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# On Having a Voice: A Political Reading of the Demon

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## Introduction

I will never forget my first week working with Dr. Vítor Westhelle. It was February 2015 during my first year of study at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. For a few years, Vítor Westhelle would spend fall semesters at different academic institutions, either at the University of Aarhus in Denmark or at Escola Superior de Teologia in Brazil. Thus, in Spring 2015, I had my first opportunity to take two classes with him: a graduate seminar on contemporary philosophy on Tuesday nights and his class on Systematic Theology on Wednesday mornings. After that first class on Tuesday night, I was so excited—so excited to have a professor who brought contemporary theory and Lutheran philosophy together; so excited to work with him; so excited...that I was unable to sleep. Not wanting to show up to his morning class without any sleep the night before, I emailed him that I was feeling ill. *Oh, great*, I thought, *this is a great way to start my studies with Dr. Vítor Westhelle*. Little did I know that I would go on to serve as his Teaching Assistant throughout the next four years.

This essay serves as an exploration of an undeveloped theme within Westhelle's work: the demon. This essay will unfold in three parts. First, I will introduce this theme by looking at the theme of the demon in the contemporary imagination with a brief comment about why I believe the demon has been undervalued in contemporary theology; second, I will investigate Westhelle's response to this undervaluing of the demon; and third, I will outline the political and cultural significance of the demon for today's society. My hope is that this rethinking of the demon for today's world serves to honor Vítor in two ways. First, I hope to highlight what he saw in thinking about the demon. Second, I hope to excavate a theme that has been unjustly forgotten in contemporary theology in the hope that such a theme may speak to us anew. I take such excavations to be an important part of Vítor Westhelle's theological method.

## Demons in the contemporary imagination

Do we think about demons in our twenty-first century context? When we hear about the devil or think about demonic possession, what do we think about? What about when we read about Jesus' exorcisms in the New Testament? Do we pause to think about what such exorcisms really mean?

Most of us do not think very much about demons. It might

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be true that *some* of us think about demons from time to time. Some conservative Christians think about demons and the devil when it comes to impurity or lax morality. There was a brief resurgence in thinking about demons and the devil when the film *The Exorcist* came to theaters in the 1970s. It is also important to note that demon-talk is still important in many Asian and African cultures, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic communities in which speaking in tongues, exorcisms, and talk of possession are important parts of the culture. But I believe that many Christians in North America tend not to think about demons. Many Christians tend to consider demons as the product of superstition or as relics of the past. They may think of demons as operating only in more "primitive" societies. As the German historian Wolfgang Behringer writes, "Under the impact of the scientific revolution, economic success, political stability, and other aspects of modernity in Europe and the Americas, Christian theologies started to deconstruct traditional demonology... In the present, theologians seem to avoid the subject."<sup>1</sup>

Take, for instance, the story of the Gerasene Demoniac in Mark 5. In the story, there is a man with a demon, an "unclean spirit." When Jesus comes upon the man with an unclean spirit, Jesus asks the man his name. The man responds, "My name is Legion; for we are many." Jesus commands the spirits to leave the man. The spirits then leave the man and enter a group of pigs before drowning themselves in the sea. Although this story may be

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1. Wolfgang Behringer, "Devil, Satan, Demons and Demonic Powers," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 320.

familiar to many Christians, I believe that many Christians fail to wrestle with the meaning of the story. If asked about the meaning of the story, I suppose many Christians would say that the meaning is that “Jesus is a healer” or that “faith in Jesus can defeat all evil.” However, in doing so, many theologians prove Behringer’s point when he writes that contemporary theologians “seem to avoid the subject” of the demon all together. When interpreting the story, many Christians evade thinking about the demon.

But, then, how do we interpret the demon? What should we do with these texts? In the early twentieth century, the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann argued that contemporary Christians ought to “demythologize” the Bible. In explaining what he called the project of demythologization, Bultmann wrote, “This method of interpretation of the New Testament which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions I call *demythologizing*—an unsatisfactory word, to be sure. Its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them.”<sup>2</sup> I think that we can take Bultmann at his word when he says that he does not want to do away with the “mythological” and rather wants to reinterpret it for the contemporary world. However, here is the issue: When Bultmann and other contemporary theologians reinterpret the text, they bring their own contemporary assumptions to the text. Moreover, when theologians who are from the dominant culture within society reinterpret the text, they often reinterpret the text in such a way that reinforces their own assumptions as *the* meaning of the text. This, I think, accounts for why the demon has been ignored in twentieth century theological imagination. When individuals read about the devil or demons in the New Testament, they cast the notion aside as something “primitive” or “outdated.” I believe that this is a mistake. In what follows, then, I will try to develop an interpretation of the demon for our contemporary society.

## Of demons (and idols)

In developing a contemporary understanding of demons, I want to turn to Vitor Westhelle’s concept of “the demon” that he develops in his book, *The Church Event*. In this work, Westhelle develops a political reading of sin in juxtaposing “the demon” and “the idol.” Both concepts, the demon and the idol, describe the effects of sin on the community. In other words, rather than seeing sin as a moral failing or merely a strain on the individual’s relationship with God, Westhelle uses the demon and the idol to signify sin’s relationship with power. Westhelle argues the idol is produced by those in power: “‘Hubris,’ ‘pride,’ and ‘sin of strength’ have been concepts used to describe the human behavior, the ‘spirit’ that produces idolatry: the drive to be like God.”<sup>3</sup>

Examples of idolatry abound in our society. “Money” is an idol; “fame” is an idol; “power” itself is an important idol. In my

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dissertation, I make the claim that “whiteness” is an idol in so far as whiteness determines social relations in twenty-first century American life. In the spirit of *theologia crucis*, the prophetic work of the church is to “call a thing what it is”—namely, to problematize our society’s infatuation with idols. However, Westhelle incisively points out that there is a corollary to the idol—the demon. While the idol is the “sin of strength,” the demon is the “sin of weakness.” Westhelle writes, “Different from the idol, the demon makes its appearance by an act of invasion, by possession. Instead of the self-assured positivity of the idol, the demon negates.”<sup>4</sup>

As the sin of weakness, the demon is the condition of the powerless. The demon is the condition of those who have been invaded by another spirit or power. In following Westhelle’s description of demonry and from narratives of demonry in the New Testament, we come to the following three conclusions about how the demon invades individuals.

*First, the demon invades individuals by robbing them of their authenticity.* In the New Testament, we see the association of the demon with muteness or other physical disabilities, such as the inability to walk. In Matthew 12, for instance, Jesus heals a demoniac who was both blind and mute. Likewise, in Luke 4:39, the demon is associated with a sickness or fever. Most dramatically, some demoniacs in the New Testament appear to be mentally ill. In Mark 9, the boy with a demon gnashes his teeth and foams from the mouth. Some others, as with the Gerasene demoniac, have been relegated to the edges of society due to their mental illness. In all of these narratives, the demon robs the individual of their authenticity. Westhelle writes that “A demon prevents one from speaking one’s word, from naming one’s world.”<sup>5</sup> In these episodes, the individuals are unable to function in the world, either physically, mentally, or socially.

*Second, the demon invades individuals from the outside (extra nos).* Westhelle writes, “The demonic is the spirit of being homeless, of no longer belonging, of having been invaded, fragmented and shaken. As a spiritual reality, the demon comes from the outside.”<sup>6</sup> In John 9, we have an interesting dialogue between Jesus and his disciples concerning a man who was born blind. John 9:2-3 reads, “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or

2. Rudolf Bultmann, “Jesus Christ and Mythology” in *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (San Francisco: Collins, 1987), 293.

3. Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of the Church Protestant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 97.

4. Westhelle, *The Church Event*, 99.

5. Westhelle, *The Church Event*, 99.

6. Westhelle, *The Church Event*, 99.

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his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’” With his answer, Jesus asserts that such conditions arise from the outside of the individual. In other words, blindness, muteness, and mental illness are not the result of the sin of the individual; rather, these conditions are part of the structure of sin. The New Testament presents a similar reality with respect to demons. Put differently, the New Testament presents demons as simply part of the social structure. In response, Jesus heals individuals because they are children of God.

*Third, the demon invades “the weakest among us” in society.* In the New Testament, the demon invades those at the margins of society. The demon invades women and children. When the demon invades men, the men become paralyzed, mute or dumb, which relegates them to the margins of society. The demon is associated with “the abject,” those who are at the margins or those who have been pushed to the margins because of their condition. This is why Jesus’ healing of those with demons became such a radical act. Jesus transgressed the social boundary between clean and unclean by meeting and healing them. More than that, however, the demon locates the boundary between the powerful and the weak in our society.

### Having a voice: the political reading of the demon

In a previous section of this paper, I sought to demonstrate that the demon has been misunderstood in contemporary theology. In this final section of the paper, I argue for a political reading of the demon for our contemporary world. More than simply a phenomenon of ancient mythology, the demon names a reality that conditions our world. The demon names a reality that pervades our structures and robs us of our authenticity. Demonology is another name for what theologians call systemic sin (Vitor would name it as the *hamatiosphere*). Systemic or structural sin can be thought of as “the sin that lives in the structures of our corporate life and the linguistic patterns of our culture...sin [that has] become so normalized and so seemingly natural that we are unable to see it as sin.”<sup>7</sup> Demonology can also be likened to the concept of *han*

in Minjung theology. The theologian Andrew Sung Park defines *han* in the following way:

Han is the suffering of the innocent who are caught in the wicked situation of helplessness. It is the void of the soul that cannot be filled with any superficial patch. This void is the abysmal darkness of wounded human beings... *han* is a physical, mental, and spiritual repercussion to a terrible injustice done to a person, eliciting a deep ache, a wrenching of all the organs, an intense internalized or externalized rage, a vengeful obsession, and the sense of helplessness and hopelessness.<sup>8</sup>

Demonology, then, accounts for the structural dimension of sin. In today’s contemporary world, sociologists have shown us ways that sexism and racism are structural realities that create and oppress those whom society deems as “Other.” The language of the demon, then, gives a theological vocabulary to these oppressive systems.

When we return to the biblical narrative, we see that the phenomenon of the demon is the phenomenon of “losing your voice.” In Matthew 9, for instance, the demoniac had lost the ability to speak. After Jesus healed the individual, the individual regained their ability to speak. The ability to speak is a significant assertion for our sense of self, either individually or collectively. The ability to speak, to have a voice, has deep political significance, especially within Western liberal democracies. In concluding this essay, I will offer a political theology of the demon by thinking closely about what it means to have a voice. Although this political theology will be thought within the context of the United States and its socio-cultural conditions, I believe such a political theology of the demon can be contextualized in different cultures or societies.

First, to have a voice is to be represented politically. The principle of “one individual, one vote” has been a central pillar of democratic societies through modernity. Within the United States, the democratic principle of “one person, one vote” has been central to American governance. However, this fundamental right has not been given to all citizens throughout the country’s history. During the era of Jim Crow, southern blacks were subjected to oppressive practices, which sought to disenfranchise millions of eligible voters. These oppressive practices included literacy requirements or the establishment of poll taxes. In June of 2013, the Supreme Court invalidated the Civil Rights legislation that sought to remedy these patterns of discrimination, which opened a new era of voter disenfranchisement in the United States. In recent years, conservative politicians have enacted “Voter I.D. laws” that have disproportionately barred black and brown citizens from having the right to vote. In so doing, these policies have taken the voice from these individuals who have the fundamental right to pick leaders to represent them politically in the United States Congress. Theologically, these forces of voter suppression are demonic

(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 152-153.

8. Andrew Sung Park, “The Bible and Han” in *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of Sinned Against*, eds. Andrew Sung Park and Susan Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 47-48.

7. Serene Jones, “What’s Wrong with Us? Human Nature and Human Sin” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William Placher

because they take away the voice of citizens of the United States.

Second, to have a voice is to be represented culturally. Many people within the United States do not feel that they are represented by the mainstream culture. In other words, when they watch television or a movie, they “do not see themselves” on the screen. This is a problem of cultural representation. Throughout the history of culture within the United States, cultural or social minorities did not see themselves represented culturally. For decades, romantic comedies or family sitcoms featured storylines or cast members that only reflected the experiences or lifestyles of white people. Single women and members of the LGBTQIA community were left out of these cultural narratives, as were immigrants, African Americans, Asians or Latino/a individuals. More recently, as Hollywood movies and TV shows have begun to privilege stories and cultures that have long been underrepresented, some conservative Americans have argued that they no longer see themselves represented in the cultural institutions within the United States. This issue of cultural representation is also an issue of not having a voice.

Third, to have a voice is to be represented in memory. Contemporary Americans view life and death in terms of a biological binary: one is either dead or one is alive. For this reason, many Americans foreclose the discussion of death in everyday life. This foreclosure distinguishes American culture from many other cultures, which have a much more robust and healthy dialogue around death. As a result of this foreclosure, death does not play a role in popular consciousness of Americans. This American attitude toward death is a form of the demonic because it robs the voice of the generations that have gone before us. In recent years, political theologians have begun to emphasize the role of memory as a way of talking about death. Johann Baptist Metz identified “dangerous memories” within Christianity that speak to the ways in which the memories of those who have died continue to “haunt” the present and shape the future. In her analysis of Metz’s concept of “dangerous memories,” Diana Hayes proposes that “dangerous memories” call for the church to be an agent of liberating action

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in the world. Hayes writes, “It is that paradoxical memory that enables Christians to confront the indifference of today’s world and to challenge it toward a future beneficial to all...As the bearer and public witness to the tradition of a dangerous memory, the church must, in its teachings and confessions of faith, spell out this memory publicly and concretely.”<sup>9</sup> By allowing those who have gone before us to speak to us, we can give their voice back to them.

## Conclusion

In the New Testament, demoniacs are represented as those who do not have a voice and those who are marginalized from society. Upon their encounter with Jesus, they are given a voice and they reenter the society. When we think about what these narratives mean for our own lives, we need to think about the conditions that led to the demoniac in the New Testament society, conditions such as loneliness, alienation, and isolation, as well as the social conditions that give some a voice while silencing others. We might find the same forces alive and well in our society. The work of people of faith, then, is to seek out and listen to those voices in today’s society. In doing so, we can live into a society that values all stories.

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9. Diana Hayes, “Johann Baptist Metz” in *Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox: 2011), 214.