DERRIDA'S REFLECTION OF IDENTITY IN THE ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract:

Ekumenisme adalah gerakan untuk memulihkan kesatuan di antara gereja-gereja kristen. Hambatan terbesar dalam gerakan ini ialah kuatnya identitas masing-masing tradisi gereja. Identitas itu terungkap lewat dogma maupun ajaran gereja, singkatnya lewat bahasa. Melalui pemikiran Jacques Derrida, artikel ini mengupas secara tajam problem kebahasaan yang membentuk identitas itu serta konsekuensinya bagi ekumenisme. Sebuah teologi ekumenis bukan sekedar refleksi teologis atas gerakan ekumenisme, tapi juga mencarikan solusi atas kebuntuan ekumenisme. Solusi itulah yang ditawarkan artikel ini lewat terang pemikiran Derrida.

Keywords: deconstruction, difference, identity, language, ecumenical theology

This title begs contribution from extra-theology area for ecumenical theology. It is a wide range area. That is why I choose Jacques Derrida, a linguistic philosopher, who addresses a very basic question for identity. His answer to that question becomes the first part of this essay. In applying Derrida's theory on identity for ecumenical theology I have to stick on his idea of *differance*, which is the key word in order to understand Derrida's project. Then I try to relate Derrida's theory to the problem of identity. And at the end I will give implications Derrida's theory to ecumenical theology, especially its dialogical concern.

1. Stating the Problem

The important of language is becoming a major theme of the world Church today. The acknowledgement of contributions from outside theology, especially social sciences and philosophy, broaden our understanding of language. People are becoming more and more aware of how language differences affect communication; one only need think back to the great Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries to realize how language can be a barrier to, as much as a vehicle, for communication. From

linguistic anthropology, the account of cultural effects in language has been more clearly ascertained, and is gradually being thematized. In Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984) this effect is examined deliberately showing great consequences on theology, particularly in the development of doctrine.

These new understandings make us realize that we do not only shape the language but are also shaped by language. Experience is not only prior to language (*proportional cognitivist* in Lindbeck's term), but it could be as well constructed in language. Language is not only used as a mean of communication but also of expressing one's identity, presupposition, horizon and universe of meaning. Our identities, therefore, are maintained through and by language.

How does language function in shaping one's identity? This is the main question that is raising various answers. One answer is given by Jacques Derrida who works predominantly in the area of philosophy of linguistics. He is one of several other philosophers who are regarded as "postmodern" philosophers. There is a huge debate on using the term *postmodern*, but I am not dealing with that problem in this paper. This paper purports to discuss one reflection on identity from Jacques Derrida and its contribution in illustrating dialogical concern of ecumenical theology.

As I mentioned above, Derrida's theory is based on linguistic philosophy, which is very important for those who work in the area of ecumenism. Ecumenism, by its basic meaning, refers to the movement towards restoring unity among Christian Churches. The sad reality is that Christianity is split into three main groups: Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. Within these groups there are further divisions, as we all know. For too long Christian Churches have perpetuated these divisions by quarrelling among themselves or simply maintaining the status quo. Now they have been bold and courageous enough to call a halt to the hatred and simultaneously taken steps to improve their relationships with each other. But it is still a long journey and much work needs to be done.

One particular problem, which arises, is how to bring people, from various traditions, together. These various traditions in some ways have shaped the identity of every different church. Not surprisingly, how this tradition was created very often finds its root in the difference of interpretations and understanding of dogmas or church teachings. So, ecumenism has something to do with the language problem. That is why Derrida's notion in this case would be very interesting as one alternative way in coping with this matter. How does his theory open up new possibility of doing ecumenical theology?

In the following part we will see Derrida's notion of "differance" as one of the key words of his general philosophy. But prior to that, I will give a very general background how Derrida comes to that notion.

2. Derrida's Project of Deconstruction

Since the main focus of this paper is to relate Derrida's notion of *differance* to ecumenical theology, in this part I will introduce the general background and context of how Derrida comes to his idea.

Derrida presents himself not as a practitioner of traditional philosophy but as its most assiduous reader. And he is, indeed, above all a remarkable reader with a distinctive talent for close, subtle, and imaginative scrutiny of text. He has devoted himself to reading and commenting on the writing of others. But by commenting on others' writing he prepares his own text. He writes his own text by deconstructing that of others, going beyond it to say something that was not said in the original. This strategy or procedure, by Derrida, is called "deconstruction."[1]

Why should a philosopher, particularly one at Derrida's historical site be so obsessed with what others have written? Because, as Derrida sees it, writing reveals the essential peculiarities and limitations of human thought. A written text will always escape total clarification. There will always be textual ambivalences that remain unresolvable and prevent us from understanding fully "what the author really means". We may think, as Plato sometimes suggests, that the problem is due simply to the medium of writing. If we could directly speak to the author, our perception of intonations and gestural nuances—along with the possibility of follow-up questions—would eliminate all ambivalence, all undecidability. But of course even face-to-face speaking will not convey a message perfectly. The inevitable differences (in past experience, in expectations, in idiolect) between speaker and hearer maintain permanent possibilities of misunderstanding. Suppose, then, that to eliminate these differences, I consider just the case of my own internal formulation of my thoughts. Even here, Derrida maintains, the linguistic formulation will not be totally adequate. The generality of any linguistic expression will make it a less than perfect expression of the precise details of my thought or the exact nuances of my feeling. It would seem that perfect adequacy is achieved only in the immediate, prelinguistic presence of my thought to itself. But Derrida argues that there is no such pure presence of thoughts to the self. All thought is mediated through language and can never attain such total clarity. There is always a difference between what is thought (or experienced or said or written) and the ideal of pure, self-identical meaning.

The above line of argument is a prototype of Derrida's repeated demonstrations, in different contexts and terms, that the apparently contingent

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1   Kees Bertens, *Filsafat Barat Abad XX*, jilid II (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1990), the third edition, 233. Derrida tries to cope the words destruction (Heidegger) and construction with his term deconstruction.

and remediable defects of writing are in fact inevitable feature of all thought, all expression, all reality. Derrida's philosophical project is an unending extrapolation of the reader's inability to master a text.

In search of total clarity, philosophers (and others) since Plato have repeatedly insisted on a sharp distinction between speech and writing. As Derrida presents it, the basic contrast of the dichotomy is always between speech as the primary and immediate expression of thought and writing as a secondary and derivative expression of thought. When I hear someone speak, the source of the thought (the speaker) is immediately present to me, so there is minimal possibility of misunderstanding. When I read what someone has written, the source is absent, and there are many more possibilities for misinterpretation. Derrida shows how thinkers from Plato to Rousseau and Saussure have derogated writing in comparison to speech and associated the division between the two with all the standard philosophical dichotomies.[2] Speech involves presence, reality, truth, certainty, purity; writing involves absence, appearance, falsehood, doubt and impurity.

At the same time, Derrida points out, the very texts in which Plato, Rousseau, and Saussure celebrate speech over writing undermine or reverse the distinction. Plato, for example, defines thought (of which speech is supposed to be the pure expression) as a kind of "writing inscribed in the soul". (This leads Derrida to speak of a more fundamental form of writing—*archi-writing*—of which speech itself is an instance). Further, writing, for all its dangers, is in the end the only way that speech, which itself exists only in the fleeting moment, can be preserved. This is why Plato refers to writing as a *pharmakon*, which means both poison and remedy. Similarly, Rousseau, while denouncing the deceptions of writing, admits that it, rather than speech, is the only way in which he can express his true self. And Saussure, although he makes the standard points about the derivative nature of writing, eventually uses it as his primary model for the way in which the meanings of signs are specified by differences. Derrida refers to the project of studying the role of writing in Western thought, including both its denigrations and surreptitious returns, as the discipline of *grammatology*, from the Greek for letters or writing (although he later tends to speak of his effort here as just one example of deconstruction).

Despite our relentless failure to attain perfect meaning and truth, all our philosophical thought and language is based on the assumption of and drive for such perfection. This assumption and drive can be formulated by

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2   On Plato, see "Plato Pharmacy", in J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), On Rousseau, see J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1998) part II, On Saussure, part I, chaapter 2.

three principles that are central in the Western philosophical tradition. (Derrida himself never states the principles in these terms, but they catch what he has in mind by "logocentric" thinking). First, the basic elements of thought and language are pairs of opposing concepts, such as presence/absence, truth/falsity, being/nothingness, same/other, one/many, male/female, hot/cold. This we can call the principle of opposition. Next, the opposing pairs are regarded as exclusive logical alternatives, governed by the principles of identity (A=A) and non-contradiction (nothing is both A and not-A). This we can call the principle of logical exclusion. For example, being present excludes being absent; the present is simply what it is (present) and is in no way what it is not (absent). Finally, each fundamental pair is asymmetrical in the sense that one term has in some crucial sense priority over the other (e.g., is more fundamental, more real, morally better than the other). This is the principle of priority.

Derrida, then, develops his own strategy of reading, which he calls deconstruction. Deconstruction shows how texts based on binary oppositions themselves violate both the principle of exclusion and the principle of priority. Thus, a deconstructive reading of a text reveals points at which it introduces one of the opposing terms into the definition of the other or reverses the order of priority between the two terms. Derrida describes how the dominant terms of the standard polar oppositions always correspond to some sort of presence, a reality that is positive, complete, simple, independent, and fundamental (Plato's forms, Aristotle's substances, Aquinas's God, Hegel's absolute). This presence is always understood as the polar opposite of something that is negative, incomplete, complex, dependent, and derivative (matter, creatures, appearance, etc.). Derrida comes to his conclusion that the purity and priority of presence is never sustained in the texts of the great metaphysicians. For example, Plato discovers that the forms participate in non-being, that Christian think of God as somehow humanly incarnate, and so on. The result is a critique of metaphysical presence.[3]

3.   Differance

Derrida's deconstructive readings are complemented by a more positive and, in some ways, even systematic philosophical project. This is carried out through his repeated efforts to introduce vocabularies that attempt

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3   Here, as elsewhere, the point of deconstruction is not to reverse the standard bifurcation and give, for example, priority to absence over presence, a reversal that would merely continue logocentrism in another key. See, for example, Derrida's critique of absence in "Violence and Metaphysic" in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

to adumbrate the level—which we might call ontological or even preontological—where dichotomies dissolve and their oppositions reverse and slide into one another. This project is systematic both in the comprehensive applicability of each of the terms from different vocabularies. One of them is *differance,* the one Derrida has most fully developed and most often deploys.

What is Derrida's understanding of this term? *Differance* is an inescapable reminder that all discourse is written and that includes theological discourse. Before this statement dissolves into truism, we need to understand, first, the operation that *differance* describes, and secondly, how the word 'written' is being used. Derrida tells us that *differance* is 'literally neither a word nor a concept,'[4] but that there are 'effects' of *differance. Differance* itself is both a process and the condition for a process. I will sketch what this means in more detail in a moment.

The word interweaves two families of meaning—to differ and to defer, and it is the deferral of meaning involved when any one word means something only in its relation to all that it differs from, that is the basis of the process, the economy. So, for example, if I did not know English particularly well and I came across the word 'snow', I could only distinguish its meaning by understanding how this word's meaning differs form 'ice', from 'rain', on the one hand, and how as a noun it differs from the pronoun 'I' and the verb 'see' in the syntax governing its appearance in a sentence. Words, on this model of the operation of language, cannot refer directly to what is out there, to an object, without also, simultaneously, referring to other words from which they differ. A word, then, as a linguistic sign, has a twofold structure—being both a signifier and just an 'open window' upon the object it refers to. It is also a thing in itself, a material body (either phonetically or graphically) whose power to signify depends upon its relation in a language system and a grammar. This is what 'writing' means –words are inscribed, they are part of a system of signs. Janus-like they face two directions—the object out there and themselves as objects within a particular lexicon and grammar.

From this, Derrida says, it follows "that the signified concept is never present in and of itself…Every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to…other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences." *Differance* is precisely this sort of play, which is why it is not a concept "but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual system and process in general." Similarly, *differance* is not a word: it is not "the calm, present, self referential unity of concept and phonic material."[5]

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4   J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, translated by David Alison (Evanston, IL: North-western University Press, 1973), 131.

5   J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 11-12.

Like Saussure, Derrida states that within a language as a system there are only differences, but "these differences are themselves effects." *Differance* is "the playing movement that 'produces' — by means of something that is not simply an activity — these differences, these effects of difference… *Differance* is the non-full, non-simple structured and differing 'origin' of differences."[6] If, as classical thought has it, a cause had to be a presence (subject or substance), we would have soon be led to speak of effects without causes, and therefore we would shortly stop speaking, even of effects. (Derrida tries to fill this conceptual gap with the notion of a trace).

Thus, for Derrida, *differance* characterises movement and causality. For example: "*differance* refers to the (active and passive) movement that consists in deferring." Further this movement "is the production of… differences" between basic philosophical oppositions such as "sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture, etc."[7] However, Derrida also emphasizes that we cannot literally conceive of *differance* in terms of the standard categories of movement and causality.[8] They too are terms of philosophical dichotomies (rest/movement, sense/effect) and so must themselves be the "products" of *differance*. *Differance* is not, like Hegel's absolute and any other metaphysic, a synthesis of all opposites into a fully intelligible whole. It is itself caught in the endless play of difference, neither controlling nor controlled, always generating new paradoxes. We can use *differance* to indicate the limitations of our concepts and language but not to overcome them. Derrida's questioning of the distinctions on which thinking is based is not undertaken in the name of a new set of definitive answers (i.e., a new set of dichotomised concepts) but in the name of the perpetual need to be aware of the limits of any answers.

4. Consequences for Identity

There are two things that I will explain here as the consequences of Derrida's notion for identity: firstly identity in general especially in relation to meaning; secondly the idea of community. These two consequences later will be applied as dialogical concern of ecumenical theology.

4.1. Meaning as Identity

What is Derrida's understanding of *identity*? Derrida never makes any

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6 Idem.

7 J. Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 8-9.

8 J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 12-13

distinction between *meaning* and *identity*. Perhaps somebody can argue that *identity* is broader than *meaning*. But since Derrida's theory is on the basic level of our understanding of reality so he talks about *meaning as identity* or vice versa. *Meaning* is something that we live with, search and hold. It forms our understanding of reality; in Gadamer's term, it gives horizon for us in coping with reality. Here, *meaning* constructs boundary and limit for our understanding to something. In contrast, situation without *meaning* is called chaos: uncertain, untidy, unclear, unshaped, unidentified, etc. There is process of distinction, judgement, claim, and differentiation in the process of giving a meaning to something. So, *meaning* gives us clarity, form, or *identity*.

As I mentioned earlier, Derrida's problem is how we produce the meaning. He refuses the traditional views, which he calls logocentric and is haunted by metaphysics of presence. Metaphysics of presence, in Derrida's opinion, is very obvious in Western teachings of signs. Sign is understood as derivative of presence. We need sign in order to present something which is absent. It is a substitute for the absent thing. Western philosophy locates the meaning of sign in the thought it signifies, with the thought taken to be the meaning itself, fully and positively present to the mind. While for Derrida, the meaning of a sign corresponds not to a presence but a system of differences that distinguish one sign from all the others. The meaning we might say, exists in a given sign but only as a set of traces of all the other signs from which the sign differs. Similarly, identity is never understood in itself but as the product of system of differences.

If Derrida says *Il n'y a pas de hors texte* (there is nothing outside the text),[9] he sees the text in its original meaning from the Latin word *texere* which means 'to weave or to compose' (as symbolise in weaving). If phenomenology talks about inter-subjectivity, Derrida talks about inter-textuality (context). The implication for identity, we cannot present identity outside the context. One's identity exists in referring to others.

Derrida does not say that there are no things, only words. It is rather meant to convey that at every level—both that of reality itself and that of our language and thought of reality—there are no simply present facts or meanings but only the unending play of differences that Derrida has shown using the term *differance.* There is nothing outside the text (language) only in the sense that both language and reality are systems of differences and nothing else, and that the metaphysics of presence applies to neither. Derrida himself makes the point quite clearly:

> "there is nothing outside the text"…does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book….But it does mean that

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9   *Of Gramatology,* 158.

every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this "real" except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes in a movement of differential referring. That's all.[10]

Derrida does not deny the facts of meaning (and hence identity), but he warns us of the limits of our entire logical schema for talking about it on a fundamental level, not making absurd statements about it.

Using three principles (opposition, exclusion and priority), we can identify that process of "giving meaning (identity)" always through the process of opposition (identity A / non-A), process of exclusion ("us=us" and to exclude "them"), and process of priority (e.g. Western morally better than Eastern, male more real than female,etc.). Derrida describes inevitably what we regard as identity never excludes the other (non-identity). How do we decide our identity if there is no others' identity? So, our understanding of one's identity cannot be separated from the others. Perhaps, Rorty-like, unless we encounter the other (non-identity) then we cannot transcend (objectify) our own identity.[11] As Derrida shows, if we insist on describing identity with only the two predicates "identity" and "non-identity", we may well be obliged to say that certain intermediate shades are both identity and non-identity. Besides, for Derrida, identity is the unending play of differences produced by *differance*. Claiming identity (truth) on something means to give privilege or priority.

To sum up, Derrida is bracketing the philosophical claims to have uncovered a deep, univocal meaning of identity. Identity, therefore, is not only ambivalent but also indeed multivalent. Using the perspective of *differance,* identity is the product of unending play of differences. So, every effort to maintain or even sacralise identity becomes naive.

4.2. Derrida's Critique of Community

Derrida's theory of *differance*—some would say "the economy of *differance* is the metaphysics of signs"—is his "paradigm" in every items and subject of his writings. For example is his critic of community. We will glimpse his idea of community is connected to identity as well. It also links tightly to his concern about ethics, because for Derrida, ethics concerns our treatment of others.[12] Derrida readily admits to feelings of unease re-

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10   J. Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, translated by Elizabeth Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 148.

11 Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: philosophical papers*, Vol. I (UK-USA: Cambridge University Press, 1991) on "Solidarity or Objectivity?", 21-34.

12 For Derrida's recent treatments of ethical topics, see, for example, J. Derrida, *Of Spirit*:

garding community:

> I do not much like the word community, I am not even sure I like the thing… If by community one implies, as is often the case, a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomenon of discord or war, then I don't believe in it very much and I sense in it as much a threat as a promise. I have always had trouble vibrating in unison.[13]

Derrida's doubts about community can be connected to a tension apparent in the word's etymology, which refers to a fortified city (cum= common, munis=defence, as in "munitions"). The problem, etymology aside, is that community simultaneously implies sharing and exclusion (sharing with a circumscribed group and exclusion of everyone else). A moral commitment to a specific community requires cutting oneself off from a whole range of other people, something Derrida finds is in tension with an ethical concern for other as such.

A similar tension shows up if we reflect on another term that initially has very positive ethical connotations: hospitality. In fact, at first glance, hospitality might seem to offer a solution to the problem of the exclusiveness of one community (my family, my church, my country), surely there can and should be an attitude of welcoming strangers, those who don't belong to the community. Hospitality does not make strangers belong to my community, but, short of this, it does provide a special mode of acceptance.

But even here there are tensions, once again signalled by the etymology. For "hospitality" derives, first, from *hospes* (guest), which itself derives from *hostis,* which originally means "stranger" but comes to mean "enemy". Moreover, the second part of the word derives from *potes,* meaning "power". So there is an etymological sense in which welcoming a guest means having power over (or, perhaps, giving power to) an enemy.

Here, as in identity, Derrida shows the limitation of community. How to reconcile between idea of community and inclusiveness? This perhaps a big gap that we have to fill.

Heidegger and the Question, translated by G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), J. Derrida, *Specters* of Marx, translated by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), and J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).

13 J. Derrida, *Points*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, et. al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 355, 348.

5. Implication of Derrida's Reflection on Identity for Ecumenical Theology

Derrida's reflection on identity has great implications for theology in general, and ecumenical theology in particular. David Tracy in his *Analogical Imaginations* (1988) try to divide theology according to its audiences. It shows the difficulties to create a theology which copes all level of audiences. I think, this is one of many significance differences between theology in general and ecumenical theology. Ecumenical theology, indeed, tries to accommodate all traditions of churches as its purpose. It tries to put into account all identities of churches in its process of theology. That is why Derrida's reflection on identity touches the very core of ecumenical theology. In the following part I will explore Derrida's implication for ecumenical theology in the area of dogmatic claim. From history we know that churches maintain their identities through dogmas and church teaching, where the meanings are watched over by authorities (the Bible in the case of Protestants and the CDF for Catholics) who protect the purity and truth of the teachings. We become aware of the reason of church divisions is in their difference interpretation of dogmas.

5.1. Bracketing [Theology]

Derrida's notion has consequences to all discourse and writing, including theology. That as a discourse theology has no more privileged an access to truth than any other form of writing. It too deals in metaphors. Somewhat unfairly, I think, Derrida once defined theological discourse as 'the discourse of someone who is satisfied with metaphors'[14]

Differance draws our attention to the fact that theology cannot make dogmatic claims about God, not without also accepting that it speaks with and through metaphors. This ineradicable metaphorical character of language does not negate the meaning of theological statements, but it puts them into question. It demands that they recognize that they are not, nor ever can be, unequivocal statements of truth.

Roger Haight recognises that all religious language as a symbol. He defines: "A symbol is anything, or person of history which mediates or makes present to human consciousness God in this way or that way."[15] Religious language, as described in the doctrine and dogmas of the Church, constitutes by religious symbols struggling with trying to put into human words that are ineffable. It is the nature of symbols as in the formulation of doctrine, to be polysemous and polyvalent, which allows for a certain elastic-

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14 J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 267

15 Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 131.

ity in the boundaries of a given religious symbol. Religious symbols have awakened the consciousness on many different levels of various groups. Symbols allow for a plurality of interpretations. The classical explanation of the procession in the Trinity is one example that there are more ways of saying things theologically.

More than Haight, Derrida's *differance* places MacKinnon's call for 'a very healthy agnosticism'[16] at the very heart of the linguistic sign. In doing so it calls for an ethics of eloquence; in our case, theological eloquence. Of course, theologians of the stature of Augustine, Aquinas and Barth have always seen this, but with Derrida it is not an injunction against idolatry, or a warning against anthropomorphic projection. The agnosticism is internal to the economy whereby language represents anything to and for us. To quote Kevin Hart, 'It does not follow that deconstruction is a mode of negative theology [something Derrida has repeatedly denied]; but it does supply us with a rather more secure position from which to inquire about negative theology's relation to language.'[17] In fact, *differance* makes plain that theology has always been and will always remain impossible. So when Derrida writes that, 'the "interrogation of God" will never belong to a book,'[18] he is really in agreement with systematic theologians like Aquinas and Barth.

Derrida's refusal for theology does not mean that we do not need theology, but I think the way we cope with the truth should be put in the bracket. The implication for ecumenical theology is that Derrida provides new space for creating theology. The past becomes the trace how metaphysics of presence is found in theology. And how theology shape our horizon (identity). The new way of doing theology as alternative of shaping our "identity" as ecumenical.

5.2. Questioning Revelation and Eschatology

If *differance* is the play between the presence and the absence of meaning in language, a play that defers meaning and produces a chain of signifiers, then it follows, theologically, that 'revelation' and 'eschatology' are questioned too. Revelation and eschatology both posit moments of immediate reception, of God speaking to his creation directly, without the distortion of that communication being mediated. Derrida' work draws attention to the way metaphysics has privileged presence, the transparency of direct communication and immediacy. In the dualisms spirit/body,

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16 J. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 118.

17 Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96.

18 Writing and Difference, 78

speech/writing, presence/representation, there is always a hierarchizing; the privileging of one above another, the former over the latter.

Differance emphasizes that presentation—the kind of presentation required for the advent of revelation or the advent of the 'revealed one' (the eschatological *telos*)—is always, and irredeemably, contaminated by re-presentation. There is no pure moment of presence, or present time, there cannot be. There can only be that which is in the past and both recollected and re-presented, or that which is in the endlessly deferred future, which is always a 'not yet'.

What this means for theology is that we cannot privilege either revelation or eschatology, as unsullied solutions either to questions of church doctrine or to questions of ultimate salvation. There is no revelation which is not already a text, not already a representation, not already interpreted. There is no event that is prior to its representation. In fact, there is no experience which is not already an interpretation, and therefore a text. And so there is no revelation which is not open, in being represented, to interpretation and reinterpretation. Neither is there a completed theodicy, there never can be—because the end is still an open question and will remain so. There is no possibility of justifying the ways of God to human beings. It is a question always of being on the way, of being part of a movement between past fiat and a future parousia.

The economy of *differance* structures both our understandings of time and space; time is space, is the movement of enduring, is duration.[19] The economy of *difference* is also the epoch of difference, so that time and experience lie between an irretrievable beginning (a non-original origin) and a postponed but presupposed end. Theologically we live ('Deconstruction is life'), both historically and existentially, between the Incarnation and the Apocalypse. Our theology is done between the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Our time is the duration, the preduration, of Holy Saturday.[20]

The implication for ecumenical theology is that we should revise our understanding of doctrine and truth claim. Identity which is in every dogma and church teaching as the product of claiming the truth should be seen as a process to the Truth. So that we refuse every effort to sacralise dogmas. Our searching for Truth as the whole body of Church from various traditions should be filled with this perspective. Ecumenical perspective is process of conversion (metanoia), which means that we are ready to be change, to enrich or to be enriched

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19 *Writing and Difference*, 197. The influences of Kant and Bergson are evident here.

20 See Professor Nicholas Lash's article 'Friday, Saturday, Sunday' in *New Blackfriars* vol. 71, March 1990. He discusses the theological significance of living through an epoche of the Holy Saturday; the theological importance of knowing the time.

5.3. Dialogical Concern of Ecumenical Theology

We have met each other at depth. We have been built up by each other's faith in Jesus Christ. We have been challenged truly to listen to one another. We have been called to let go of prejudices and misunderstandings which in the beginning we did not know we possessed. We have grown in respect and love for both our traditions. We have learnt much. We have become aware that the Spirit of God is at work in our meeting, calling us to a change of mind and heart.[21]

One paragraph from document of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue describes the important of dialogue in ecumenical theology. Derrida's contribution on this point is to illuminate our perspective and understanding of others by bracketing every possibility to construct identity. Derrida does not deny the possibility of identity for everyday life, but he warns us that our convictions always have dangerous limitation that may lead us away from "others" unless we continually try to think beyond them. Presupposition that we use to create identity, for Derrida, is illusive. So every effort to sacralise identity as something eternal and perpetual becomes naïve.

I think, an openness to the other, the very root of Derrida's suggestion is what we need to develop dialogical concern for ecumenical theology. If Derrida violates the principle of exclusion and priority in Western metaphysics, we have to create the principle of inclusion as our paradigm in doing ecumenical theology.

Derrida's idea of community makes us more aware about the nature of the Church. As Derrida points out the exclusiveness of community by sharing and exclusion, similarly the idea of the Church can leads us to exclude others. The recent improvement on ecclesiology is to include the sinners with the community 'sanctorum' as the definition of the Church. The Church only becomes the Church if it includes the other. In the area of ecumenism, the Church should include all people from various backgrounds. How do we built this kind of Church? This is a great question. Lindbeck describes two kinds of goal for ecumenical movement: Organic Church (Christian unity) or inter-confessional.[22]

6. Conclusion

With his theory of differance, Derrida gives us new understanding of identity. If in the past identity—as any other meaning—was understood in

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21 Pastor and Priest, *Australian Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publication House, 1990), 3

22 George Lindbeck, "Ecumenical Theology" in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, Vol II (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1989), 255-273.

itself as one entity separated from the others, in contrast Derrida confesses that there will never be pure identity. By examining the problem of identity, it is the easiest way to understand dialogical concern of ecumenical theology. What we regard as identity of the Church or tradition is very delusive. Moreover, Church identity itself is shaped through language, and hence theological language and doctrine. Derrida through his critique to any single writing, makes us realise of the limitation of the way we doing our theology, or even theology itself. How far theology has shaped our understanding and identity is one opened question. Derrida makes us aware of the impossibility of theology. Is there any future for theology? I think here Derrida offers a space for doing alternative theology, including ecumenical theology.

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