

# Identity As Not-(Im)Possibilities of an Interreligious Dialogue From the Fringes: Exploring Giorgio Agamben and the Interreligious Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

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The present essay explores if and how selected political concepts developed by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben can be applied to difficulties frequently met in interreligious encounters. Using Agambian concepts such as 'Homo Sacer' and 'The Cut of Apelles', this paper discusses problems of representation, identity and inclusion/exclusion, which are structurally inherent in interreligious dialogues. The essay concludes sketching the potential of Agamben's category of 'messianic-suspended identity' in connection with a method of radical historization for the interreligious dialogue.

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**KEYWORDS:** interreligious dialogue, identity, exclusion, inclusion, representation, homo sacer, Messianic suspension

## (IM)POSSIBILITIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

In June 2009 the *World Council of Religious Leaders*, the *Hindu American Foundation*, and the *American Jewish Committee* held a conference in which leaders of both religions dialogued. The Hindu delegation was headed by Swami Aydeshananda Giri, of the *Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha*. The Jewish part was led by the International Director of Interreligious Affairs Rabbi David Rosen. The conference culminated in a final paper stating, along with commonalities between the two religions, "the need for a continued cooperation in order to safeguard

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peace and harmony” (Evers 2009, 230). The first Jewish-Hindu-Dialogue of this kind took place in New Delhi in February 2007. One of its significant outcomes was the statement that both religions “share a history of persecution” (Evers 2009, 230).

However, what some praised to be a positive “new form of interreligious dialogue” (Evers 2009, 230), others observed with mistrust. In fact, Muslim leaders expressed a suspicion that these dialogue encounters aimed “at forming an anti-Muslim coalition” (Evers 2009, 230). This suspicion was anything but surprising, considering the participation of right-wing Hindu politicians who “are not normally dialogue-minded” (Evers 2009, 230). Furthermore it remains unclear if and how this statement was received or even noticed by the persons who identify themselves as Jews and Hindus.

This example illustrates three structural problems of representation inherent to interreligious dialogues aiming at “safeguard[ing] peace and harmony” (Evers 2009, 230). *Firstly*, the problem of exclusion of ‘the other’, i.e., *interreligious exclusion* of all those who are not present at the dialogue session, with regard to all the different religious affiliations, which are co-responsible in the “safeguard[ing of] peace and harmony.” *Secondly*, the problem of representation *within one’s own* religious community (*intrareligious exclusion*). *Thirdly*, the problem of self-representation or identification with very dialogue-partner’s comprehension of one’s own religious community, i.e. one’s own tradition of conflict with the religious community of the dialogue-partner (*intrasubjective exclusion*).

With regard to the *first problem*, the given example does not need much explanation: those representatives who came together happened to create a new meta-identity, based on a commonality. However, this move to include ‘Jews’ and ‘Hindus’ under the meta-identity, the essence of which was later defined by the common statement, resulted in the exclusion of others. And this *interreligious exclusion* turned out to be interpreted as a menace for those standing ‘outside’ the dialogue (in this case Muslims), resulting in the opposite of ‘peace and harmony’. Had the dialogue-partners also included Muslims, it might have been another group finding itself outside of the newly created meta-identity. Unless *all existing*<sup>2</sup> religious communities come together, there will always be some outsider who might become suspicious. But is it possible to gather *all existing* religious communities? Instances like the *World Parliament of Religion* seem to

<sup>2</sup> Italics are to notify, that this is just a hypothetical sentence; we cannot discuss the epistemology implied here.

point in the right direction at first glance. A closer look, however, reveals the epistemic framework of that communication, i.e. the fact that rules and language are dictated by Western representatives and Western scholars of religion, and thus producing an asymmetry which results in a subtle epistemic exclusion, perhaps even in “epistemic violence” (Gottschalk 2007; King 2007; Mandair 2007).<sup>3</sup>

With regard to the *second problem* the question has to be raised, as to how the final statement, drafted in the given example, was received by the very people forming those represented religious communities. Who did actually take notice of it? Would those who are exposed to situations where peace and harmony is needed subscribe to that statement? It might prove almost impossible to find this out, as there will always be *intrareligious* misrepresentations within religious communities and representatives (Hutter 2008)—even for religious communities like the Catholic Church, although this is arguably the only large religious group, with a long tradition of hierarchical organization (Hung Nguyen Quang 2008). As a result, a structurally unavoidable *intrareligious* exclusion, meaning that some people who would say ‘we don’t see ourselves represented there’, is added to the *interreligious* exclusion mentioned before.

With regard to the *third problem*, our example can illustrate another exclusion, which is the most difficult one to describe: the *intrasubjective* exclusion. Those individual subjects who stated a common “history of persecution” made up a new meta-identity by reflecting the history of their religion(s) and locating themselves within it. But what if their relation had been one of persecutor-persecuted? What would they have identified themselves as, had one of the dialogue-partners accused the other of being part of ‘those who used to be our persecutors’? In this case, “peace and harmony” could only be achieved by the dialoguing subject’s self-exclusion from that which is temporarily understood as the history of the religions dialoguing. The problem of representation would in this case lead to the dialoguing subject’s *self-exclusion* from dark moments of his/her own religion’s history (or those events which are mentioned as representatives of one’s religion’s history). At least in terms of the individual subject’s self-distancing from certain events, saying: ‘I don’t see myself represented in those moments of violence’, this *intrasubjective exclusion* would most probably take place, otherwise no dialogue could ever lead towards peace and harmony.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course this is a perspective informed by postcolonial studies (see for example Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994).

Given these problems one may ask: *Is interreligious dialogue worth having it at all? How can these structural problems of representation and identity be adequately described? Are there concepts which openly address epistemological and political implications of these problems?*

My intention is not to paint a cynical picture of interreligious enterprises, but to enhance analytical categories for assessing interreligious encounters in a self-critical way. The three problem areas show that, when talking about interreligious dialogues such as the one in our example, the line of distinction between 'genuine religious' and 'political' intentions, as well as 'private' and 'public' interests, is very blurry. Given a globally increasing "politicization of religion" (Bielefeldt and Heitmeyer 1998), this calls for more differentiated concepts of identity and representation in matters of interreligious dialogue.<sup>4</sup> This essay, therefore, explores if and how selected political concepts developed by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben can be applied to difficulties frequently met in interreligious encounters. Using Agambian concepts such as 'Homo Sacer' and 'The Cut of Apelles', it discusses problems of representation, identity and inclusion/exclusion, which are structurally inherent in interreligious dialogues. In the conclusion, we will sketch the potential of Agamben's category<sup>5</sup> of 'messianic-suspended identity' in connection with a method of radical historization for the interreligious dialogue.

## **GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S THOUGHT AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

In the following paragraph we will introduce Agamben's best known concept, the *Homo Sacer*, and briefly show why categories of liminality are useful for our task. Along the three problems outlined earlier, we will then discuss some other concepts that help us articulate what we have called *interreligious*, *intrareligious* and *intrasubjective* exclusion.

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<sup>4</sup> This is especially valid if one considers the transnational aspects of today's politics, religion and migration. Netherland-based Filipino Scholar Gemma Cruz-Chia, who has done research on Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong, can say "that any study of migrants that ignores the role of religion will most likely be incomplete and skewed", pointing to Sociologist Timothy Smith's thesis "that immigration itself is a 'theologizing their experience'" (Cruz-Chia, 2007, p. 212).

<sup>5</sup> The term category is used here not in the Kantian sense, but synonymous to tool of analysis.

## Homo Sacer and Citation: The Outside That Is Inside, and the Inclusive Face of Exclusion

The work of Giorgio Agamben, Italian scholar of law and philosopher, struggles with the question whether or not non-exclusive politics can be conceptualized. For Agamben, this implies the search for historical moments in which political and 'religious'<sup>6</sup> exclusion can be studied and a description of its intersection with power and law. This description allows him to develop *paradigms* (Agamben 2008a) he locates right on the border between exclusion and inclusion. For the scope of our essay, these "zones of indecidability or indifference" allow to conceptualize political problems from an epistemological point of view and offer new categories for the quest of political exclusion (Raulff 2004, 612).<sup>7</sup>

Agamben's "best known" (Levi and Rothberg 2003, 23) category is the *Homo Sacer*. In ancient Roman law, the *Homo Sacer* was a human being who could be killed by anybody without being guilty of committing murder. However, this human being could not be sacrificed. The *Homo Sacer* was thus banned and excluded from the community. The ban stripped the *Homo Sacer* of his public life, leaving him his mere biological life. In other words, the *Homo Sacer* was deprived of his<sup>8</sup> *zoe* (**zwh.**) which, following Aristotle, is the social life lived in public, but still had his *bios* (**bi,oj**), his bare organic life. This status made him a creature legally dead and yet alive (Agamben 1998). According to Agamben, *Homo Sacer* is a category that is right on the "threshold" (Agamben 2005, 138ff; Vacarme 2004, 117) of exclusion and inclusion. If one looks at the face of the *Homo Sacer*, one is looking at the inclusive face of exclusion.<sup>9</sup> The fact of being stripped of his legal, social and public life excluded the *Homo Sacer*

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<sup>6</sup> Agamben's distinction between political, religious, cultural and ethnic is not always clear.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, that a large part of Agamben's work, especially for example the tetralogy *Homo Sacer* genealogical in character. This historical analysis, however, is not that of an Historian, but that of a Philosopher who seeks to find paradigms for forging new epistemological categories. This is an important aspect, since Agamben's work has been vehemently criticized from the historic-methodological point of view, as can be seen in the reaction to Agamben's paradigmatic comparison between the rightlessness of Guantanamo detainees and the lack of rights of the detainees in the Nazi's concentration camps (Raulff, 2004, pp. 610–615).

<sup>8</sup> Technically speaking *Homo Sacer* could be both, male or female. For reasons of space and clearance, however, in the whole paper, we will have to avoid the gendered formulation his/her.

<sup>9</sup> This paradox is present *ab ipsa polysemia adjectivi as sacer*, which means both sacred and cursed.

from the community, but since he was still biologically alive and thus interacting with the community (in order to continue his biological life) he was simultaneously<sup>10</sup> part of the community. According to Agamben, the *Homo Sacer* is a historical and concrete instance of the paradox zone of indifference, where the outside is inside and vice-versa.<sup>11</sup> This construct will help us look at the paradoxical nature of interreligious dialogues displayed in the problems of identity and representation.

### **The Withdrawal of the All, First Glances at the Cut of Apelles and First Implications for *Interreligious* and *Intrareligious* Exclusion**

#### *The Withdrawal of the All*

Interreligious dialogue is about identities that come together and through their very act of communicating happen to construct a common meta-world, i.e., common history, common language etc., sometimes abstractly formulated in final statements. Even when differences prevail the commonalities, this newly constructed common meta-world is not always intelligible for so-called outsiders of the very dialogue sessions. This applies both to outsiders from other religious communities (*interreligious* exclusion) as well as to those of the same religious community (*intrareligious* exclusion).

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<sup>10</sup> For Agamben, this paradoxical simultaneousness is also displayed in the polysemy of the Italian term *bando* (Agamben, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> There are two more concepts which exemplify the antinomy of inside/outside-simultaneity. Epistemologically speaking, Agamben finds this paradox in the concept of *paradigm*. Paradigm, from the Greek “paradigme [... \*para-deigmh,] what shows itself beside” (Agamben, 2002), though Agamben’s point here is more apologetic in nature. Agamben illustrates it with a grammatical paradigm, which is meaning within a grammar lesson is derived from the fact that it has been emptied. ‘I love you’ as a paradigm of conjugation (I love you, You love..., He/She/It loves... etc.) is emptied of its original meaning. ‘I love you’ is completely taken out of any context of meaning, stripped off its original meaning. Yet it is able to show the system of language (grammar) in which ‘I love you’ may be pronounced in a meaningful way. The paradigm is something that stands outside its context; something that has been excluded from its context, but is not completely meaningless, since it still belongs to the original context. Otherwise it would not be possible to use it as example for explaining grammar. Almost the same could be said of the concept of *Citation* (Agamben, 2005, 138ff). Agamben affirms that the essence and powerful subversiveness of a citation relies on the fact, that the new meaning performed by it constitutively and simultaneously holds together the old and the new context of the quote. A citation makes the most sense if one knows the original context it is taken from. At the same time, this context is crossed out, while the present context is dominant. The citation, therefore, contains two meanings at the same time, which are mutually constitutive. For ontological implications see also Jacques Derrida’s concept of “sous rature”, (Derrida, 1990, 77ff), and additionally, in relation to Agamben’s discussion on the “nominal sentence” (Agamben, 2005, 127ff), Judith Butler’s “performative signifiers” (Butler, 1993, 208ff). Paradigm and Citation, thus, illustrate the outside, that draws its meaning from the context it has been ‘cut’ or removed from.

With regard to the different streams within the same religion, Catholic Feminist theologian Maura O'Neill shows that the distance between dialogue participant of *religion A* and dialogue participant of *religion B* is often smaller than the distance between a traditional and a progressive member of the same religion (O'Neill 2007, 8–16).<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, however, she does not articulate it as a structural problem. Therefore, O'Neill's thesis that there cannot be a successful *interreligious* dialogue if there is no *intrareligious* dialogue, will fall short in terms of fairness and efficacy, if the idea of *inter-* and *intrareligious* dialogues claims to achieve a comprehensive, equal and just representation of all those who ought to be effected by it.<sup>13</sup> The relation between "the all and the part [... is] dialectic" (Agamben 2005, 55ff), meaning it cannot be seized. In other words: the "all" withdraws from being grasped.<sup>14</sup> Attempts to grasp it fail in the face of an insurmountable "remnant" (Agamben 2005, 53ff). In the last part of this paper we will relate this to the Agambian category of the messianic identity and investigate the possibilities of this impossibility, taking seriously what Agamben calls "unusually dialectic" (Agamben 2005, 55ff). As for now however, let us put the 'unusual' aspect into brackets and focus on the basic concept: the impossibility of comprehensive representation, i.e., the withdrawal of the all.

### *The Cut of Apelles*

Agamben illustrates this concept with the Plinian story of a

contest between Apelles and Protogenes. [...] Protogenes draws such a fine line that seems not to have been drawn by the paintbrush of any human being. But Apelles, using his brush divides his rival's line in two with an even finer line, cutting it

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<sup>12</sup> And this may be even more the case with regards to different regional contexts, which calls for more interdisciplinarity between theologians and scholars from religious studies, ethnology, sociology, etc.

<sup>13</sup> This is also the Achilles heel of Habermasian approaches to interreligious dialogue, see (Biebricher, 2005, 248; 240–242). For a discussion of the implications for poststructuralist and post-Marxist politics, see (Laclau, 1996; Laclau, 2007). As already mentioned, examples like the *World Parliament of Religions* and their *World Ethics* seem to be understood by all, but their reasonability applies only to those who share the same concept of reason and its political agenda. Postcolonial Studies have shown that certain concepts of 'reason' can be Trojan horses of a certain politics, if not of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988). This must be honestly said, especially when the material content of the *World Ethics* is decidedly shared, which is obviously my own case.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the Aristotelian bonmot, which states that the whole is always more than just the sum of its parts (Metaphysics, VII, 1041b).

lengthwise in half. (Agamben 2005, 50ff)

The cut of Apelles hints to the possibility that every line, no matter how fine it may be, bears in itself the possibility of being cut in its own turn, thus displaying an *infinite* potential of resistance against *definite* cuts.

According to Agamben, every (further) cut produces a rest, a remnant. Likewise, every attempt of complete identification and representation of people and their actual religion *de facto* collapses vis-à-vis the resistance of the remnant. Accordingly, the real people at the center of the dialogue's efforts are

neither the all nor the part, neither the majority nor the minority. Instead [.. they are] that, which can never coincide with itself, as all or as part, that which infinitely remains or resists in each division, and, with all due respect to those who govern us [or claim to embody representation in another way] never allows us to be reduced to majority or minority. This remnant is the figure, or the substantiality assumed by a people in a decisive moment, and as such is the only real political subject. (Agamben 2005, 49ff)

This is not to evoke a spirit of pessimism, but to make clear that so-called results of interreligious dialogues are always to be seen with a contrite modesty<sup>15</sup>: they do not always affect the believers positively. Often the believers or adherents of the religion are not even aware of any results (Husstein 2008, 234; Wettach-Zeitz 2008, 232; Micksch 2009, 84).<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, if certain final statements drafted at the end of interreligious dialogues had obliging character, it would result in the religion's implosion. The commonly constructed world would lead into a system of mutual rights and privileges, which inevitably leads to a religious form of subjectivation.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, those not

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<sup>15</sup> Though its epistemology is not shared, this expression is borrowed from Amos Yong's realistic approach, whose most important feature is a Peircean "contrite fallibilism" (Yong, 2000, p. 100).

<sup>16</sup> With regard to newer ecumenical dialogues, see Walter Hollenweger's critique (for example Hollenweger, 1999) and the special issue in *Pneuma*, 2008, 30 (2) and Macchia's Editorial (Macchia, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Our understanding of *subjectivation* draws on Michel Foucault studies on power (Foucault, 1994a; Foucault, 1994b). In modern times, man perceives himself as an individual who possesses freedom and rights. By the setting of rights and privileges and making them personally available, a process of individualization takes place, which offers the human being the emancipation from object towards subject. This move, however, from object to subject, puts a yoke on the individual's neck: he becomes sub-jectus to a (meta-)system of rights and duties (Agamben, 1998, 119f). Following this concept of subjectivity, the subject's presumed freedom and rights is at the price of one's own subjectivation, in the literal sense of the latin term *sub-jectus* i.e. being thrown under (as participium passivum of *subjacere*).



willing to follow the usually highly sophisticated argumentations of their representatives would find themselves virtually excluded from their religion. If some of them, then, formed a new religious (sub) identity, the latter would represent the outside of the inside. In any case the religious person is stripped off its public-religious *bíos* within the 'original' context and becomes a *Homo Sacer* of its own religion, a *homo sacer suae religionis*.<sup>18</sup> Of course the *homo sacer suae religionis*, who is left behind only with his religious *zoè*, is arguably less tragic than the implications of the biopolitics Agamben is concerned with. Yet on an abstract level, this helps to conceptualize the paradox identities of religious (sub)identities which represent the outside of their original (read: former) religion.

Also from an *intrareligious* perspective, this may be useful to further conceptualize the identity of the so-called apostates and link it to the mechanism of exclusions, since such religiously excluded do not simply disappear, despite being meticulously silenced in the chronicles and histories written by "the so-called high culture" (Bergunder 2009, 245ff). They are still there and in some way still continue to have relationships to their original context, etc.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, a unity-fostering understanding of the 'apostate' or 'sect' is probably easier achieved if s/he is understood as *homo sacer suae religionis*. His/her ambivalent and paradox identity, which questions the original context and yet is very alike his/her former context, is well explained by these categories of liminality.<sup>20</sup> The concept of *homo sacer suae religionis* is

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<sup>18</sup> In classical Latin *sacer* stands with the *genitivus possessivus*, the *dativus* is used only in pre- and post-classical Latin. Yet it could be constructed also with a *dativus commodi*, meaning that the *homo* is *sacer* from the point of view of or for his religion, such as in *homo pro sua religione sacer*. With regard to Latin style, it should read *homo suae religionis sacer* or even better *homo suae propriae religionis sacer* or respectively *homo suae (propriae) religioni sacer*. Here, the shortest and simplest variant was preferred. I thank Stefan Meisters for helping me work this out.

<sup>19</sup> Looking at the history of the Christian context, one could argue that one of the major and best documented schisms, the protestant reformation, (which, all but reformation, ended up in being initially regarded as religion, and at least confession or denomination), could be negotiated politically only after the so-called *Religionsgespräche*. Thus the religious-political *Pax Augustana*, which celebrated its 450th birthday recently, is among other factors the outcome of these *Religionsgespräche*. A central document of this is the *Confessio Augustana* (Bornkamm, 1956), which constructs an inclusive protestant meta-identity at the cost of the so-called Anabaptists and Spiritualists, who were stigmatized and excluded (CA, §§ 5; 9; 16; 17). Another example are the conservative sects within the Catholic church, which are critic of the Second Vatican Council, and which are now being (re)embraced by the politics of Pope Benedict XIV. Best known, since some Holocaust-denying expressions by Bishop Richard Williamson (Lipstadt 2010, 571), is the case of the *Society of St. Pius X* and the interreligious implications of their opposition to *Nostra Aetate* (Beinert, 2009; Bischof, 2009; Hünermann, 2009)

<sup>20</sup> See also the discussion on the Agambian notion of 'paradigm' and 'citation' under 2.1, footnote 11.

thus a prolific instrument for the study of history of religion, in so far as it plainly addresses the constitutive but hybrid mutuality<sup>21</sup> between normality and anomy.<sup>22</sup> With regards to the impossibilities of interreligious dialogue, structurally rooted in the performative exclusion of any process of identity-making or representation, this raises the question whether religious desubjectivation is possible and how an engagement into the interreligious dialogue as identity-free non-subject can be conceptualized. This question will be addressed in the last part of this essay.

### **The State of Exception: Declaration of Anomy as Legitimization of a ‘New Norm(ality)’**

As we have already hinted, the sovereign power as the power to establish new laws or new sets of norms (i.e. new ‘normalities’), such as those powers who reduce a person to its bare life (*Homo Sacer*, **zwh.**), requires the annulations of the public life (**bi,oj**) and this in turn requires a legitimization. Agamben’s research of the apex of totalitarianism in modernity, which according to him, is the Nazi concentration camps, leads him to the concept of the state of exception (Raulff 2004, 609). Following, one might argue somehow uncritically, Carl Schmitt’s Definition of “*Ausnahmezustand*” (Agamben 2008b, especially 53) that he finds the pattern of emergency being the legitimization *par excellence* for grasping absolute sovereignty by cancelling the *bíos*.

Originally understood as something extraordinary, an exception, which should have validity only for a limited period of time, [...] a historical transformation has made it the normal form of governance. [...] The state of exception establishes a hidden but fundamental relationship between law and the absence of law. It is a void, a blank and this empty space is constitutive of the legal system. (Raulff 2004, 609)

According to Agamben the emergence of new systems (be it legal, political or otherwise identity-related) is somehow linked

<sup>21</sup> For the poststructuralist notion of ‘hybridity,’ see Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994; Rutherford, 1990). This genealogical approach, which studies the history of religion with focus on discontinuities rather than on continuities, and tries to explain consistencies instead of inconsistencies, draws from the works of scholar of religious studies Michael Bergunder (Bergunder, 2007; Bergunder, 2009a; Bergunder, 2010) and Jörg Hausteine (Hausteine, forthcoming). Although their postcolonial approach is informed by a Derridean epistemology and opposes Agamben’s metaphysical framework.

<sup>22</sup> The Agambian concept of ‘anomy’ as a precondition of normality or, put in another way, normality as a result of ‘anomy’ means that a new form of norm (i.e. rule or law) is legitimated by a declaration of lawlessness, thus factual *anomy* for the greek **anomoj**. Agamben follows Carl Schmitt’s thesis, which defines sovereign who decides on the exception. In the next chapter we will discuss the concept of ‘anomy.’

to the declaring of an emergency. The state of exception is the best rationale for justifying discontinuity. It allows the introduction of a new element of sovereignty (e.g. law, norm), yet under the alibi of the provisionality—especially when the issue of fear and security is instrumentalized.<sup>23</sup> The exception constitutes the link between continuity and discontinuity, e.g. between new and old law, because

in the exception what is excluded from the norm does not simply have no bearing on the law, on the contrary, the law maintains itself in relation to the exception in the form of its own self-suspension. The norm is applied [...] to the exception dis-applying itself, in withdrawing itself from it. [...] It] is not a mere exclusion, but an inclusive exclusion, an *ex-ceptio* in the literal sense of the term: a seizing of the outside. (Agamben 2005, 104f)

Philosophically speaking, this is again a grey zone. If Agamben's thought is consequently continued, it leads to the thesis that (a new) normality is constituted by the declaration of anomy. The success of establishing a new system (such as a meta-identity) is related to the success of establishing new norms that regulate its elements. Such an establishment of new norms requires the annulation of the old norms on the one hand; on the other hand, it also requires the setting new boundaries, within which these norms apply. Boundaries in turn imply exclusion as they decide about the inside and the outside. For Agamben this exclusion (actually an inclusive exclusion) is most easily achieved under exceptional circumstances. Eventually this development may become a new state of normality, which might hide the encoded and constituting anomy, without being able to erase it. Normality thus requires and is constituted by anomy (Agamben 1998; Agamben 2005, 104ff; 108ff; Raulff 2004, 611).

The implications for the interreligious dialogue are obvious. Radicalization, reformation, and splitting of religious identities and systems often go hand in hand with some declaration of a state of exception as legitimization. It may start with a sense of exceptional or chaotic disorder, which calls for an urgent intervention in order to safeguard some 'collective interests' or the 'purity of a religion's identity'. This state of exceptional or chaotic disorder could be understood as caused by 'the religion fatal decay due to a stray from the roots'; 'the religion's accommodation of unconventional principles'; but it could also

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<sup>23</sup> Such as in the moral panics-campaigns of the Bush-administration, which launched to legitimate an exceptional treatment for terrorists (and people suspected to be terrorists), such as waterboarding (Zizek, 2007) and Guantanamo, which is still there, also after President Obama's promotion to Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

be called 'desperate need for global peace and harmony'. In any case it gives legitimization for exceptional measures, which could be both isolation and radicalization, or openness for interreligious dialogue.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, as we have seen in relation to the previously sketched Jewish-Hindu dialogue, there is a high potential of abuse of interreligious dialogue. This raises the quest of intentionality with regard to the participants in the interreligious dialogue. Under the pretext of exceptional conditions<sup>25</sup> unusual coalitions come into being, which give rise to new (meta)identities. However, this rise of new (meta)identities is problematic from the viewpoint of those who are necessarily excluded as a consequence of the impossibility of comprehensive representation and thus represent the remnant. This is problematic. However, if the non-excluded are successful in establishing their new (meta)identity, "the state of exception [...] become[s ...] the normal form of governance" (Raulff 2004, 609).<sup>26</sup> It is the forms of the state of exception, implicitly or explicitly found in rationales underlying interreligious dialogues, that describe an epistemological point of contact between our reflections so far and the political concepts of Giorgio Agamben and give us fresh insight in what we called the problem of *interreligious* exclusion. However, this point of contact is not merely epistemological. We will have to consider the relation between public and private vis-à-vis a certain concept of religion before we turn to some concepts which help us to discuss the third problem: the issue of *intrasubjective exclusion*.

## Religion Between the Private and the Public

In terms of applying Agamben's philosophical categories to interreligious dialogue, the present essay could be criticized as

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<sup>24</sup> We are not evaluating these 'causes' here, nor are we analyzing their ideological thrust. On the descriptive and formal level they are equivalent, in as they can be used to legitimate a state of exception.

<sup>25</sup> In terms of abstractions, exceptional conditions' and declared, state of exception are very alike, they differ in range, effectiveness and on the level of representation on which they are uttered.

<sup>26</sup> Politically speaking, the danger of the state of exception becoming the normal form of governance, is certainly one of the motives why some "[l]awyers led by Senate President Jovito Salonga filed five separate positions, asking the Supreme Court to nullify President Arroyo's declaration of martial law [state of exception] in Maguindanao" when she had declared the state of exception in parts of Mindanao, after the horrible massacre in the Southern Philippines on 24 November 2009. A few days later the "[t]he Ampatuan clan, ... [which was presumably responsible for the massacre], who gave President Macapagal-Arroyo [...] controversial victories in the 2004 and 2007 elections, were labeled rebels" by the same President (Eguerra et al., 2009).

farfetched, being too far away from the concrete material theme of Agamben's work. Therefore at this point it might be useful to consider religion between private and public.<sup>27</sup>

Against the predictions of several wannabe-prophets standing in the tradition of the secularization thesis, religion is all but on the way of extinction (Giordan 2008, 203f). Headings such as "Dio é tornato" (Stark and Introvigne 2003) or "La revanche de dieu" (Kepel 1991) suggest that religion is booming. Though the implicit Eurocentrism and (Hegelian) teleology underlying several secularization theories have to be criticized, one has to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water, and confuse the increase of religious grassroots-movements or spirituality with the decline of membership in institutionalized forms of religion (Casanova 2001, 418–419). The thesis, according to which religion in modern societies concerns only the inward person has been strongly contested. Despite religious pluralization, religion is far from being just a private matter.<sup>28</sup> The modern concept of religion, substantially drawing from Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence" (The Christian Faith, § 4; cf. Bergunder 2009)<sup>29</sup> which *de-fines* (i.e. limits) religion's locus to the private, has to be reconsidered. But religion cannot be detached from private issues either. As discursive formation, religion has its locus right at the threshold between the private and the public, which according to Agamben is to be understood more as "dipolarities" than as "di-chotomies" (Raulff 2004, 612). Agamben's plea for viewing these oppositions "[...] not substantial, but tensional" and his call to "a logic of the field, as in physics, where it is impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances, [where] the polarity is present and acts at each point of the field" (Raulff 2004, 612; cf. Agamben 2002) can help us in

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<sup>27</sup> Due to time constrains, we will have to refrain from elaborating on a definition of religion. Thus, in what follows, we will ex negativo deal with definitions of religion, which seem to be misleading in the light of the recent global developments and their relation to the discussion on interreligious dialogue. The notion of religion implied here tries to avoid both a functional and substantial definition of religion, thus, historicizing and conceptualizing it through a genealogical and discourse-oriented approach (for further readings see the introductory sections in Kippenberg & von Stuckrad, 2003; or Hock, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> The communitarian relations and (identity)political implications of religious individuals, however understood, therefore, seem to weaken well-intended suggestions of focusing more on "Spirituality as a chance for intercultural theology" (Giordan, 2008) or interreligious dialogue.

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that Schleiermacher's concept of "Geselligkeit" and his notion of plural interests in the context of his Kant-critique also allows an opening towards the public character of religion (Welker, 1999).

formulating our questions concerning the interreligious dialogue and understand non-Schleiermacherian—sometimes wrongly referred to non-Western—concepts of religion, when we engage in interreligious dialogue.<sup>30</sup> Here I am particularly referring to language systems, in which there is no word for religion as understood ‘inwardly’ and accordingly the dichotomy church/state, sacred/secular is repeatedly a stumbling block, though as a consequence of globalization, language is obviously adapting to the Western-dominated discourse.

The state of exception as *locus* and *rationale* in which distinguishing lines are dissolved and borders are crossed (such as the difference between public and private, between personal history and collective history) make these categories promising with regard to our question here. Interreligious dialogues, as an encounter between individuals of delegates who identify themselves as part of a collective identity called ‘religion XY’, inevitably presents a political moment and stumble into the same structural impossibilities of representation, which are inherent in political systems (Laclau 2007).

### **The Messianic, the Cut of Apelles and the Remnant, *Katargein*, *Astheneia* and Being As Not: Intrasubjective Exclusion and Categories of Identitylessness?**

So far the carryover of our essay should be understood as a tool for reformulating questions or blurred spots linked to the wider topic of interreligious dialogue. What has repeatedly emerged throughout our discussion is the problem of identity and its implicit constitutive exclusion which calls for a “desubjectivation”<sup>31</sup> (Vacarme 2004, 116) or an identity that is non-exclusive.<sup>32</sup> The following Agambian concepts will be not only analytical but also synthetic, as they will positively ask whether and how forms of non-identity are applicable within the interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>30</sup> Schleiermacher’s definition of religion as “feeling of absolute dependence” has been criticized by many Western thinkers, yet it is irreducible to the present notion of the discourse on religion (Bergunder, 2009b).

<sup>31</sup> On subjectivation/desubjectivation see 2.2.2, especially footnote , 17.

<sup>32</sup> Non-exclusive identities, in the sense of a non-exclusivist position, are, practically speaking, very common among religious people with academic background or at least enough intercultural experience. Hence, what is attempted here might seem to be trivial. However, a systematic and/or theoretical reflection of such an identity position is rarely ventured. An introductory overview of the underlying classification exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist can be found in (Yong, 2000, p. 39; Knitter, 2002; Bernhardt, 2005).

### *The Messianic, the Remnant and the Cut of Apelles Revisited*

In his “Commentary on the Letter to the Romans” (Agamben 2005) Agamben suggests a reading which understands *Romans* as a “fundamental messianic text” (Agamben 2005, 1). The center of gravity of this commentary is the concept of the “Messianic” which functions as a radical “Aufhebung” (suspension) of law, time, class, politics and identity (Agamben 2005, 1ff; 99ff).<sup>33</sup> The Messianic draws its potential of subversiveness and resistance from the fact that it does not set up a positive counter-essentialism or counter-identity. On the contrary, it cuts the existing, celebrating its awareness of the dissolving of static identity at every new encounter. In this sense, it does not raise essentialist claims. “Instead of proposing a universal principle, [... it] divides the division. And what remains is the new but indefinable subject, which is always left over or behind because it can be on all sides, both on the side of the non-Jews as well as the Jews” (Vacarme 2004, 122).

How does this work? Let’s go back to the cut of Apelles and the idea of the remnant. The cut of Apelles hints at the possibility that every line, no matter how fine it may be, bears in itself the possibility of being cut in its own turn, thus displaying an *infinite* potential of resistance against definite cuts. In the light of our former consideration pertaining to our complex, pluralistic and transreligiously cut reality, Agamben’s notion of *the Messianic* simply takes the impossibility of identification and representation seriously. It is radically aware of the paradox constituting identity. In order to understand the ‘positive potential’ of this, we will have to look at three more concepts and then draw some programmatic conclusions.

### *Astheneia and Katargein*

According to Agamben, the concrete reality of Paul’s addressees drew a line between mankind, dividing humanity into two kinds: Jews (i.e. circumcised) and non-Jews (uncircumcised). However, this

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<sup>33</sup> Though for Paul’s *Romans* the Messianic is constituted by faith in Jesus as Christ/Messiah, the following transfer of Agamben’s concept does not imply fideistic belief in the Person of Jesus Christ, not even in terms of historical person. It is sufficient to understand the Messianic as a discursive or theoretical concept for a chosen self-denial in the context of interreligious dialogue. Christians, who believe in Jesus Christ could, of course, add to this theoretical aspect a theological rationale for engaging interreligious dialogue with this attitude and elaborate on the implication of one’s belief in the Word made flesh. Thanks to Markus Rackow for bringing this objection to my mind.

mutual exclusion, this form of subjectivation was no longer valid for Paul, after his encounter with Messiah (i.e. Christ). For Agamben's Paul, the *factum* Jesus Christ suspends every difference among mankind (Gal. 3:28).<sup>34</sup> It cuts the conventional identity-line, showing that among the *fleshly* circumcised there are *breathly* uncircumcised and vice versa (Agamben 2005, 51). It annuls the given categories: "Circumcision is nothing" (Agamben 2005, 23)—and empowers those standing on the fringes. It introduces a new kind of viewing (collective) people both suspending the old identities and questioning any new kinds of identity. It is a perspective that radically takes into account the margins, a point of view which stands right on the threshold. Agamben calls this identity *remnant*. The remnant-identity stands for "the impossibility of the Jews and the non-Jews to coincide with themselves; they are something like a remnant [...] between every identity and itself" (Agamben 2005, 52). Therefore the remnant-identity is a kind of *non*-identity (or suspended identity), the characteristic of which is the radical weakness (**avsqenei,a l**), a radical surrender of coincidence with itself, a radical giving away of identity resulting in a lack of power ("adynamia" Agamben 2005, 95ff; 97). It is in this move, in this moment of "de-activating" (Agamben 2005, 97) and questioning, that an identity is conceived which actually does not claim positive essentials.<sup>35</sup> Agamben describes this act of questioning with the Pauline term of *katargein* (**\*katarge,w**), which he translates as "I make inoperative, I deactivate, I suspend the efficacy" (Agamben 2005, 95).<sup>36</sup>

Yet *katargein* does not imply destruction which clings to a new form of totalization or subjectivation: it is a subtle de-construction which is non-essentialistic because of its very withdrawing from being a new identity. Its negation of the existent does not lead to a 'better form' but is constituted by a radical self-emptying (**\*keno,w**)<sup>37</sup>, a giving away that results in powerlessness (adynamia).

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<sup>34</sup> "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus".

<sup>35</sup> Radical weakness as characteristic is understood hereas (self-)negation, thus it is not a positive essential.

<sup>36</sup> It is this consciously accepted (better: received) lack of power, that distinguishes this concept from trivializations, such as 'Why can't we all just be friends?'

<sup>37</sup> I admit, that the concept of kenos is used here, which stems from another Pauline letter, Phil 2:5ff, is based on a distinction between form and content, which is problematic in the context of poststructuralist philosophy. It may serve as a 'Christian metaphor' for the Agambian talk about *adynamia* and *katargein*, which works with rather tensional than dichotomous abstractions.



### *Identity As Not*

How do these abstract reflections apply to concrete persons in time and space? This is shown by the concept of *As Not* (w`j mh.). For Paul the consequence of the Messianic was not a matter of being somebody else, but of letting one's identity go, of celebrating the de-activation of one's own subjectivity" (1Cor 7:29-32): [...] time contracted itself, the rest is, that [...] those having wives may be as not [...] having, [...] those weeping [...], rejoicing [...], buying [...], possessing [...], using [...], as not" (Agamben 2005, 23). According to Agamben, the subtleness lies in the fact that Paul is not calling to become somebody else, but to *remain* what one is and yet perceiving one's identity as having undergone the process of messianic liberation. The element of remaining is important, as it is the *locus* of celebrating the de-activation (katargein) of one's identity,<sup>38</sup> thus being freed from subjectivation. This would actually lead to a new understanding of one's own history as seen from the *kairòs* point of view ("Jetztzeit" Agamben 2005, 143).

The notion of remaining has been misunderstood as intellectually highly sophisticated camouflage of quietism (Vacarme 2004) or, in Weberian terms, "eschatological indifference" (Agamben 2005, 23). Yet for Agamben "the messianic tension does not tend toward an elsewhere, nor does it exhaust itself in indifference between one thing and its opposite (Agamben 2005, 24). It rather "revokes a condition and radically puts it into question" (Agamben 2005, 23). It is a liberating cut of the very line, which represents the subjectivating cutting of identities. "The messianic vocation dislocates and, above all, nullifies the entire subject" (Agamben 2005, 41). Yet at the same time it encourages to remain, making use of the given identity now celebrated as non-identity.

The point here is that the Messianic makes out of a structural impossibility a possibility as it takes the resistance of the remnant seriously and identifies with this unseen potential lurking at the fringes of identity, which never coincides with itself. The remnant-identity appears at the fringes to de-activate the given. But it withdraws positive appropriations. In its radical weakness, it resists totalization, universalization and the kind of "positivism [... and ...] essentialism

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<sup>38</sup> It might be helpful to draw parallels between this concept of non-identity and the *ego-lessness* suggested by the Indian scholar of religious studies Vengal Chakkarai (Chakkarai, 1993, pp. 78–82). Yet Agamben's notion of *remaining* seems to be a regulative for not falling into what has been criticized as "internalization of oppression" (Orevillo-Montenegro, 2006, p. 25) which leads to an oppressive(!) sacrifice attitude.

[...] in which the position of the [...speaking subject] remains unquestioned" (Spivak 1988, 295f). Talking about it corresponds to hinting at it, such as pointing to a trace (Derrida 2001, 289). To foster this metaphor, messianic remaining, thus, means being a trace, which does not contain anything, but it is not meaningless (dissolved in a whatever), neither. A trace points to something concrete, by the very fact that it lacks it. It is empty.<sup>39</sup>

### (IM)POSSIBILITY OF NON-IDENTITY: TOWARDS AN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS NOT

The most common objection to [...] interreligious dialogue is that those who usually attend these meetings are people who are already 'converts to the cause of dialogue' [...] Even worse is the [...] cynical remark that interreligious dialogue is the field where those people meet who are not at home in any given religious tradition [...] Is dialogue just *l'art pour l'art*? (Evers 2008).

We have come to see how interreligious dialogue fails for reasons of representation, in what we called the withdrawal of the all and the resistance of the remnant. We then approached in-between-categories such as *Homo Sacer* and others and used them as a lens for formulating some problems connected to interreligious dialogue, pointing to the political nature of religion, especially in relation to the private/public-dichotomy. What has repeatedly shown up is the call for an approach daring to move on the threshold between exclusion and inclusion and later on the quest for desubjectivation which avoids the totalizing or universalizing essentialisms mentioned before. This concluding part will sketch how this walk on the tightrope could look like, as it asks: *What could it mean to take an astheneia-inspired As-Not-stand when engaging in interreligious encounter?* As already stated, we will be able to do this only in a very experimental and programmatic way.

#### ***Ex negativo: (Suspended) Identity-As Not and Relativism***

One of the main objections to an engagement in interreligious dialogue with this *as-not*-approach could be the charge of relativism. Yet, we have seen before that an *As-Not*-position in interreligious

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<sup>39</sup> Jürgen Moltmann's understanding of a radical self-emptying of the God-man (kenosis), which peaks in God's absence at Calvary (Deus absconditus), and culminates in its empty grave (resurrectio), helped me conceptualize this (Moltmann, 1974). See also 2.5, footnote 37.

dialogue does not mean indifference, since it also implies a *remaining* in the position where one is. The question follows: How is it possible to stop holding one's identity and yet remain in it? According to Agamben, Paul exhorts a slave to live 'as not being a slave' and yet to remain in the calling of slave (Agamben 2005, 26f). This means neither resigning to be a slave, nor claiming to be a freeman. At most, it could be paraphrased with being a non-slave.<sup>40</sup> What is central here is a specific negation of the status, which questions one's own given identity. It means distancing oneself from one's own identity, yet without grasping a counter-identity and asserting the opposite.

### **To Be or Not to Be: Historization as a Move Towards a Self-emptying, De-activating Remnant-identity**

With regard to interreligious dialogue this suspension of identity, the mentioned desubjectivation, i.e., distancing oneself from one's own identity, could be achieved by a radical historization.<sup>41</sup> Interreligious dialogue As Not means interreligious dialogue opened up for a historization of one's identity. Historization is understood here as a genealogical (diachronous) and archaeological (synchronous) reconstruction, which tries to overcome the chimera of origin and that of teleology (Foucault 1977), such as it is used in postcolonial and cultural studies. An important feature of this understanding is the formal openness of the corpus of historical sources. Such a historization includes a bold and earnest dealing with one's history of exclusions (active and passive), leading to an increased sensitivity for the way the other sees oneself, as the latter is usually the outcome of 'the past'<sup>42</sup>. This move of distancing oneself may lead to a self-exclusion from certain moments of one's own history of identity (i.e. genealogy), thus assuming the non-identity of the remnant. Applying this Cut of Apelles to one's own religious identity, one deliberately becomes a *homo sacer suae religionis*, thus incorporating the outside that is inside.

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<sup>40</sup> Or in the wake of Derrida and Agamben's notion of the Nominal Sentence: Being a non slave.

<sup>41</sup> What follows draws from Michael Bergunder's formal definition of religion and religious movements, such as Esotericism (Bergunder, 2010) and Global Pentecostalism (Bergunder, 2007; Bergunder, 2009a). Operationalizing insights from cultural and postcolonial studies, his work is unique in its attempt to define the object of research of religious studies without essentialistic criteria and keeping the promise of thorough methodological transparency.

<sup>42</sup> We put the past in inverted comma, since the bringing together of the contingent events that represent what is called the past is a performative act taking place in the present.

Further the genealogical-archeological thrust of the suggested earnest historization (in concreto: its opening up the corpus of sources) would mean being open for new data which will resist unquestioned essentialisms due to its very openness. The self-emptying of one's own identity and yet remaining in it, by genealogically tracing it back and locating it within a given religious collective identity (the latter representing the synchronous operation), results in a radical astheneia: One is not clinging to one's claims, and neither does one negate them, assuming to be somebody else. This kind of historization makes way for a de-activation of identity, which allows to be closer to the 'other' in certain questions and matters than to one's 'own camp'. In exemplum, this application of the Cut of Apelles means: non-Christian(s) dialoguing with non-non-Christian(s).<sup>43</sup> At the same time, this kind of historization, which considers the archive as open, invites other *homines sacri suae religionis* of this kind to join the dialogue table, hence showing at least an awareness of the problem of representation and a way of frankly addressing the mechanisms of subjectivation of one's fabric of religion, going beyond the private/public-dichotomy.

### (C)losing Remarks

In this essay, we have done no more than pointing out certain difficulties and articulating them in relation to some Agambian categories, walking along three set of problems which we have called *interreligious*, *intrareligious*, and *intrasubjective exclusion*. In the last section we have identified identity as a neuralgic point of these problems and ventured some reflections on non-identity and desubjectivation. While we might have found possibilities of dialogue lurking beneath the surface of some impossibilities of dialogue, there are new and old questions which remain unsolved. One may raise the fundamental question about the (Foucauldian) ubiquity of power underlying these categories as well as Agamben's historical and argumentative soundness in regards to them (Passavant 2007). Moreover, one may ask whether historization will not lead to elitism anyhow, as most of the people who consider themselves somehow

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<sup>43</sup> Additionally to the *Messianic*, especially the *Pneumatic of Romans* (unfortunately omitted by Agamben, arguably due to his relying on Benjamin) offers prolific avenues of articulation for such an approach from within a *non-non-Christian* framework. A promising starting point could be the *theologia religionum* of Chinese-American Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong (2000) and its exemplification in his latest book on interreligious dialogue entitled *Hospitality and the Other* (Yong 2008). Freed from its legacy to Percian realism this could offer fruitful venues for our discussion.

adherent to a religion do not have access to the corpus of sources (this could turn out to be the new old problem of representation)<sup>44</sup>. Finally one may ask: ‘Who makes and safeguards the rules for such a historization?’—at this point we have come full circle with our reflection on the state of exception—and dismiss the whole attempt to transfer Agamben’s epistemological categories to interreligious dialogue vis-à-vis ‘concrete conflicts and suffering’<sup>45</sup> also due to religious matters. Therefore, this essay does not claim to have any original solutions, but wishes to be an essay in its most literal sense: an attempt to operationalize different instruments which may allow a fresh naming of the new old problems and which may help us to describe them, guessing that this might inspire us to “*pagtuo, paglaom ug gugma...*”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Such as Thomas Biebricher’s ‘backdoor elitism’ mentioned before (Biebricher 2005, 248; 240-242) or in the sense of Gayatri Spivak’s self-critical tone in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1988).

<sup>45</sup> Such as Filipino theologian Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro’s compelling critique of Wong Wai-Ching postcolonial and post feministic concept of “Woman as Subject-in-Process”-Christology: “How can an unstable subject resist an empire’s complex network that seeks to secure its hegemony over the world and to suck the world’s lifeblood in order to feed its own political and economic machineries?” (Biebricher 2005, 248; 240-242). She keeps on alarming us on the danger of postcolonialism accommodating neocolonialism, when she affirms “that postcolonial theory reads” expressions of people struggling against injustice “as a discourse in cultural and literary criticism [which] ‘seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves [...] as postcolonial’” – whereas her (liberationist) approach accused of essentializing “describe the[...] concrete historical conditions” of the author’s mentioned expressions. Connecting with Filipino postcolonial critic E. San Juan, Jr. she argues that “the urgent-life-or-death questions are simply ignored by postcolonial theory” (Orevillo-Montenegro 2006, 174-176). What she withholds is a methodological discussion of the questions of representation (Who are the women in need of liberation? Discussing theologians and narratively illustrating them with episodes might call for further empirical validity) and an epistemological discussion of the base of such a dialectic approach of “urgent-life-or-death” postulates or “concrete historical” reality. Though hers is a theological point, the formal trait of her argument (as well as, what she is silent about) applies to our poststructural and postcolonial approach which is inspired by Agamben’s thought.

<sup>46</sup> “...to believe/faith, hope and love...” (1Cor 13: 13).

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