Khōra table: An attempt at a vulnerable Time-Play-Space for a local practical theological voice seeking global harmonies and offering prophetic discord

Author:
Johann-Albrecht Meylahn[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Johann-Albrecht Meylahn

Email:
jmeylahn@lantic.net

Postal address:
PO Box 14885, Lyttelton 0140, South Africa

This paper sought to investigate a possible grammar for a practical theological voice. The paper begins by reflecting on the different grammars currently dominating the voice of theology in South Africa and seeking a way beyond such dominating grammars towards a more playful grammar that is acutely aware of the incompletion and thus vulnerability of the play as there are unheard voices still to join it. In an attempt to interpret such a space I have made use of Derrida's understanding and use of *Khōra* and brought to this interpretation a specifically Second Testament and kingdom image of the table. The 'table' is a place of invitation, celebration, sharing, hospitality and expectation. By bringing these two together, *Khōra* and table, I sought to describe the space of practical theology, as an open vulnerable grammar, that gives voice to a local theology, which seeks global harmonies and offers prophetic discord in the global dialogue.

The setting of the table: Creating space for a local theological voice

As introduction I would like to describe the setting or the context for such a possible table not by giving the setting a particular name, such as postmodern, post-Christian or post-secular or by any other name for that matter, but rather as practical theology teaches us by naming through describing experiences of this setting (describing the context). In an attempt to describe the setting one could, as one does in everyday language, give a description of *our* time and thereby describe something of the mood of *our* time, the mood of the setting. Can one speak of *the* mood of *our* time? Time is never general or universal, but always the 'temporalisation' of a particular *Dasein* [existence] (Heidegger 1962), so if anything such a description can only be a particular description of experiences of a particular *Dasein's* time. Although it is the 'temporalisation' of a particular *Dasein*, this *Dasein* is always also a *Mitsein* [being with] so in a sense it is the 'our' time of *Mitsein*.

It is impossible to separate time from place, which has already become clear in the everyday use of language, as, in an attempt to describe a place (setting) one can begin by describing the time and thus time is intimately connected to place. Just as time is not a universal general time, but always the time of a particular *Dasein* [existence] or *Mitsein* [being with] so also place is not something general, but always something particular. The particular place of this 'our time' is South Africa. Connecting time to a particular place does not suggest that all people in this particular place (South Africa) share the same time, that is interpretation of time (the 'temporalisation' of *Dasein*). One would need to be more specific and particular, namely the Christian or theological or even more specifically practical theological time in South Africa, although even that would remain a generalisation as not all Christians or theologians or even practical theologians in South Africa or even in Pretoria perceive 'our' time in the same way. These multiple interpretations of time and place, 'places' one in a bind as one cannot escape generalisation, but the alternative would be solipsism, which is most certainly not satisfactory.

In listening to the experiences shared by others, in theological circles and within the faith community, one could speak of 'our' time as certain commonalities can be identified in the stories reflecting on the experiences of the time they are living in. This is probably the best way to understand 'our' time, namely offering each other (the others that make up the 'our' of 'our' time) our stories in the hope that there are enough commonalities in the differences to make understanding possible. Yet when speaking of 'our time' one remains fully aware that there will be many who will not be able to identify with these interpretations of the time that are being described as 'ours', and thus they will inadvertently be included into this 'our' time of the description of this paper, and by this inadvertent inclusion they will feel excluded.

It is exactly such unavoidable exclusion that occurs the moment we write or speak that makes any writing and speaking violent. It is exactly this violence of inclusion and/or exclusion that also

makes it temporary and vulnerable and thus what is offered in these pages is a 'vulnerability', even if at times the mood of the writing may appear otherwise. This vulnerability, which may be classified as vulnerable because it remains open for what is excluded and thus question-marked, is possible because of a hope that such vulnerable openness will create space for continuous dialogue. Time is given into a space or situated in place (*Zeit-Spiel-Raum*[1] [time-play-space]) and there it plays with the Being of beings, and thus creates the language or grammar of 'our' time.

It is this grammar that is sent into 'our' time (the epochal sending of Being in time) that some have experienced as frustrating when it comes to God-talk. This grammar offers various possibilities within this *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* [time-play-space], such as[2]:

- religious fundamentalism, where Being is denied to play with time and it is held captive in a universal timeless place as timeless absolute truth
- religious liberalism, where the playground of time is absolute and everything is relative, relative to time, yet it cannot avoid becoming captive to the desires of the religious consumer or captive to the demands of what is presently politically correct or any other strong contender on the market
- orthodoxy in all its forms, where the grammar of a previous time is absolute and the play of Being and time is forced into that grammar, come what may.

These are experiences of different forms of speaking of God (theo-logy) in 'our' time (our grammar) and this could be perceived as categorising or labelling which would be very logo-centric and most certainly representational, which this article would want to avoid. With the aforementioned information in mind what is being attempted here is not to categorise, but to offer a description of the grammatical possibilities of *our* time with regards to speaking about God and that these possibilities are experienced as limiting.

Is there a way beyond this grammar, this language and this God-talk (theology)? This question does not seek a language beyond the current languages in the sense of finding another language (grammar) that would or could present itself as *the* ultimate or as the better theological language, but it seeks that which is beyond these competing languages towards something truly wholly Other. Can one go beyond grammar and still speak and write? Is there a nongrammatical way of speaking and writing? No there is not, as Derrida said there is nothing outside the text, there is no way beyond the text which is not already text.[3] On the other hand, it is exactly that outside or 'beyond the text' which calls the text forth. How does one think that beyond, that which is otherwise than Being? This nothing (beyond, otherwise) has been thought by different thinkers, for example, Heidegger's nothing from

his inaugural address in Freiburg, *Was ist Metaphysik* [What is Metaphysics] (Heidegger 1949), Derrida's 'nothing beyond the text' and Wittengestein's 'nothing'. All these thoughts of the 'nothing' have one thing in common and that is that although it is a reflection on the nothing it is not nihilistic. They think the nothing, that which is not 'being' something, 'as that which leads (*Es gibt*) to thought'.

The mystics, contemplatives and some artists try to avoid grammar by rather not speaking or writing, but listening to the 'peal of stillness' [4] of this nothing – language that speaks as the 'peal of stillness'. Maybe these poets can offer us some guidelines as to how to 'think' the beyond language or the otherwise than Being.

It is in this context that the table, the space for local theological voice, is set and the setting of the table is exactly there on the border between language and the beyond, the nothing and its peal of stillness. The table is set, seeking to faithfully respond to this *Geläut* [ringing]. What does one name this setting? Some have described this as the end of philosophy (Heidegger 1973). It is certainly the end or death of the metaphysical God, the end of or the overcoming of metaphysics. However it is not so much an end as in death, but rather an end as a limit. But as limit it is also the structural possibility of philosophy, metaphysics and theology, thus maybe it should be called fundamental metaphysics, fundamental ontology or fundamental theology. Not fundamental as in discovering its true essence, as in an absolute ground or reason, but fundamental as in thinking its possibilities, fully aware of (awakened to) its limitations. Awakened to the *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* [time-play-space] in which any thinking, be it phenomenology, ontology, metaphysics, theology or philosophy, takes place and that, this *Raum* [site], is a place of play, child's play with the epochal 'sendings', thus fatally wounding these disciplines. Not fatally as in the death of these disciplines, but fatally as being fully aware of their limits, namely their impossible possibility. To some this may indeed be the end, but to others it is the new beginning as these wounds are also theology's, philosophy's, ontology's and metaphysic's greatest possibilities, within limits of course. Heidegger dreamt of a new beginning, but he dreamt of this new beginning within the parameters of his Greek-German myth (Caputo 1993a). Even without such a myth (metanarrative), but through these wounds, there can be new beginnings. A new beginning like Caputo's book, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Caputo 2006). It is in the hope of such new beginnings that one is invited to sit at this table.

Why *Khōra*?

It is interesting to start a reflection on Khōra, as Derrida (Derrida 1995) writes it, with the question *why* as it is more still than the mystical poet Angelus Silesius'[5] rose without

---

1. Heidegger in his *Vier Seminare* marks off the three stages of his thought-path (*Gedankenwege*). He describes his final stage as thinking the *Ortschaft* [site] the open space within which Being and time play themselves out. In this stage the guide word is not 'meaning of Being' or 'truth of Being', but *Ereignis* [disclosingly appropriates] (Heidegger 1977:82–87).

2. The possibilities listed here should not be seen as exhaustive, but rather as an indication of some of the possibilities offered by the grammar of our time (our epochal sending).

3. There is no outside text (Derrida 1997:158)

4. 'The calling of the dif-ference is the double stilling. The gathered bidding, the command, in the form of which the difference calls world and things, is the peal of stillness. Language speaks in that command of the dif-ference calls world and things into the simple onefold of their intimacy. *Language speaks as the peal of stillness*' [*Geläut der Stille*] (Heidegger 1971:207).

5. Angelus Silesius, 'The rose Is without why; it bloom because it blooms; it cares not for itself, ask not if it's seen' (1976). This couplet is taken up by Heidegger in his essay, *Der Satz vom Grund*, translated into English as *The Principle of Ground* (Heidegger 1974).

why. *Khōra* is without why and yet it gives to thought the question why and in the same breath wounding that question.

Where does this word or name '*Khōra*' come from? *Khōra* is a Greek word that can be translated as the countryside surrounding, the Polis, in other words the space or opening (countryside) in which the polis (the site of human construction) is revealed. Plato interprets *Khōra*, in the *Timaeus*, in similar terms, as the receptacle (space), which is the medium in which the cosmos is revealed. It is the space in which forms take shape. It is the open formless space in which forms are given. I would like to bring these Greek thoughts into dialogue with some Hebrew thoughts taken from the book of Genesis (Gn 4) and the creation, not of the cosmos, but of the first city in the land of Nod. The land (countryside) of Nod is the land of wandering and yet it is the land (space) receptacle that is open to receive the marked Cain and the construction of the first city. It is a land without ground, without home, as it is a land without 'why', not because 'why' is not asked, but because of another more fundamental, but forgotten question: *Where* is your brother? This is the infinite question Cain cannot flee from, the infinite question that asks about the whereabouts of the slain brother which groundlessly and ceaselessly cries out from the very ground that Cain tries to stand on. It is an infinite unavoidable question that asks about the place (the 'where') of the one slain. In this groundless land of wandering the marked Cain constructs the first city (cf. Meylahn 2009). Is this groundless space, this land of wandering (Nod), maybe *Khōra* – the space in which the first polis is constructed? Is this the gracious space in which human construction can take place as wounded and question-marked constructions (cf. Meylahn 2009)? It is a wounded construction because the 'where' of the slain other questions the space of the construction by asking after the space that was denied the other. So the space of the construction is always wounded or marked by the space denied the other in the construction – it cannot escape the question: Where is your brother?

Khōra is maybe a name that we can give to something that is beyond names, but the space into which names, proper names, are called. *Khōra* is maybe the name that can be given to the *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* [time-play-space] of Heidegger's (1971) *A-letheia*, *Ereignis* [disclosingly appropriates] and dif-ference (*Austrag*) or Derrida's (1997) 'différance'? I am not suggesting that all these different concepts can be equated and thereby deny the differences that exist between them, but I do believe that they all point, with their differences, to a certain region (*Ortschaft*[6] [site]), open space – a *Zeit-Spiel-Raum*. Could it be the place of *Ereignis*, the place of the *Austrag* [dif-ference], the place of deferment and difference, namely 'différance'? The *Ortschaft* that receives, that offers hospitality to the event. They point to a *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* where the table is set. I would like to call this *Zeit-Spiel-Raum*, where the table is set, *Khōra*. A name that can be given to the nothing if one can give nothing a name. It is within this space that I would like to interpret this ~~name~~ (which is not a name) as what it names is unnameable. It is that space that gives metaphysics, and yet also fatally wounds metaphysics, and thus it is the space which calls

6. I like the word *Ortschaft,* because it seems to me that it is very close to the original Greek of *Khōra* as *Ort-schaft* expresses something of the place (space) –*schaft* of the *Ort*. It is the place of the place, or the space of the place.

for thought through metaphysics towards the beyond or otherwise than metaphysics and the Being of beings. It is a space that calls for wounded (marked) metaphysical thought about the epochal play of the Being of beings and time. This thought to which Heidegger encourages us is truly wounded, fatally wounded and thus dangerous (Caputo 1986:24). Dangerous as this play of epochal sendings of Being without any myth or narrative is desolate and deserted of hope. One cannot stay in such a desolated deserted desert space. One needs a way to cross it. One needs a way to cross *Khōra*.

How does one approach (think) that which is beyond representation, beyond naming, beyond the Being of beings or otherwise that Being? Heidegger argues that only poetically can one approach and thus think, this beyond that gives to thought (Heidegger 1971). Through poetry, art and thus narrative one can approach (think) that which calls for thought and gives to thought, but the danger is to create a single narrative, a single myth as Heidegger did, a Greco-German myth, thus capturing and confining the play of Being and time within the constraints of a single metanarrative. That is always the danger of any religious or ideological construction – that it is singular and thus exclusive.

Heidegger's mistake was to think what is given to thought exclusively within the ambit of a singular Greek-German narrative. He thought the *Ortschaft* [site] only in Greek as if culturally pure uncontaminated thought is possible. This *Ortschaft* of thought (city or human construction) needs to be thought and maybe one can call it *Khōra*, but not exclusively in Greek, but in Greek-Jewish thought by bringing in the land of Nod.

The land of Nod is not a child's play room (*Zeit-Spiel-Raum* [time-play-space]), although it is very similar as there is also play, but not the random repetitive play of epochal sendings of Being and time, but the play of Being and time with a third playmate, namely the phantoms as the breath of the relentless cry of the murdered br-other (cf. Meylahn 2009), calling to account. Thus the Greek *Khōra*, the play of epochal sendings of Being, is called to account to the infinite cry of the Other in which the voice of God is heard. An element of prophetic justice from the Jewish Genesis narrative is added to *Khōra* as a way to cross the desert.

It is for this reason that *Khōra* needs to be thought together with table.

Why table?

In this article the concept 'table' is joined to *Khōra* because the table is an image that Jesus often uses throughout the Gospels to reveal something of the kingdom – the kingdom which is always still to come in that it is here now. The table is not only a metaphor of the kingdom, it also tells numerous other stories. The table offers gifts. The table invites and thus offers hospitality. The table, of both the Last Supper as well as the tables of the kingdom parables, are open tables that creat space for one more story that has not yet been heard, thereby inviting the other whose murdered (oppressed or marginalised) breath haunts the setting of the table.

Why *Khōra* table?

By bringing these two together the Greek *Khōra* is no longer the random groundless play of Being and time, neither is it the fateful singular Greek-German myth of Heidegger, but it becomes a Jewish-Greek *Ortschaft* [site], thus opening itself for multiple stories, but guided by a desire for justice. This dangerous random play of Being and time which without myth is desolate and deserted of hope has a table – a Jewish-Christian table that offers the hospitality of the kingdom of justice and thus gifts hope to thought.

How?

How should one think, speak or write in this Nodic *Khōra*? Is it not better to remain silent like the mystics and contemplatives? Is it not better to come to the same conclusion as Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest metaphysical thinkers and writers of Christianity, when he spoke to his friend and secretary Reginald, that all he had written is straw? This was after a mystical experience on the morning of 06 December 1273 after which the man of many metaphysical words fell silent (Caputo 1982:9). Is silence the solution or is the silence of the mystics and contemplatives just another form of metaphysics, a silent metaphysics, but metaphysics all the same?

Heidegger (1971) suggested that poetry is the only way to think the *Ortschaft* [site], but only the poets of true poetry and not all poets are granted membership in this distinguished club of true poets. I do not suppose Bruce Springsteen, Tracy Chapman or Johnny Clegg would have been invited to Heidegger's poetry club. Is there another way beyond exclusive singular poetry? Caputo (1993a) suggests a demythologising and a 'remythologising' of Heidegger. We cannot really exist without myths. The question is rather, what myths we use.

Derrida (1997) argues that all we have is the text, so all that is left to do is to deconstruct the text to allow the cry of the other to be heard in and through the text. Schrag suggests that we 'think' the otherwise than Being within the semantics of the gift (Schrag 2002). Kearney thinks the God who may be (Kearney 2001). Caputo thinks radical hermeneutics (Caputo 1987) and more radical hermeneutics (Caputo 2000). These are all new beginnings of thought and that is the real beauty, that there is not one language or grammar to think the 'beyond' of grammar and language, but rather to celebrate the gift of multiple languages that are given once one gets too close to the 'truth' of Being (cf. Gn 11:1–9). To seek one language, one grammar would once again be logo-centric and totalising. This is why Caputo refers to radical hermeneutics, 'Because "hermeneutics" has to do with meaning, and "radical" with the loss of meaning, "radical hermeneutics" is concerned with the meaning of that loss' (Caputo 1986:24). To think *in* the *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* [time-play-space], *Khōra*, where all we have is the text, in fact multiple texts of different times and different genres (biblical, philosphical, movies, poems or popular contempoary lyrics etc.), one can embrace all these different texts, enjoy them, celebrate them and play with them in the *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* without the pressure of forcing them into a hierarchy. In a sense we are given back

everything, our orthodoxy, our fundamental founding texts, our liturgies, our hymns and songs to enjoy. Yet such play relativises everything and would leave one at a loss without any accountability. To think *the* Zeit-Spiel-Raum, *Khōra*, reminds us not of the meaning of these texts, but the loss, its woundedness, namely to think the structural *im*-possible possibility of these texts and thereby to think their limits. To think the limits and their loss of meaning could easily become nihilistic, but within the context of the prophetic voice of the biblical narrative this nihilistic play is cautioned by the voice (unheard cry) of the victim of the play, the marginalised excluded other, and that brings a certain seriousness and accountability into the play as meaning is not sacrificed to endless play, but offered to the other in dialogue.

In a sense everything that one started with has been given back, but differently. All the texts have been retrieved [*wiederholt*], not as the answer to the question 'why', or in competition with each other as the ultimate answer to the question 'why', but wounded by the haunting cry of the other that has been slain, excluded in the saying or said of any text, or the other who has been reduced to the same by forcefully including her or him in the writing of any text. Thus these texts enter into the *Zeit-Spiel-Raum* [time-play-space] as wounded in their original construction by the cry of the excluded other and they remain eschatologically open for the other which is always still to come. It is in the space between the original wounded construction and the openness of the welcome that these texts find their seriousness in their play and where theology, more specifically practical theology finds its seriousness in its play whilst seeking global harmonies and prophetic discord.

References

Caputo, J.D., 2006, *The weakness of God: A theology of the event*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, IN.

Caputo, J.D., 2000, *More radical Hermeneutics: on not knowing who we are*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, IN.

Caputo, J.D., 1993a, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, IN.

Caputo, J.D., 1993b, *Against ethics*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, IN.

Caputo, J.D., 1987, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic project*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, IN.

Caputo, J.D., 1986, *The Mystical element in Heidegger's thought*, Fordham University Press, New York, NY.

Caputo, J.D., 1982, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An essay on overcoming Metaphysics*, Fordham University Press, New York, NY.

Derrida, J., 1997, *Of Grammatology*, transl. G.C. Spivak, John Hopkins, Baltimore, MD.

Derrida, J., 1995, 'Khôra', in T. Dutoit (ed.), *On the name*, transl. I. McLeod, pp. 89–127, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Heidegger, M., 2003, 'Overcoming Metaphysics', *Martin Heidegger: The end of philosophy*, transl. J. Stambaugh, pp. 84–110, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Heidegger, M., 1977, *Vier Seminare* [Four seminars], transl. C. Ochwadt, Klostermann, Frankfurt.

Heidegger, M., 1974, 'The Principle of Ground', in *Man and World, IV*, transl. K. Hoeller, pp. 207–222.

Heidegger, M., 1973, 'Metaphysics as History of Being', in *The End of Philosophy*, transl. J. Stambaugh, pp. 1–54, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Heidegger, M., 1971, 'Language', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 189–210, transl. A. Hofstadter, Harper & Row, New York, NY.

Heidegger, M., 1962, *Being and Time*, transl. E. Robinson & J. Macquarrie, Harper & Row, New York, NY.

Heidegger, M., 1949, 'What is Metaphysics?', (1929 lecture, 1943 Postscript), in W. Brock (ed.), *Existence and Being*, pp. 325–61, transl. W. F. Hull & A. Crick, Vision, London, UK.

Kearney, R., 2001, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Meylahn, J-A., 2009, 'Being thought from beyond our borders: Towards ethical global citizenship', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Art. #56, 30(2), 1–6.

Schrag, C.O., 2002, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Towards a Semantics of the Gift*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL.

Silesius, A., 1976, *The Book of Angelus Silesius. With Observations by the Ancient Zen Masters*, transl. F. Franck, Knopf, New York, NY.