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Internal draft of presentation

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Some remarks on deconstruction and difference in terms of globalization

1. Introduction

At the Methodist Seminary for the German speaking countries, which is placed in Reutlingen, Germany, I am teaching philosophy and biblical languages. I am not an ordained minister, but a lay preacher since 25 years and member of the annual conference. In my professional work I just finished a translation of the Acts, which has been made for young people; it will be published not only as a print edition, but as well as a DVD with lots of information additional to the text. In this summer I will - hopefully - finish a philosophical Latin dictionary. But my core interest is not philology; it is philosophy. In that discipline I am working in the field of systematic philosophy and postmodern thinking. With these biographical notes I just want to give some hints to my personal background so that you may understand more easily what I will do in my presentation.

I decided to enrol at the present Oxford Institute when I read - in the first lines of Oxford Institute's web page - the words "postmodern currents" in narrow context with the word "globalization". These notes obviously want to explain Charles Wesley's expression "the present age"; and they are inevitable to explain the present age. My question is: How can we come to a postmodern reading of our theological essentials? This might be a question similar to the other one: How can we get a theological reading of our postmodern times?

Globalization is a complex phenomenon, it has economical, political, social, cultural, ecological, of course religious and many other aspects [technological, etc.]. And in any of these aspects we find a double perspective: a perspective of unity ("we have to deal with one world, we are living in one global village") and at the same time a perspective of diversity ("different cultures, languages, habitudes, etc. get in contact, and differences suddenly become important").

Postmodernism - to me - seems to be a philosophical interpretation of unity and complex diversity. You all know the famous definition: Postmodernism is the end of the big stories,

the end of the meta-narratives (like the story of never ending progress or increasing freedom or God's *oeconomia salutis*, etc.); so small stories get the chance to be important - as we reflected already two days ago with Pamela Couture's paper. -- Postmodern philosophy began - simply spoken - (in the late 70ies) with a report about new technologies in the administration of knowledge and elitist education (Jean-François Lyotard: *La condition postmoderne* 1979/ Engl.: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984). It developed to a theory, or better: to a multitude of associations about unity and diversity; for example of cultures and religions and languages.

Its basic question refers to language, even to speech. And this question is fundamental for each other question, both in everyday life and in the scientific world.

Some thoughts of my presentation might seem theoretical at first sight, but they will turn out to be extraordinarily practical after a moment of reflection.

I will begin by reading a story of the Old Testament: Gen 11:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version, 1989).

1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

5 The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

6 And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

9 Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Do you know this well-known story as a story of success or as a story of defeat or failure? I guess, one relates Babel to a big defeat of mankind. And one has some good reasons to do so:

-Some verses in the New Testament's Revelation call Babylon (the Greek name for the Hebrew *Babel*) "the mother of harlots and of abominations of the earth" (Rev 17:5, NKJ); others allude to the city of Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire (1P 5:13).

-The iconography - at least in the western world - is clear: Several paintings show the unfinished tower: the plan of mankind was a flop; God punished man.

-Up to the 18th century the story was - without any exception - read as a story of loss: loss of community, loss of a common language, of communication, and - of course - of a big building.

Only the time of enlightenment found some positive aspects in the story [e.g. the settlement of man, the progress of civilization].

Nowadays postmodernism gives a complete different interpretation of this story: It even can be seen as a basic myth of postmodernism. As we will see: it is a story of salving diversity instead of killing unity.

That's why I want to share with you a Derrida-inspired-reading of this story.

(Jacques Derrida, a postmodern French philosopher, living from 1930/ Algeria to 2004/France, speaks about Babel at several occasions.)

2. Language of Adam

The traditional interpretation has been:

God sees the tower and the city of the mortals, he remarks that they all have one language, and he decides to confuse their language. Most interpreters took this confusion for a wound, that had to be cured [Umberto Eco, 347, does so obviously misunderstanding the reading of Derrida (1997, 119)]. This understanding leads immediately to the question: What had been the language like before this confusion?

In Gen 2:19sq. God brought the animals to Adam to see what he would call them. And Adam gave names to all the animals; the Latin Vulgate says: He gave *their* names to the animals (*nomibus suis*); that would mean: He was not free to invent names, but he had to find the right ones.

People of all generations till today tried to find the original language or to reconstruct a similar one (and myths like this one exist in nearly all cultures): Of course the Hebrew language was the first candidate, but other languages (artificially constructed or natural ones) were spoken of as original and universal language. Although common sense realizes,

that the problem of a language of Adam is unsolvable, the dream of a universal language is still alive and there are lots of attempts of constructing a universal language until today:

- The medieval logic developed e.g. by Raimundus Lullus [1232/35 to 1316] with the aim to convert non-Christians (13th century, Spain),
- the *characteristica universalis* of G. W. Leibniz [Brief an Herzog Johann... 1679] (17th century, Germany), which should rationally explain every phenomenon in nature and mankind,
- the modern mathematical logics,
- the artificial language Esperanto,
- perhaps also the international languages of traffic and science (*lingua franca*): Latin for a long time and today English or Spanish.

God confused the language of the people that wanted to be in the centre of the whole world by means of a language that should be universal, a language that should reign the totality of the world, that should be spoken by everyone, that should bring to reason the universe. Such a language might have been able to support peaceful transparency of human community; but at the same time it risks to convert to colonial force. So God interrupts this way of peaceful transparency and the colonial force. He sets free the universal reason from just one nation and reduces its universality. In other words: He forces to translate. (Derrida 1997, 125)

3. Deconstruction

The last sentences have been quotations from Jacques Derrida. Derrida reads this text - as he reads all texts - in a way of deconstruction. Deconstruction is neither a method nor a concept; it is a new way, a new practice of reading. It's hardly possible to explain theoretically what it means. So I take the story of the tower of Babel that has been interpreted by Derrida and has been given new perspectives by his deconstructive reading. At the same time the story of the tower of Babel explains what deconstruction means.

Deconstruction is not just the opposite of construction (to build up a tower - to destroy a tower), but it is an interpretation of the construction and of the constructed. It is an analysis, a dissolution of simple binary opposites of yes and no.

I want to give you some examples of deconstruction that are related to our discussions of the last days. On one hand they will complicate things, but on the other hand they allow new and different perspectives:

-In Joerg Rieger's paper - in his methodical approach - we heard of the opposite of top-down and bottom-up and its evaluation as bad or good (I know, I am simplifying); I intervened two days ago and said that things could develop at the same time top-down and bottom-up (for example the incarnation of Jesus Christ - what an "example"!).

-In Bishop Ivans plenary lecture we found several times the distinction north vs. south. I agree completely with Ivan, but you can observe that the opposite north-south is reflected in the north itself and - if I was right - also in the south itself; more concrete: in the southern part of the world, in the two-thirds-world there are nations (or at least people within the nations) which benefit by globalization (India, China; you could mention Korea); on the other hand in the northern world the risk of declining economic situations (especially by unemployment) concerns the complete lower middle-class because work is much more expensive here than in Romania or even in China.

-I would like to give a third example of deconstructing a simple alternative, because it is important for the subject of globalization: We did not discuss it yesterday, but in one current, the paper of Ken Bedell discusses the media development from writing on stone/ vellum/ papyrus to codex/ paper/ printing press to transistor/ computers and internet. And obviously Ken wanted to reach his intention of education - to combat the ideologies that support imperialism - by means of internet. Deconstructive thinking would say: The most democratic and the most globalized medium - the internet - may easily convert (or intentionally be converted) into a means of imperialism [e.g. you have to pay for being mentioned in Google!].

So these are three examples for deconstructive thinking and reading. One might prolong them into further associations:

Concerning the tower of Babel Derrida contrasts with it the image of the labyrinth. He deconstructs the tower of Babel into a labyrinth, or better: he puts the image of a labyrinth into the image of the tower to gain new ways and new perspectives [Derrida 1987]. When you want to stress the character of the tower to be the centre and to be immobile in the centre, you could contrast with it the image of fluidity; as far as language is concerned: the fluidity of notions [cf. G.W.F. Hegel].

In each case, God himself is deconstructing the tower and the universal language. In Derrida's words: The tower of Babel represents - even exposes - the imperfect. It characterizes the impossibility of accomplishing and completing, of totalizing, of constructing perfectly. So it expresses the necessity of deconstruction [Derrida 1997, 119].

4. Reductive language

Let us have a closer look to Gen 11 to identify another aspect of universal language.

In my first view on the text I put the stress on the universal language in the sense of the language of Adam (nowadays language of logic or the English language or others).

Now I want to tell you, that the world "in the time" of the tower of Babel knew various languages. In Gen 10:5.20.31 we read: "These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, according to his *language* [sg] [...], the descendants of Ham, according to their families, according to their *languages* (pl), and the descendants of Shem, according to their families, according to their *languages* (pl)". Didn't Gen 11:1 tell us: the whole earth had *one language* and the same words? And wasn't this repeated in 11:6 by the LORD himself? So what happens here?

In Gen 10 the Hebrew text uses the normal expression for language: *laschon* (literally *tongue*; Greek: *glōssa*; Latin: *lingua*), it's the common word for *language*, also for the *holy language* of the Jews till today. Whereas Gen 11 uses the word *sapah*, which literally means *lip* (Greek: *cheilos*; Latin: *labium*). I suppose that in this case we have not to deal with a language like Latin or English (that would be *laschon*), but with a language that is necessary to build up a city and a big tower. It is the language of the masters and the rulers, which get their slaves to work. It is a very simple language: "15 man at the other side! 100 bricks on the top now! Etc." It is a language without any space for hope, for trust, for faith, for love... It is a language of slavery. - Is it the language of economy and market in our days?

The aim the mighty men from Babel wanted to reach can be read in 11:4: "let us make a name (hebr. *šem*, like *šem*, the first son of Noah) for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

So when I said some minutes before that God confused the language that had the arrogance to be the one and unique universal language, we now see that God destroys the language of order and obedience. It is not a punishment - at best for those who want to be the mighty men; it is liberation from the language of slavery. By the confusion of languages and the scattering of the people he sets people free. The different languages - in opposite to the one language - give space to differences (the universal language had been the language of indifference). Now there is space for a language of hope, of faith, of trust, of love, space for a language of poetry, a language where the *other* may be right (which is the basic rule of hermeneutics: the other may be right! [cf. H. G. Gadamer]).

Again with Derrida [1997, 124sq.]: God himself is deconstructing. He is the 'decontracter' of universal claims.

5. Difference [Derrida: *Differance*] and Translation

With Derrida we learn: the multitude of languages (and cultures) is not confusion, but a gain for human understanding, although we are forced to translate. Derrida - as other postmodern thinkers [J.F. Lyotard] - maintains that translation in some relevant cases is not possible. To illustrate this he firstly states the word *Babel* which should explain the *confusion* (Gen 11), although the name of Babel is etymologically not evident and it surely does not mean *confusion* (Hebr. *bl*). And secondly he states the name YHWH/ Adonaj, with which God draws back from being understood. The impossibility of translation does not decrease the respect of the *other*, but increases it. Understanding the other always means misunderstanding the other. If understanding with a rate of 100% was possible, the other would no longer be the *other*. So the difference of languages and the problems with translation put a clear stress on the *alterity* or the *otherness* [cf. E. Lévinas].

In yesterday's discussion the word "dissemination" was mentioned. Here in this context it has its best place: It means the scattering of the people of Babel (the tribe of *šem*, that wanted to make a name/ *šem* for itself [I know very well that *šem* and *dissemination* are not linked etymologically - it's just a pun in the sense of Derrida...]), and related to us it means that we as *seminaries* send out our people as *seed/ semen* to tell their own (small) stories and to get the people in the world to find their own words for their small stories (as we heard yesterday from an aborigine woman of Argentine).

So the high-estimation of difference leads to respect of the *otherness*, and last not least for the *others*.

Some weeks ago the pope Benedict gave us a wonderful counter-example, an example of universal language in the sense of the tower of Babel. He published a document about churches. He conceded the protestant churches to have "elements of sanctification and truth". But it is still the Vatican who decides about the true participation at the truth, because the Vatican has and embodies the complete truth and the Roman Catholic Church is - in a strict sense of the word *subsistit* - the one and only church (Derrida calls it "mundialatinisation" and "CD-ROMizing" of the world [Derrida 2000]).

6. Conclusion: Some Theses

I conclude with some theses:

-We are in permanent danger to reduce the multitude of languages (in all senses of the word) to the utopia of one universal language.

-In a globalized world the language of numbers takes priority over the language of words [Nietzsche].

-In a globalized world the language of quantities has precedence over the language of qualities.

-In a globalized world the language of bureaucracy dominates a language of understanding and tolerance.

-In a globalized world a simplifying language of bullet points (Power Point Presentations) replaces the language of hermeneutical thinking.

--In each case of plurality of languages it has to be asked: Is it possible to translate between two languages ("reductive languages"), e.g. between the language of theology or faith and the language of economy. For some postmodern thinkers [Lyotard] this is the main question of our times.

---This paper tried to give a *philosophical* view on *postmodernism*. A *sociological* analysis of *postmodern times* (*postmodernity*) concerning cultural and historical settings might lead to different outcomes (e.g. in the dialectical opposite of fragmentation/ diversity/ individualism and totality/ unity/ community). Postmodern (christian) philosopher Gianni Vattimo sets great store by the statement, that postmodernity is no new epoch following modern times; such an understanding would implicate a completely *modern* expression of progress. Postmodernism is a new perspective on a more and more differentiated modern world (developing by Heideggerian "torsion/ Verwindung").

To conclude finally I want to quote Umberto Eco (355): "We should not see Babel as a sign of defeat and wounding, which has to be cured, but as the key to a new covenant and a new community." And Eco thinks of the counter-story to the tower of Babel, the story of Pentecost from Acts 2, where we find a wonderful community that maintains all cultural and lingual differences.

7. Bibliography

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