself is unavoidable. One phrase, following one particular discourse genre, must win and overcome the others.

The unavoidability of linking causes the expectation. Lyotard calls this 'moment' *relative nothingness*. The question is which phrase and according to which rule will win the clash of discourses. This repeats itself with each new phrase again and again and provokes conflicts, the situation of *differend*.

That is the situation wherein one is first of all confronted with a number of possibilities of phrases that can be linked to a happened phrase, and, secondly, wherein one finds oneself without a general rule to decide which specific phrase will follow, is called a differend.<sup>20</sup>

The consciousness of differend does not deprive the event of its eventfulness. It does not mean that we find ourselves in the situation of resignation or even apathy with regard to what is and has to be said. Something must be said. A phrase will happen anyway because silence is also a phrase. Nevertheless, Lyotard attributes much more importance to that what was not said because it could not be said. In other words, the function of the differend is the appeal 'not to forget [...] all those phrases which will never be actualized once one phrase realizes the linking.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Lieven Boeve, J.-F. Lyotard's Critique of Master Narratives. Toward a Postmodern Political Theology. In: Georgie De Schrijver (ed.). *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*. Leuven: Peeters, 1998, 300.

<sup>20</sup> Lieven Boeve. Bearing Witness to the Differend. A Model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context. *Louvain Studies* 20, 1995, 370. <https://doi.org/10.2145/LS.20.4.556011>.

<sup>21</sup> Lieven Boeve, J.-F. Lyotard's Critique of Master Narratives. Toward a Postmodern Political Theology. In: Georgie De Schrijver (ed.). *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*. Leuven: Peeters, 1998.

However, the differend is not the only strategy of linking phrases. In fact, we are accustomed to comprehending language rather in terms of *litige*. Similar to the previous case, this term refers to a particular situation of dealing with the conflict of eventual phrases. In general, the *litige* is the equivalent for judicial proceedings. Applied to language, this presupposes that there is someone, perhaps the judge, who possesses a binding rule which prescribes linking. Practically, this means that one dominant discourse genre, a meta-narrative, suppresses the others. The default conflict is abridged. This is what happens in meta-narratives because they exclude everything but the phrases following the logic and goals of their narration. It is predictable which phrases will follow and which phrases will be erased (out of memory). ‘A litigation thus undoes the linking of its event character,’ says Boeve while interpreting Lyotard’s standpoint.<sup>22</sup>

Master narratives claim they possess the rule of linking, the only correct, objective rule of the game that is plausible in all instances. The problem with this logic is that it excludes any criticism formulated outside a particular narrative because the rules of linking either prove the opponents to be wrong or do not even allow them to speak. Master narratives admit only one voice – their own – which unavoidably suppresses the differend. Master narratives pretend to possess ultimate interpretations of reality while they situate themselves above reality. The story-teller speaks from the position of having a bird’s eye view, the Big Brother who oversees everything.

Hence, instead of language *pragmatics*, Davis prefers the term *mechanics*.<sup>23</sup> And, indeed, language degenerates into a kind of mechanics where the linking is technical, cold, serving a purpose and with deathly odour. The event is mastered, violated, raped. The hegemony of master narratives does not allow anything to happen which is not under control. The very question of happening is forbidden.<sup>24</sup> It is the ban on the event, for Lyotard: simply evil.

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<sup>22</sup> Lieven Boeve. *Lyotard and Theology*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Phillip E. Davis. *St Lyotard on the Differend/Difference*, 123–126.

<sup>24</sup> ‘A “great story” is a closed unit, in which the sentences are connected in a way that both the audience and the storyteller, a liberating whole is created and nothing unexpected can “happen”’: André Lascaris. *Can I Say ‘We’?*, 24.

By evil, I understand, and one can only understand, the incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt of Being.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, Lyotard's postmodern critique reveals two basic things. First, master narratives qualify the differend within its own finality and form exhaustive narrative structures. Second, master narratives are totalitarian, oppressive and excluding those who resist linking phrases according to their regulative rules. In short, modern master narratives result in a totalitarian hegemony. In what follows, I will argue that the postmodern critique of totalitarian hegemony does not decline into relativism, as it is often with haste suggested, but rather exercises the passion for truth.

### 3. The Idea of Truth

Meta-narratives are total philosophies of history which prescribe the rules. These rules do not apply only for the linking of phrases. They also qualify ethical regulations, epistemological standards and political actions. In the logic of master narratives, everything must function according to the prescribed unquestionable rules. In other words, these rules decide what is true and what is not.

The decisive logic behind master narratives is the Enlightenment belief in the emancipating power of reason confessing that human abilities are almost unlimited. Accordingly, a proper use of reason enables us to create a better world, the paradise on earth. The problem is that the promised emancipation will be accomplished only in the future and this future comes under the condition that humanity will serve an idea which supposedly will bring the future emancipation.

The thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are governed by an Idea (in the Kantian sense): the Idea of emancipation. It is, of course, framed in quite different ways, depending on what we call the philosophies of history, the grand narratives that attempt to organize this

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Differend*, 140. 'One can easily see what Lyotard feared when one thinks about the Nazi rule of linking all phrases and gestures according to the rule of "pure Aryan blood", or the Stalinist rule of linking according to the rule of "the worker's paradise" – ending in Auschwitz and the gulags respectively for those who resisted these grand narratives.' Phillip E. Davis. *St Lyotard on the Differend/Difference*, 127.

mass of events: the Christian narrative of the redemption of original sin through love; the *Aufklärung* narrative of emancipation from ignorance and servitude through knowledge and egalitarianism; the speculative narrative of the realization of the universal Idea through the dialectic of the concrete; the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation through the socialization of work; and the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty through technoindustrial development. [...] But in all of them, the givens arising from events are situated in the course of a history whose end, even if it remains beyond reach, is called universal freedom, the fulfillment of all humanity.<sup>26</sup>

The projects of emancipation can be characterised as the postulating of absolute knowledge by master narratives. The Enlightenment, for example, set up the goal to emancipate all humanity from ignorance. Science was supposed to lead the process of emancipation resulting in absolute control over nature and the freedom of humanity. Socialism promised to set workers free from exploitation. Socialist movements claimed to know the laws of nature (historical materialism) which simply contradict everything but the idea of the reign of the proletariat. In contrast, capitalist ideologists found the freedom of all humanity upon the idea of the liberal market free from any constraints and regulations. Although each modern grand narrative postulates a different definition of emancipation, they all have something in common: universalistic logic. Consequently, master narratives fight against each other since they promise to set free all humanity and tend to control the whole society. In short, a regulative Idea forces out rival ideas.

Even though Lyotard argues that different meta-narratives promote different regulative ideas, it seems that one fundamental idea operates behind any type of hegemonic discourse. The idea of a workers' paradise, the idea of a free exchange market, the idea of rational dominance over pre-critical ignorance, even the idea of Christian reciprocal love between God and the people are modalities of the Idea of Truth in possession. 'We' are right, while 'they' are wrong, therefore they are enemies, primitives, or heretics. This is a universal regulative idea, the Idea, behind all hegemonic discourses. Think of, for example, the case of communist totalitarian systems. The idea of a future workers' paradise is the truth of communism which

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<sup>26</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 24–25.

must be accomplished. Those who share this truth, those on the inside of the narrative, are comrades while those who dare to question the communist truth, those on the outside, are contra-revolutionaries, revanchists, and the class enemies. They are outsiders and traitors because they question the truth of the master narrative of red paradise. The very thought that this might be false, or not entirely right, is classified as high treason.<sup>27</sup>

Any challenge of the narrated truth deserves capital punishment without exceptions. Thinking historically, the events in Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, Poland 1980, and many others prove that the construction of meta-narratives, despite their promises, end up in totalitarian terror. ‘The passages promised by the great doctrinal syntheses end in bloody impasses.’<sup>28</sup> The aforementioned examples ended up in brutal military invasions and purges not because the story had fundamentally changed. The Hungarians, Czechoslovaks and Poles had not planned to substitute the master narrative of communism and the dream of socialist paradise for any other grand narrative. Their crime was that they dared to tell the story in their own way differing from its one irreversible version. Lyotard’s comment is resolute:

We have paid dearly for our nostalgia for the all and the one, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, for a transparent and communicable experience. Beneath the general demand for relaxation and appeasement, we hear murmurings of the desire to reinstitute terror and fulfill the phantasm of taking possession of reality. The answer is this: war on totality.<sup>29</sup>

What actually happens in totalitarian hegemony is that the event of truth is replaced by the Idea of truth. Nevertheless, according to Lyotard, truth belongs to the realm of the unrepresentable and not to the explanatory realm. The truth is an unphraseable phrase, an interruptive event. This is the reason why theology recognises its voice in postmodern criticism. Not the renewal of religion but the reverence for truth and the fight against hegemony is the lesson theologians can gain from the postmodern discourse. We will return to this

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<sup>27</sup> Orwell puts it aptly when he depicts a ‘Thought Police’ as the most frightening force of totalitarian systems.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Differend*, 179–180.

<sup>29</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 16.

in the concluding section. Before then, it is worth making a note on 'the event of the unrepresentable', which, as we have seen in the case of Wendel, can be taken as the obstacle for a theological engagement with Lyotard.

#### 4. The Event of the Unrepresentable

In the course of our reading of Lyotard, it is possible to characterise his postmodern criticism as an anti-hegemonic discourse remembering the event that *something is happening*. In contrast, totalitarian hegemonic narratives possess the cognitive claim for the absolute universal knowledge on which they base their postulates to render the fulfillment of humanity. Thus, for the latter, the truth is an object – a thing among other things (*Zeug*) – in their possession. In this sense, the event(ual) character of truth is precluded and lost.

The fight against totalitarian hegemony is, in Lyotard's opinion, based on the respect for the event as he argues in his essay "Gloss on Resistance".<sup>50</sup> According to a standard definition, 'an event is an occurrence beyond the powers of representation, something that the subject experiences but which he or she is unable to comprehend or think through adequately, let alone phrase coherently'.<sup>51</sup> Hence, for Lyotard, 'the event cannot be presented without losing it'.<sup>52</sup> This is also the main point of his master-piece *The Differend*, where he provides us with the contemplation of the event as a perennial challenge, a founding moment and a common ground of his postmodern thinking.

An event consists in the perception of an instant in which something happens to which we are called to respond without knowing in advance the genre in which to respond. In other words, events occur in such a way that pre-established genres are incapable of responding adequately to their singular nature.<sup>53</sup>

For Lyotard, the event is the interruption of presupposed explanations and conceptual frameworks. It throws any pre-given meaning

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<sup>50</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 87–97.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Gritten. Event. In: Stuart Sim (ed.). *The Lyotard Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Phillip E. Davis. St Lyotard on the Differend/Difference, 123.

<sup>53</sup> Simon Malpas. *Jean-François Lyotard*. London, New York: Routledge, 2005, 100.

into a state of shakiness. In addition to this negative moment, the event has positive impacts. It causes astonishment and surprise. In short, the event is the marvel of ‘that there is’ (*il y a*).<sup>54</sup>

Importantly, every event calls for a response and demands to take a position. The event opens up the space of new relationships to happening, generates questions and doubts, initiates challenges. The event motivates us to think in a different way: to think again and thus it unveils new readings of reality. For Lyotard, the faithful stance towards the event is condensed in his famous saying ‘read and re-read’. Explained in the example of reading the Torah, the sacred text of Judaism, recorded only with consonants, Lyotard demonstrates that there is no binding rule of reading available inscribed within the text itself. One has to take the text and read, give it one’s voice to let the event happen. Although there are certain traditions of reading (genres of discourse), the reading is never fixed. The vocalisation of the text must happen always anew. In fact, the need to give voice to the text creates the space where its truth reveals itself.<sup>55</sup>

Even though the event might be a poem, a painting, or a piece of art, the example of liturgical reading and performing sacred texts seems to probe the centre of gravity of Lyotard’s argument. Although the text is still the same, the reading itself is never the same. Liturgical reading and re-reading is more than a repetition because the essence of liturgy is to let the texts happen as a new revelation speaking ‘here and now’. In other words, the text is never in possession and cannot be exhausted.

Mysticism is a similar experience. Although it is the place where silence dominates, it is not because there is so little. On the contrary, the experience is so rich and deep that words fall short. Something is happening, but there is no proper name for it because naming reduces the experience and consequently reduces the eventfulness of the event. One can bear witness *that* something is happening but barely to *what*

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<sup>54</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 97.

<sup>55</sup> Consider *Fahrenheit 451*, a dystopian novel by Ray Bradbury, which portrays a future society where the reading of books is forbidden. The task of the fire brigade is not to fight the fire but to burn any books that are found and thus prevent people from reading them. The book is seen as a potential danger and reading is a crime because reading opens a possibility of something new to come; something that might be true not in the sense of correctness but as a challenging event.

is happening. The event resists all attempts to represent it and it is not possible to present the event without losing it.

One wants to say what it does not know how to say, but what one imagines it should be able to say. One violates it, one seduces it, one introduces into it an idiom unknown to it. When this desire disappears – this desire to be able to say something other than what it already knows how to say – when language is felt to be impenetrable and inert, rendering all writing vain, it is called Newspeak.<sup>56</sup>

And as Lyotard adds, ‘newspeak has to tarnish the wonder that (something) is happening.’<sup>57</sup> Hegemonic narratives supposedly seize control over an event and, therefore, it is not by chance that we designate them as *master* narratives. They possess the desire for a total mastery over everything and everybody and in this context the question ‘*is it happening?*’ turns out to be forbidden. Instead, totalitarian narratives focus on ‘*this is happening!*’ The question ceases to be a question. It is rather a prerogative statement determining linking-happening. To phrase it in Lyotard’s own words: ‘Nothing must happen but what is announced, and everything that is announced must happen.’<sup>58</sup> The event must be stripped out. The event must not happen.<sup>59</sup> A total philosophy of history secures itself against an occurrence of something which is beyond the scope of its own narrative. But despite all security mechanisms, the event might happen. There is, for the part of master narratives, only one possible solution: bearing witness to the event is a crime. This is why ‘Lyotard links the idea of philosophical totality [...] with political totalitarianism and terror.’<sup>40</sup> The Orwellian ministry of truth must be established and, for example, the gulag is designed to constantly point out the prohibition of an event. The very event of life is forbidden. Only the *inhuman* remains.

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<sup>56</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 90.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Like theory, which, hypothetically, keeps its head above the water of time, totalitarian bureaucracy likes to keep the event under its thumb. When something happens, it goes into the dustbin (of history, or the spirit):’ Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 90.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Malpas. *Jean-François Lyotard*, 42.

To sum up, postmodern thinking opposes hegemony over being by emphasising the search for an impossible phrase.<sup>41</sup> This is, however, nothing like the platonic eternal Idea or the onto-theological telos of everything. The impossibility of a total, exhaustive phrase is our very possibility to understand that ‘each phrase, no matter how ordinary, arrives as an event [...] that what it contains is never necessary.’<sup>42</sup> Could this, in any sense, affect our ways of thinking of and doing theology?

### **Conclusion: Why Theologise (with Lyotard)?**

This essay puts forth the thesis that theological engagement with the French postmodern philosopher and outspoken critic of Christianity Jean-François Lyotard is not only possible, but offers a great benefit to the endeavour of theology as such. So far, we have explained that the postmodern, the notion which is often perceived as an obstacle for a plausible theological dialogue, in the Lyotardian sense refers to a radical critical position with regard to a philosophical hegemony which consequently leads to political oppression: in one word, totalitarianism. Lyotard diagnoses modernity to be especially ill with a hegemonic mode of thinking and acting. In his wording, the discursive strategies of modernity exclude the differend and oppress the otherness. The promise of emancipation, the idea of progress and the aim of a redemptive fulfilment of humanity turn out to be horrors of the inhuman.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Differend*, 142.

<sup>42</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*, 81–82.

It becomes clear that Lyotard's intellectual effort must be interpreted as direct opposition to hegemonic thought patterns and a fight with the dark side of reason and its totalitarian outbursts. At the same time, Lyotard's postmodern critique is never simply anti-modern, or even irrational and against reason. On the contrary, Lyotard points out that what we lack, and what we are called to profess, is *thinking*. Here we mean a mode of thinking different from the reasoning of logic and different from pursuing a total unity of knowledge and action in the sense delineated in the quotation above. The goal of thinking is simply not to grasp objects and thus to acquire a complete cognition of the thing. Instead of being directed at the 'what', thinking aims at the 'why'. Therefore, what we mean is better depicted as thinking between the presence and absence; in short, the task of thinking. This brings us back to the question of theology.

Robyn Horner summarises Boeve's elaboration on Lyotard under the rubric of 'a theology of the differend'.<sup>44</sup> I find this classification accurate because Boeve indeed convincingly shows in which ways theology benefits from drawing inspiration from Lyotard's critical theory without simply recuperating or even baptising the theory itself. For Boeve, Lyotard aptly shows the postmodern condition as the incredulity towards metanarratives. On the one hand, this reveals the contextual situation of Christianity but, on the other hand, it also leads to the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as such. Boeve does not dispute his allegiance to the Christian narrative and its truth, however, he suggests thinking of Christianity in terms of an open narrative bearing witness to the differend. 'The truth of a narrative is then no longer a matter of true propositions, it is perceived according to the quality of its relationship to otherness'.<sup>45</sup> Obviously, this has theological consequences: first, it implies a Church outside the metanarrative structures; second, it leads to a historically embodied truth of Christianity in which the very historicity is not an obstacle but the very condition of its revelation; and third, theology recognises its limits and confesses that its words always fall short, which is again nothing like a failure caused by theology's inability to possess the ultimate truth because of its embeddedness in language. In line with the Lyotardian perspective,

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<sup>44</sup> Robyn Horner, A Theology of the Differend: Engaging Boeve Engaging Lyotard. *Modern Theology* 31, 2015, 501–510.

<sup>45</sup> Boeve. *Lyotard and Theology*, 96.

there is no extra-linguistic guarantee of knowledge. For Boeve, this is not bad for theology. On the contrary, language is a necessary – incarnational – condition of all theologising whatsoever.

The questions to be raised are as follows. Does Lyotard really teach theology something new? Or, does he provide theologians, while disclosing the differend before their eyes, with a thorough anamnesis? In other words, couldn't we say that the tradition of theological reflection knows moments when the theologian is the witness to, and the guardian of, the differend? Boeve concludes that Lyotard's notion of philosophical discourse as a constant search for its rule makes theology be aware of its radical hermeneutical character and position in history, which includes both the continuity of tradition and the discontinuity of contextual interruptions.<sup>46</sup> Thus the answer is that Lyotard helps the theologian remember the depth of tradition in its present contextual setting. Consequently, Boeve's theology of the differend leads to theologising in open narrative, the Church as the *locus* of theology turns out to be an open community, and theology is the story to be constantly interrupted by the other.

Someone may rightly argue that such a postmodern perspective prevents us from believing in any truth whatsoever and that it results in a kind of uncertain faith. This criticism is pointed if the differend is taken as another objective – metaphysical – principle, that is, a metanarrative of its kind. However, I suggest that the point of Lyotard's critical theory is not the presentation of the world in the mode of differend, which would indeed be to tell another overwhelming story about bearing witness to the otherness. In my opinion, the real challenge is *thinking* from the perspective of differend which means two things: first, paying attention to oppressed, excluded voices; and second, adopting a fruitful conflict as a theological method. Especially the latter is of great importance.

Conflict can be understood in terms of war which leads to senseless damage and sorrow. Nonetheless, conflict can also be the engine of thinking because a genuine conflict presupposes the respect for particular identities, including my own. Conflict is not an obstacle to be surpassed on the way to the total unity of truth, but the very path of any meaningful questioning of the truth. To rephrase one of the previous

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<sup>46</sup> Lieven Boeve. *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*. Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003, 24–26.

instances, the Church is not simply an open community of ‘anything goes’, but the community of devotion to the revealed truth, yet shaken in its certainty about the meaning of this truth. Theology is not the excavation of the present yet, for the moment, somewhat hidden, obscured truth, but conflictual thinking of the presence of truth interrupted by the true absence. Thinking in theology does not result in a more solid theology, understood as full, complete, extensive (although this can also be and surely is a part of thinking); however, theological thinking leads to rewriting theology – thinking-through again and again.

Why theologise with Lyotard then? The answer is in the question. Theologising, drawing inspiration from the differend, is opening up. However, this opening up is not meant as a blind reception of the otherness without questioning the other. Rather, it is adopting conflict while engaging with the other and acknowledging this conflict even within ourselves. In this sense, theological thinking is a two-fold gesture: polemics *ad extra* and the position of being shaken *ad intra*. Again, the question is in the answer: the ‘why’ challenges the language of theology because its words always fall short; the ‘why’ irritates everyone because it reveals theologising as something poor and rich at the same time. It is poor because of its incapability of providing a finalised truth; however, it is rich because the venturing of theology gives rise to the hidden meaning.

Ultimately, we realise that what concerns us in the postmodern situation is not so much the question of ‘what’ is theology but ‘why’ theologise. The question of this essay – why theologise with Lyotard – is thus transformed into the question *why theologise at all?* I suggest that we theologise because we are called to think about the presence of truth given to us in its absence, that is, revealed in the differend in the midst of this world. To say it with Lyotard, who says the following as his answer to the question of why philosophise, but it applies to theology as well, we theologise:

because there is desire, because there is absence in presence, deadness in life; and also because there is our power that is not yet power; and also because there is alienation, the loss of what we thought we had acquired and the gap between the deed and the doing, between the said and the

saying; and finally because we cannot evade this: testifying to the presence of the lack with our speech.<sup>47</sup>

In this sense, theologising shows itself as the task of thinking, a true thinking that has no substance independent from what it thinks; thinking that is never alone, never about, but always in the middle of signs, in the need of reflection, always the task in-the-world but going beyond-the-world.

*Catholic Theological Faculty, Charles University  
Thákurova 3  
CZ-160 00 Praha 6 – Dejvice  
e-mail: martin.koci@ktf.cuni.cz*

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *Why Philosophize?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 123.