

Ukraine war: A war of languages and bodies

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This research is part of the research project, 'Religion, Theology and Context', directed by Prof. Dr Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:

Received: 06 Aug. 2022

Accepted: 05 Sept. 2022

Published: 19 Dec. 2022

How to cite this article:

Meylahn, J.-A., 2022, 'Ukraine war: A war of languages and bodies', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a8005. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.8005>

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For most readers, myself included, the views and opinions on the Russian attack and consequent war in Ukraine are dependent on the main media houses, who present the situation in a certain language. In this article, Badiou's understanding of democratic materialism (languages and bodies) will be explored within the context of the war, and how language is used to order bodies into categories of good and evil. In democratic materialism, there are only bodies and languages, but no truth. The question that will be explored in these few pages is, is there a way beyond democratic materialism via truth towards a materialist dialectic?

Contribution: The paper contributes to the current discussion on the war in Ukraine and tries to make sense of the geopolitical context of the war. It then seeks to engage with these discourses from a theological perspective.

Keywords: war; Ukraine; Badiou; Christ poietics; public theology; peace; justice; ethics.

Are there only two opposing options: Friend or enemy?

Alain Badiou (2005, 2009:4) argues that in democratic materialism there are only languages and bodies. In such a democratic materialist context, it is interesting that through the Western media,¹ the world is currently being fed two opposing bodies, each circumscribed within a particular language. The first body is presented as the male rapist, totalitarian dictator – the epitome of toxic and backward masculinity, while the other is presented as the people-friendly comedian who rises to become the 'true' leader of the oppressed and suffering Ukrainians. The second body is presented as the noble leader of the Ukrainian people whose only desire is Western freedom and democracy, but through Russian imperialism, they have become the victims of a savage and aggressive war. Selenskyj has, via Western media, become for many the epitome of the new rational Western liberal male. He stands for a new generation of Western men who are in touch with their sensitive and emotional side while being able and capable of leading a people from oppression towards self-determination and liberation. This rather simplistic image of good verses evil is what the dominant Western media would like to feed the world. This polarisation into good verses evil is then embodied in two clearly opposing bodies, characteristic of two very different types of masculinity, which fit neatly into two opposing world views (languages), where the one is clearly evil and the other is good and righteous. These two men are presented as embodiments of two very different worlds with opposing values, namely the Western, liberal, democratic, human rights conscious Europe together with the USA and on the other hand the totalitarian, dictatorial, outmoded, backward, oligarchic and Orthodox Russia. One needs to keep in mind that in the West there are no oligarchs – only well-wishing philanthropists, who want to serve the interests of freedom and democracy. If only the world was so simple, then taking sides and knowing that one is on the right side of history (on the side of the good guys), would be as easy as the media wants one to believe. This begs the question: is taking sides the most important thing to do in times like these?

It seems that in the information age of the fourth industrial revolution, the populace cannot deal with more than two opposing images. In the past two years it has become clear that where the option is either to be for or against vaccines. Again, it is immediately a matter of good verses bad and even evil. What has happened to the idea that there should be open, rigorous and critical discussions and that this was once the hallmark of a healthy democracy?

Such a lack of willingness to listen to different views with the intent to engage in rigorous critical debate does not bode well for the future of the globe. The result is that today there are only two options or two very neat images of two male *bodies* belonging to two different worldviews, where one is clearly good, right and righteous and the other is evil, bad and wrong. These two opposing bodies are not only different, but they are also enemies, where the one is a DC-style hero and the

1. When I refer to Western media, I am not comparing it to any other media; it is the only media that I currently have access to.

other is clearly the villain. In such a clear world of good versus evil, it is basically impossible not to decide on whose side one is, and this decision will determine your friends and enemies and your moral character. It seems that in a democratic materialist world, openness for debate and listening to dissenting opinions have all but disappeared. The public opinion is first created, and then through oversimplified opposing poles, it is confirmed, with the result that after the majority opinion has been determined (constructed), it would be suicidal for any political party to debate anything else in parliament than this dominant public opinion. This might explain how Germany could get a rather controversial matter through parliament, by voting for a historical increase in military spending without any substantial debate in parliament or in the major media houses. Vilem Flusser's (2018) analysis of a universe of technical images might help one understand this phenomenon – the phenomenon that debate and discussion have become obsolete in countries that once prided themselves on nurturing critical thinking, and a culture of rigorous debate. He argues that subjects begin to mirror their media images; this happens through various feedback loops, or today one could argue through various algorithms, to such an extent that subjects in a democratic materialist world begin to become their media images. In the language of Badiou, one could say; there are only images and bodies. Such a democratic materialist world is very easy to govern, as one basically has a totalitarian state but with all the so-called democratic checks and balances in place so that nobody would dare argue that the state or system is totalitarian. As Badiou argues, there are languages and bodies, and if the language is controlled – not openly with direct restrictions on media freedom, but self-controlled or self-regulated, thanks to algorithms as in a control society (see Deleuze 1992), the bodies will shape up and do and think exactly as they should – as the image expects of them, and likewise, the image will be exactly what the body expects the image to be.

Beyond friends and enemies

Badiou (2009:4) offers a glimmer of hope in times like these when he argues that there are not only bodies and languages but also truth. Not the old metaphysical truth of totalitarian regimes, but truth – more like a Freudian slip, or like a dream, a nightmare, where things appear beyond the power of conscious censorship (algorithmic and direct censorship), beyond what the conscious world wants to believe. For example, the various racist utterances by different media outlets,² utterances that should never have been published according to the politically correct censorship of the West. In these utterances, things, maybe truths, were said about Europe's self-understanding that should never have been said publicly, at least not according to the dominant 'European' ideology of universal human rights, yet these

2. <https://thewire.in/media/ameja-ukraine-crisis-racism-bias-western-media>. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/28/ukraine-coverage-media-racist-biases/>. <https://www.politico.eu/article/what-the-crisis-in-ukraine-tells-us-about-ourselves-race-war/>. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/ukraine-refugees-racial-bias-western-media-b2024864.html>.

utterances (truths) *slipped* out. These slips of the tongue that escaped the politically correct censorship told an alternative story, maybe one could be so bold as to argue that these slips of the tongue told the unconscious truth. The truth about Europe with its preference for white middle-class 'Western-educated' European bodies, and therefore that it was never about universal human rights or universal anything – it has maybe always been only about white Europeans and Western values. The problem with closed neat language bodies or the problem with simplistic Manichaeic 'Good versus Evil' narratives is that too much is excluded, and too many wonderful disruptive and thus creative contradictions are suppressed. The same media that presents Selenskyj as a hero does not mind the macho men in his close circle of financial supporters when he was seeking to win the election³. Is he really that which the media wants the people to believe? Stupid question, no image is ever a 'true' capturing of what is, and that is the whole point: there are languages and bodies and then there is truth. The image of the good ethical West has too many skeletons in its own closet. Such slips of the tongue or such disruptions of the dominant argument should not be seen as the final truth or presented as an either-or, nor are they intended to argue that because the West has committed various crimes against humanity or is committing these crimes in other parts of the world, it is okay for Russia to do the same. No, it is time to move beyond such dualisms and focus on the suppressed, by focussing on the disruptive contradictions. Such a focus would begin by focussing on the victims of war, the workers of war not the ideologues of war. Focus on the workers of the war: The soldiers, the civilians, the mothers, the sisters, the brothers and the fathers, rather than on the ideologies of the different sides. These victims, workers or soldiers, are the wounded bodies of war, the brutal reality that defies the abstract symbolisation in the language of the good or just war or even a defensive war versus the criminal, unjust and aggressive war.

If one wants to talk about international law and war crimes, then there is no argument: Russia's attack on Ukraine is a direct contravention of international law, and it deserves international outcry and the strongest condemnation. This language of international bodies is deeply connected to bodies, that is, it is situated. It is connected to the bodies that decide and pronounce what is a crime and what is not; it is connected to the bodies that commit the crimes, and it is about the bodies against whom these crimes are committed. If it is the USA, UK, France or Germany or Israel that invades, or attacks, for example, Palestine, Yemen, Libya, Yugoslavia and as long as it is done in the name of democracy as interpreted by NATO, then it is not a crime. And as long as it is not against European bodies that such crimes are committed. If there is an attack against a European body in the name of a non-European body of values, then it is the responsibility of the international community (body) such as the United Nations to unanimously condemn any such attack or invasion and to add to their verbal condemnation the necessary actions in the form of economic sanctions together

3. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/kolomoisky-praesidentschaftswahl-in-der-ukraine-selensky-1.4418172>.

with sporting, cultural and academic boycotts. I am not relativising the Russian attack on Ukraine or condoning it in any way. It is a crime, just like any other invasion of a foreign state is a crime.

So indeed, there is language, there is law and these languages and these laws are connected to bodies, and then there are contradictions. There is the language of powerful bodies that make global claims and there are bodies of those on whom these claims are pronounced, and then there are truths, Badiou argues. From psychoanalysis, one knows that these unconscious 'truths' have an uncanny way of often getting said at the most inappropriate moments and that these truths are revealing in a disruptive sense.

Žižek (2022), writing about the war in the Ukraine, refers to the tweet by the Slovene government on February 25:

The refugees from Ukraine are coming from an environment which is in its cultural, religious and historical sense something totally different from the environment out of which refugees from Afghanistan are coming. (n.p.)

The tweet was soon deleted after an outcry, but it was out there. Žižek argues that the truth was out, it is about Europe defending itself from non-Europe – it is all about a war between two worlds, two sets of languages that order bodies differently.

What do these unconscious 'truths' reveal? What do they disrupt? Well, not much, besides that there are languages and bodies and then there are truths, in other words, these languages spoken by bodies (NATO) connected to and ordering other bodies are not all that there is, but there is always something else: truth, contradiction and disruption. Truth, not understood in the traditional sense of an absolute or universal or metaphysical truth, but in the sense of exactly that which haunts, disrupts and disturbs these language bodies and calls these language bodies into continuous and *infinite responsibility*. It is exactly this calling into *responsibility*, which is now maybe the task rather than self-righteously placing oneself on the right side of history.

An infinite responsibility

That is why these disturbing truths, these haunting and disruptive truths should alert any semi-critical reader of recent events, that one should not just believe the loudest and most dominant language, irrespective of whose or which powerful body speaks or pronounces these world-ordering words that seek to place each body into a rightful moral-ethical position and time-place. In psychoanalysis, it is the unconscious that erupts in symptoms, thereby exposing the conscious world to its unconscious truths. In Todd McGowan's (2019) reading of Hegel, it is exactly these contradictions that call one into responsibility. Truth events, historical events in politics, science, art and love and one could add faith (Boer 2011) erupt when these truths, contradictions, unconscious truths push through the conscious surface, push through the tightly bound connection

between bodies and languages of democratic materialism, carrying with them the potential for truly transforming the world, if faithful subjects (Badiou 2009:47) can be found to heed the calling of these contradictions, the calling of these unconscious slips of the tongue, faithful to stand in the disruption of the dominant ideology. These truths call faithful subjects forth to stand in the disruption of the dominant language as the truth procedure irrupts (Badiou 2009:47; Meylahn 2018:114). There will, naturally, always also be other subjects around promoting the dominant language body by defying the truth or seeking to obliterate the truth, such as the reactive subject and the obscure subject (see Badiou 2009:47).

What exactly is being called forth at this stage of current events is not clear. What is clear, is that there are contradictions and that the ideology (language) of the West is challenged in the face of these contradictions, even if the media is trying its best to present a comprehensive, unquestioningly stable, and even glorious heroic story of the good free West against the dictatorial enemy of freedom and democracy, and that now is the time for the free world to unite to protect the future of the children of the free world (see Baerbock's speech at the United Nations⁴), and that all *decent* human beings should now stand together against a common enemy. To become aware of the contradictions does not automatically translate into the idea that the truth is on the opposite side or to turn the table and make the Russians or the Chinese the good guys and NATO the bad guys. Russia and China are both likewise caught in their own language games disrupted by their own contradictions and unconscious truths. Times like these do not call for taking sides, as is currently expected. Taking sides is only possible in a world where there is only a simple choice: to be either pro-Ukraine or pro-Russia as if there are no alternatives. Just because one witnesses the contradictions in the world one is part of does not automatically mean that one is an enemy of that world or a spy, collaborator or traitor of that world. Although that might have been the fate of many faithful subjects of the past, for example, Luther, who was seen by the Catholic Church as a traitor, just because he saw the contradictions in the dominant dogma of the Roman Christian Empire.

What is maybe necessary currently is the birth of a collective that is bold, disruptive and *faithful* enough to endure the contradictions of the failing languages, to allow those failures to call forth and give birth to a new body and bodies as these unconscious truths, these contradictions seek new language, seek new worlds, and then faithfully offer these contradictions words, words (language) that can re-order bodies into a new world, or at least into a transformed world (Badiou 2009:102; Meylahn 2018:124).

Faithful subjects are called for

Religions have certainly also committed heinous crimes in the past and present against bodies, specifically against certain bodies, be it the bodies of women, children or the LGBTQIA+ community or the bodies of animals and yet, religion, and I

⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82DQEnkkWF4>. Accessed 15 March 2022.

am specifically referring to the three monotheisms, also have a long tradition of heeding the Call, of faithfully seeking to respond to the Call. In these traditions, there are wonderful stories of faithful subjects heeding the Call. The Call very often arises in times of disruptive contradictions. The Call of these disruptive contradictions calls faithful subjects forth and yet too often religion responds, rather than faith. When religion responds, it soon creates a religious community, which confuses the hearing of the Call with their own construction of a Text: the law (will) of God – The Law (Will) of God, dogmatic formulations about the precise nature of Christ and the soteriology that goes with it, the exact words to the letter of the prophet. Thus, the Call was cast in stone (literally as on Mt Sinai).

This seems to be the natural human tendency: to respond to the Call with religion, a religious system with laws, dogmas, truths, etc., all that which enables the community to judge what is right and wrong, good and evil. Yet, in the Jewish-Christian tradition, the story about responding to the liberating call has an interesting twist. Moses does indeed receive from God, God's Will (the law in the form of the Ten Commandments), where God's will is cast in stone to be the eternal and universal Law. However, these two stone tablets are eventually lost, and this turn in the narrative of the people of the law is important: That the response to the Call is not cast in stone. In other words, within this tradition of a faithful people responding to a Call, there is no record cast in stone of the coming to language of this Call.

Indeed, these religious traditions, who believe they alone have – in their response – the true and only Will of the Call (God), have created havoc with their belief that they alone know the truth of the Call, they alone have the handbook of the new world or know the way back to the lost paradise or they alone know the way to the paradise to come or they have the key that opens the door to the heavenly realm, but the truth is, they do not. What they do have is a beautiful tradition of grappling with this idea of being called into responsibility, of seeking to be faithful to a Call, that according to a wonderful Rabbinic tradition, is nothing more than a breath given by God (see Denecke 1996:89), waiting for humans to give this breath words.

I am not seeking to promote any one of these three monotheisms, not even monotheism as such, but I am arguing that maybe these three traditions have something to offer, concerning the faithful response to an as yet undefined Call that is seeking language and together with language a re-ordering of bodies. The fragile and often disastrous human responses of these religious traditions are a testimony to the fragility and finiteness of the responses, as recorded in the history books of the Old Testament, for example.

What could a new collaborative movement – namely all those who hear the Call, who witness the contradictions and realise, that it is a new finite truth that is seeking to be born to

reorder and redefine the bodies and thereby transform the world – learn from these traditions?

What could be learned?

The Call needs language and with language, both the Caller and the called receive a body, in other words, the language constructs a Caller as it constructs the called (see Meylahn 2021:54f.). Before the language of the response the Caller does not exist, besides as unconscious irruptions, disruptions of the dominant language, as contradictions, as slips of the tongue, as intensity. Or as Badiou (1999:80) might say, as holes in knowledge. The Call, or for Badiou Truth, exists as holes in current knowledge, as disruption and as dissonance in contemporary understanding.

These irruptions and contradictions need to be heard – they need faithful subjects who hear them and respond to them, for example, Abram-Abraham, Moses, Samuel, the prophets, Jesus, Saul-Paul, Luther and many others. The faithful subject hears and finds language (poetic task) to respond to this Call (Meylahn 2021). Not the ideological call to war or the ideological call to defend democracy and Western values, but the Call of these contradictions – disruptions, holes in the ideologies and religions – that calls one to think, debate and move beyond the simplistic narrative of good verses evil based on one or other ideology or religion. Can the world truly afford an arms race, the continuous exploitation of natural resources in the form of oil and gas, and thereby conveniently forget the global climate crisis? It is time to respond to this Call with thinking, with faithful subjects who rise to the Call by seeking a new language, not repeating and using the old language that attempts to force the irruptions back into law and order or force compliance to a certain set of values. In the past, and specifically in the biblical stories, this poetic task of responding faithfully to the Call was believed to be a response to God. In the different biblical responses to the Call, there were diverse interpretations of God as Caller, for example, as the liberating God, the God of the Law, the God of the covenant, the Father of Jesus, the God of Grace, the God of faith, the God of love, the God of the church.

What becomes immediately clear is that both the identity of the Caller and the called change each new coming to the language of the Call – this could be explained with Badiou's concept of materialist dialectic. In other words, it is the Call (call is the Real, that is the contradictions, the haunting disruptions in democratic materialism) that calls forth a new language, a new narrative of Caller and called with the possibility of a new world – calling forth new language and new bodies (see Meylahn 2021:293f.).

In this sense, one could argue that there is a prayerful poetic-political task ahead, so instead of unfriending all those who do not share one's views on the conflict or putting the Ukrainian flag on your status, hear and collaborate with others who hear the Call-of-the-contradictions and help create a new world beyond this simple narrative of good verses evil. The current option is to just repeat by copying the

noise that the media bodies and political bodies want to be repeated so that they can make a profit by continuing to control, in the sense of limiting, the creative scope (by controlling the language and by implication controlling the bodies) of the current body-language world of democratic materialism or to be a faithful subject hearing the Call and responding faithfully and not religiously.

If one only repeats the dominant religious (ideological) response, as if there are no alternatives and as if this is the real world, then this is what capitalist realism wants the world to believe, as Mark Fisher (2013) argues. It is the purpose of capitalist realism to convince the world that there are no alternatives and that this global finance capitalist world is indeed the only real world. Such repeating of the prescribed text could indeed lead to WWII or a nuclear war and certainly speed up the climate crisis.

What does it help to further divide the world into friend and enemy, when we could create a new world where there is neither Russian or Ukrainian, woman or man, socialist or capitalist?

The holes in knowledge – be it the holes in scientific knowledge, holes in the various political ideologies, holes in art or holes in love – call for poets who can faithfully respond to the truth as Badiou understands truth. ‘A truth is thus precisely what insists as an exception to the forms of the “there is”’ (Badiou 2005:23). Mark Fisher argues, that the ‘there is’ wants one to believe that there are no alternatives to the *there is*: only bodies and languages of democratic materialism. Badiou argues that there are bodies and languages and then there is truth as an exception to the *there is*. This truth is the Call that calls faithful subjects forth (Badiou 2009:47) who respond by poetically constructing alternatives to the *there is*. These alternatives are not the new *there is* but is a materialist dialectic eternally responding to the call of the exception of the *there is*. In this sense, faithful subjects subtract themselves from the community of bodies and languages (see Badiou 2005:24) by responding to the Call by proposing yet unknown alternatives, like Abraham leaving his known world behind, or the liberation of the slaves from Egypt wandering in the desert towards an unknown land and the call of the disciples leaving their known worlds behind and opening themselves to the future.

The holes in the dominant knowledge concerning the war in Europe or the climate crisis are calling out for faithful subjects. May the heroes of faith in the monotheistic traditions inspire faithful responses to this crisis to open yet unknown alternatives.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author’s contributions

J-A.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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