

THE REIGN OF GOD

BY MICHAEL WELKER

“The reign of God is a twofold experience of free self-withdrawal: the self-withdrawal of others in our favor and our self-withdrawal in favor of others. Only when we see God’s reign in this way can we understand why becoming like children is paradigmatic for entry into the reign of God.”

YOUR reign¹ come.” For almost two thousand years, people have been praying to God with these words. Christians have been using them to ask for a demonstration of God’s power. Around one third of the human race alive today prays this petition either regularly or occasionally. It is heard in prayer and in worship, that is, in times of particular personal concentration and in exceptional life situations. When Christians in diverse epochs, cultures, and international situations pray “Your reign come,” what are they asking?

If we seek an answer to this question by exposing ourselves to the numerous and varied testimonies of the New Testament, we quickly find ourselves confronted with constellations that are nothing less than enigmatic. Are Christians in fact asking for the realization of a domain that, as Mark 10:14f.² puts it, belongs to people who become like children and that must be received in the manner of children? Are they asking for the realization of a domain that, according to Matthew 12:28,³ became present with Jesus’ action of driving out demons? These two statements about the reign of God and the question of their coherence are enough to put us in a quandary. Can people of the twentieth century honestly ask for a domain that makes its appearance in exorcisms and that we are supposed to receive like children? If the testimonies of the New Testament force us to come to grips with constellations of this sort, it is no wonder that only a few years ago the Theological Commission of the *Evangelische Kirche der Union* was compelled to register a “doctrinal deficiency in the matter of the reign of God.”⁴

A doctrinal deficiency with regard to the reign of God - although the “message that the reign of God is near . . . [is] central to Jesus’ proclamation.”⁵ A doctrinal deficiency—although “the reign of God,” in the words of the texts published by the commission, is “the archetype of all hope for a renewed world, liberated from evil.”⁶ A doctrinal deficiency with regard to the center of Jesus’ proclamation and to the most comprehensive horizon of Christians’ expectations - although according to Emilio Castro all so-called contextual theologies of the present day (the liberation theologies that in all the world are winning people to the faith in lively and creative fashion) interpret their historical, cultural, and political

¹ Where the customary English versions of the Lord’s Prayer use the word “kingdom,” the parallel German versions use the term **Reich**. This is translated as “reign” in contrast to **Königreich**, which specifies the “reign of a king”: i.e., a kingdom. For further explanation, see n. 11 (Trans.).

² Cf. Matthew 18:3f; 19:14, Luke 18:16f.

³ Cf. Luke 11:20.

⁴ *Die Bedeutung der Reich-Gottes-Envartung für das Zeugnis der christlichen Gemeinde. Votum des Theologischen Ausschusses der Evangelischen Kirche der Union* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), p. 17; cf. pp. 11, 30 and *passim* (cited as *Reich-Gottes-Envartung*). Cf. also Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17.

⁵ *Ibid.* See also H. Merklein, *Die Gottesherrschaft als Handlungsprinzip. Untersuchungen zur Ethik Jesu*, 2. ed. Forschung zur Bibel, 34 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1981); H. Merklein, *Jesu Botschaft von der Gottesherrschaft. Eine Skizze*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1983), esp. pp. 25f.

⁶ *Reich-Gottes-Envartung*, pp. 19,21.

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reality in a reign-of-God perspective.⁷ Such a doctrinal deficiency would be particularly hazardous for *Protestant* theologies and churches because, as Eberhard Jüngel has rightly observed, the “theological legacy of the Reformation churches” with regard to the reign of God “furnishes amazingly little instruction and assistance for the spiritual life of the Christian community and for this community's responsibility in the world.”⁸

In the following discussion, I would like to indicate a path by which the doctrinal deficiency - that is, the incapacity to arrive at statements that are clear, that are capable of consensus in the church, and that satisfy the question of truth⁹ - can be avoided or rectified. In the first part of our reflections, we shall take New Testament statements about the reign of God and consider them in a *systematic* context that makes it possible to understand even texts stubbornly resistant to being understood. For this, it is necessary to begin with the differentiated relation between *the reign of God* and *the law*. Beginning there will make it possible for us to acquire a clear understanding, a substantive understanding, of the *means of entering into the reign of God*.

Admittedly, that does not yet solve the chief problem that has occupied classical theologies and their critics concerning the coming of the reign of God: *Where is the reign of God to be located?* Is this reign a reality perceivable with the senses, a principle, or a phantasm? Part two will investigate the aporias that have resulted from the effort to specify the status of the reign of God - as a reality perceivable with the senses, as a principle, or as a phantasm. In the third part, I will attempt to show that, with the help of relatively new forms of thought, these difficulties can be avoided or resolved. Finally, we will seek to understand the coming of the reign of God. We will see that the preceding parts have developed a basis for understanding the subtle clarity of one after another of Jesus' parables of the reign of God/the reign of Heaven.¹⁰

I

“The law and the prophets were in effect until John [the Baptist] came; since then the good news of the reign of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force (Luke

⁷ Emilio Castro, *Freedom in Mission. The Perspective of the Kingdom of God. An Ecumenical Inquiry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1985), p. 64.

⁸ Eberhard Jüngel, "Introductory Presentation", *Reich-Gottes-Erwartung*, p. 30.

⁹ See Dietrich Ritschl, „Lehre,“ *Theologische Realenzyklopadie* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1977-90) vol. 20, pp. 608ff.

¹⁰ The following discussion consciously avoids taking conceptions of a “kingdom” as its point of departure. This is because it would require too much time and space to engage in critical analyses of stratified political conceptions of “reign,” which would then have to be conducted in orientation to strands of the biblical tradition in order to do away with false conceptual frameworks. This article contents itself with directly proposing a change of conceptual frameworks with regard to some conventional aporias of the theology of God's reign. The following discussion likewise foregoes an explicitly(i) christological centering. An explicitly christological centering would require the deciphering of formulations that are correct but widely misunderstood and misunderstandable: e.g., “Jesus Christ is the reign of God in person.” In order to understand the interconnections between Christ and the Spirit of God, as well as to understand the universal public of the person of Christ, it would be necessary to rethink thoroughly the theology of the cross, the power of the resurrection, the pouring out of the Spirit, and the coming again of the Human One. Concerning some of these questions, see Edmund Schlink, *Ökumenische Dogmatik. Grundzüge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 293ff; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Systematische Theologie im Kontext biblischer Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983), pp. 15ff; Gerhard Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979), pp. 477ff; Michael Welker, *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1992), pp. 174fT, 214fT, 279ff.

16:16).¹¹ Considered in itself, this statement seems to support, by means of a clear distinction between two phases, the conventional theological separation and opposition between the law (until John), which demands, and the gospel (after John), which gives. Yet the very next sentence contradicts such a viewpoint when it says: “But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped” (Luke 16:17).¹² From this point of view, the validity of the law and the prophets and the proclamation of the reign of God as gospel relate to each other not in mutually negating opposition, but in the sense of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*), that is, a relation that both relativizes and preserves.

It is in keeping with this point of view that, according to the Synoptic writers, Jesus’ first response to the question, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” is to point to the law, primarily to the Decalogue: “You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother; also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.¹³ In order to inherit eternal life and to enter into the reign of God, one must first heed and follow the law.¹⁴

To put the matter more generally and to borrow an expression from Wolfgang Huber, what is at issue is an “*ethos of free self-limitation*”¹⁵ This ethos of free self-limitation, which explicitly takes up the intentions of the law, remains in these New Testament statements within the limits of the practical wisdom expressed in the Decalogue and in the commandment to love one’s neighbor. The further answer to the question “How do I enter into the reign of God?” potentiates the “*ethos of free self-limitation*” to an “*ethos of free self-withdrawal*”¹⁶ “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”¹⁷ This ethos of free self-withdrawal in favor of the poor and in favor of following Christ also takes up intentions of the law. It especially picks up on the mercy laws, which aim at the protection of the weak and at self-withdrawal that can be publicly expected in favor of the weak.¹⁸ The ethos of free self-withdrawal thus retains the intention of the law in the Old Testament to ensure that the protection of the weak be routine, since only when that is the case is justice in the strict sense attained. At the same time the expectations of the law are radicalized.

The law had prescribed self-limitation and a limited free self-withdrawal in favor of others. It had prescribed a free self-withdrawal compatible with the continuation of life as it had been lived up to that point: for example, letting slaves go free in the seventh year, giving up

¹¹ Cf. Matthew 11:12f.

¹² See also Matthew 5:17ff.

¹³ Matthew 19:16ff, esp. 18f; cf. Mark 10:17ff, esp. 19; Luke 18:18ff. The texts make clear that the expressions “to have eternal life,” to “have treasure in heaven,” and “to enter the reign of heaven” are different designations for the same thing.

¹⁴ The emphasis on the commandments of the second table of the Decalogue is striking.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Huber, *Konflikt und Konsens. Studien zur Ethik der Verantwortung* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1990), pp. 205ff; W. Huber, „Selbstbegrenzung aus Freiheit. Über das ethische Grundproblem des technischen Zeitalters,“ *Evangelische Theologie* 52 (1992), pp. 128ff.

¹⁶ The insistence on the freedom of the self-withdrawal is important over against ideologies of “self-surrender.”

¹⁷ Matthew 19:21, Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22; cf. Luke 12:33.

¹⁸ It is certainly important to consider whether the call to discipleship does not also take up and transcend the intentions of the laws concerning cultic practice. These are the laws whose content is tire process by which creatures come into contact with God in a way that is open to public participation. See Michael Welker, “Security of Expectations: Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel,” *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), pp. 273ff.

exploiting the weak, giving up charging usurious interest,¹⁹ leaving the gleanings of the field to the poor,²⁰ or tithing for the needy.²¹ By contrast, the path to eternal life, to life with validity, requires a more thoroughgoing free self-withdrawal in favor of the poor. It requires giving up one's own property in a way that changes life as it has been lived up to this point. Participation in God's reign, a treasure in heaven, entry into eternal life, into a life with validity that cannot be relativized in any time or in any international situation - this is bound up with a free self-withdrawal that benefits the poor, that goes far beyond the expectations of the mercy laws inasmuch as it fundamentally changes the life of those who show mercy.

The intention of the law was to establish justice, mercy, and the knowledge of God. Free self-withdrawal in favor of others, which represents the means of entering the reign of God, takes up this intention and radicalizes it.

As is shown by the parables of the unmerciful creditor and of the workers in the vineyard,²² besides a heightened level of mercy to the poor, there are other forms of free self-withdrawal in favor of others that are characteristic of the entry into God's reign and of participation in this reign: forgiveness of debt, payment of wages according to the basic needs of the wage earners and not according to their achievement, and the readiness to accept a justice compatible with mercy. This kind of justice takes persons who have not achieved as much or cannot achieve as much and nevertheless puts them on the same level as their fellow persons.

An ethos of free self-withdrawal transcends the mercy law and expresses itself in forgiveness of debt, in payment that meets the cost of living independently of the workers' achievements and in its ungrudging recognition. But this ethos, this continuation and transcendence of the law's intentions, gives only the *first part* of the answer to the question: What are the means of entering the "reign of God"?

The sphere marked by free self-withdrawal in favor of others is not rightly perceived if we consider it only in relation to the *active* procedure, the *practice* of free self-withdrawal. Entry into the reign of God is no less marked by *experiences of mercy received*, of forgiveness or of payment beyond our own expectations.²³ As is shown by the parable of the unmerciful creditor, this experience of the free self-withdrawal of others in our favor can even be the initial event of the reign of God and the initial perception of that reign.

When we *have experienced* the free self-withdrawal of others in our favor, we obtain entry into a realm in which we live in accord with this experience by practicing mercy and forgiveness and by granting other people the means to a human and humane life. The petition, "Your reign come," and the petition, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," are thus different perspectives on one and the same thing.

The reign of God is a twofold experience of free self-withdrawal: the self-withdrawal of others in our favor and our self-withdrawal in favor of others. Only when we see God's reign in this way can we understand why becoming like *children* is paradigmatic for entry into the reign of God.

¹⁹ See for example the stipulations of the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 21:2ff; 22:20ff.

²⁰ Leviticus 19:9f; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:21 f. I am grateful to Bernd Janowski for friendly advice on this point.

²¹ Deuteronomy 14:28f; 26:12-15.

²² Matthew 18:23ff and Matthew 20:1ff. See also the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11ff) and the overall coherence of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-12. Luke 11:2-4.

²³ At issue is not merely a justice that accepts with honor those who take a long time in getting around to being reasonable. It is also crucial that the honor be given despite the fact that it was neither hoped for nor expected.

A child is continually dependent upon the care of persons in her surroundings. She thus experiences in an ongoing manner their free self-withdrawal in her favor. At the same time she is forced to accommodate herself to her surroundings in a fundamentally stronger way than is a grown person. Admittedly a child normally performs this accommodation in a naively “free” self-withdrawal, a self-withdrawal that *precedes* all *explicit* self-relation and decision. But in doing so, a child lives in every respect in relations of reciprocal self-withdrawal that are disproportionately stronger than those of a grown person. Once we pay attention to this twofold self-withdrawal, it likewise becomes clear why the synoptic writers say that it is *difficult* for the rich to enter the reign of God.²⁴ On the one hand, their interest in maintaining and maximizing their possessions stands in continual conflict with the ethos of free self-withdrawal in favor of others. On the other hand, wealth reduces the real chances of rich people to experience the free self-withdrawal of others in their favor. It is difficult for them to come to know the reign of God.

The petition for the coming of God’s reign aims at a domain in which the dominant factors are the experience of receiving the free self-withdrawal of others in our own favor and free self-withdrawal in favor of other people. This domain is by no means ubiquitous. It does not become *universally* obvious on the basis of specific individual or combined efforts. It can be foreign and inaccessible to people, or it can become so. We thus stand before the question: What is the status of the reign of God, this reign for whose coming Christendom prays?

Does Christendom envision a *reality* that can be experienced with the senses? Is Christendom thinking of an *ideal* that releases powers that can move the world and shape human experience and human life? Or is Christendom chasing a phantasm that ought to have been abandoned at the latest after the so-called disappointment about the parousia?²⁵

Answering this question is also important for persons outside Christian churches. Neither the adherents of other religions nor people who characterize themselves as non-religious can be indifferent to the object of the central hopes and expectations of people in so-called Christian cultures, in cultures that have accumulated enormous power on this earth.

What status does the demonstration of God’s power have? A brief survey of the forms of conceiving the reign of God yesterday and today awakens an initial skepticism about the possibility of ever giving a clear answer to this question.

II

Considered from a systematic point of view, almost all images, concepts and theories of the reign of God can be traced back as different answers to three questions. Each of these questions has underlying it an “either-or.” First, “Is the reign of God present or future?” Second, “Is the reign of God immanent or transcendent?” Third, “Is the reign of God something intrasubjective (in Luther’s words, ‘within you’) or externally perceivable?” Future-present, immanent-transcendent, internal-external: most of the conceivable combinations have played important historical roles in both church and culture.²⁶ Naturally,

²⁴ Cf. Mark 10:23ff; Matthew 19:24; Luke 18:24f; as well as Luke 12:16ff

²⁵ The third section suggests, though, that this “disappointment” hangs together with the development of a mistaken conception of the reign of God.

²⁶ Günter Klein has constructed a table from the dichotomies “this-worldly/otherworldly” and “present/future.” He describes the four resulting positions in the following way. The “orthodox understanding” specifies the reign of God as otherworldly and future. Recent eschatology (Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of hope seems to be primarily intended) sees the reign of God as this-worldly and future. Herbert Braun considers it this-worldly and present, while for Klein it is otherworldly and present (G. Klein. “‘Reich Gottes’ als biblischer Zentralbegriff,” *Evangelische Theologie* 30 [1970], pp. 642-670).

not every alternative must be decided in each particular case. Consider, for instance, a combination that has acquired great moral and political influence, including, in its secularized forms, in Left Hegelianism and Neomarxism. In this combination, the reign of God is immanent and external and is future as well as present. It also has been possible to ignore individual dichotomies totally, as in the abstract eschatological position that says the reign of God is transcendent and future, yet neither internal nor external.

Such reflections might come across like a game of theological marbles. Yet, even though the various conceptions of the reign of God are in conflict with each other, or even totally exclude each other, they have at various times spoken to human hearts and left a deep impression on entire cultures. They have influenced not only religious devotion, but also perceptions of self and world as well as the shape Christians give to their lives. They have defined not only forms of ecclesiastical order, but also religious and secular moralities, political ideologies, prophecies and the writing of history.

Ernst Staehelin collected in seven volumes the conceptions of the reign of God from the history of the church up to his own time.²⁷ The previously mentioned study of the *Evangelische Kirche der Union* furnishes an overview of the most important forms.²⁸

If we take a systematic approach in observing the long-range interconnections and developments of these conceptions, we cannot help but entertain the thought that the reign of God cannot be real. Since, as an ideal, the light it casts flickers as unpredictably as a will-o'-the-wisp, it does not really hold good. Therefore it must be reckoned a phantasm.

The displacement of a conception into a constellation that cannot be reconciled with it can be recognized already in the ancient church. In the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, the doctrine of the “future, otherworldly character of the reign of God”²⁹ is dominant. Explanations that bind the expectation of God's reign to a moralistic framework and spiritualizing interpretations draw the conception of the reign of God into the present. “Presence” thus by no means signifies “immanence that can be externally perceived.”³⁰ Under the “overwhelming impression of the historic change” brought by Constantine, Eusebius of Caesarea is the first to teach the “immanence of God's reign in the world's reign.”³¹ Where is the reign of God? After all, it was future and otherworldly, and now it is present and this-worldly. Yet mystical and speculative thought also work against this conception. Above all, the collapse of the Western Empire and the fall of Rome force people to dismiss Eusebius' theology of the reign of God.³²

²⁷ Ernst Staehelin. *Die Verkündigung des Reiches Gottes in der Kirche Jesu Christi* (Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1951-1964).

²⁸ The articles which work through historical material were authored by Gerhard Ruhbach, Rudolf Mau, Hans-Georg Geyer, Johannes Wallmann, Eberhard Jungel, Christof Gestrich, Martin Onasch, Henning Schröder, Jürgen Miethke and Rudolf Weth. See also R. Mau/M. Beintker, „Herrschaft Gottes/Reich Gottes,“ Sect. 5 and 6, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 15, pp. 218ff.

²⁹ *ReichGottes-Erwartung*, p. 76.

³⁰ According to Clement of Alexandria those Christians who have ascended to the level of ‘Gnostics’ participate in the reign of God. According to Origen the reign of God is a present und spiritual reality, (but one) that is radically distinguished from external reality” (*Reich-Gottes-Erwartung*, pp. 77f).

³¹ *Reich-Gottes-Erwartung*, p. 78.

³² Although the term *Reich* often corresponds to the English “reign,” German also uses *Reich* in a number of expressions where English uses “empire”: e.g., the Western Empire is the “*Westreich*.” The German original thus states more clearly than the English translation that Eusebius' theology of the reign of God is an imperial theology: “the collapse of the *Westreich* and the fall of Rome force people to dismiss Eusebius' *Reichstheologie*” - Trans.

Admittedly, that is not tantamount to giving up once and for all the position that the reign of God becomes reality *in Christian empire*. The reformers of the eleventh century represent anew the “conviction of the imperial reality of God's rule.”³³ The reign of God is something immanent, externally perceivable, and either already present or to be created at once. Without the conception of the external, immanent, and present reign of God, it is impossible to understand the Reformer Martin Bucer's summons to the English king “to create a Christian state according to the law of life of the citizens of the reign of Christ.”³⁴ Likewise incomprehensible without that conception is the “reign of God in Münster”³⁵ or the “attempt during the English revolution under Oliver Cromwell to erect a reign of God on earth.”³⁶ In addition, it is beyond question that the initiatives of Left Hegelianism, with their extraordinary indirect political consequences, were developed as secular correlates of this form of theology of God's reign.

Running counter to these conceptions are theologies and religious movements emphasizing that the reign of God cannot be captured in human experience or that it is related only to a “spiritual existence of Christians” defined in opposition to worldly experience. Here we have interiority instead of exteriority, transcendence instead of immanence. Mysticism, Luther's theology, early Pietism on the one hand, and bourgeois theism on the other hand, can serve as counterpositions of this sort.³⁷

Where is the reign of God? In the broad spectrum of configurations from future, transcendent, and internal to present, immanent, and external, God's reign seems to be simultaneously beyond our grasp and available at minimal cost. One could say the same thing about God's reign on the basis of the broad spectrum from immortality of the soul to contemporary sociopolitical events seen as having a religious value. Is the reign of God a plaything of theological opinions, of devout or pious wishes, of historical and cultural displacements?

I think that in the following discussion we can with good reason answer this question in the negative. We shall see that it is in reaction to *the particular constitution of God's reign* that conceptions of that reign undergo the rampant proliferation observable in the course of time. This reaction is partly on target, albeit reductionistic, and partly ineffectual and confusing.

The following discussion wishes to invite the consideration of an idea that makes it possible to understand - far removed from all recourse to paradox - why the reign of God can and *must* be described as both future and present, both immanent *and* transcendent, both internally *and* externally perceivable.³⁸

To this end, I shall refer to conceptual developments that, since the 1920s, have emanated particularly from Harvard and in the last fifteen years or so have begun to leave their mark on intellectual consciousness in Europe as well. The desired comprehension of the reign of God naturally does not entail a justification of the very diverse *contents* attributed to the reign of God both yesterday and today. On the contrary.

Polemically formulated, I am taking leave of “train station” conceptions of God's reign with their attendant questions: Has it already arrived, or is it not yet here?; Is it coming now, is it coming later, or is it never going to come?

³³ *Reich Gottes. Erwartung*, p. 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, with reference to M. Bucer. *De regno Christi*, 1550.

³⁵ See G. Seebaß, „Reich Gottes und Apokalyptik bei Thomas Müntzer,“ *Lutherjahrbuch* 58 (1991), pp 75ff, esp. 80ff.

³⁶ *Reich-Gottes-Erwartung*, p. 84.

³⁷ Cf. *Reich-Gottes-Erwartung*, pp. 79, 80f, 84f.

³⁸ With regard to the mediation of these various aspects, see also Paul Tillich's pneumatological reflections in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*.

We begin with the following idea: *The reign of God is a process of emergence*. We can most readily gain an understanding of the event designated by the term “emergence” if we begin with the statement, “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” This statement, more precisely the word “more” in it, as a rule, elicits something like a secular version of meditative prayer. The term “emergence” seeks to comprehend this numinous “more” and how it hangs together with the so-called parts, specifically with regard to marked *changes* of relative wholes.

New ideas emerge and change a conversational situation. Unforeseen problems are posed and require a transformation of the research landscape. A new political power emerges and necessitates new definitions of the international situation. In each case, a surprising change of configuration is delineated that acquires clear contours and entails or requires new powers of self-organization. A “new quality [arises] . . . that cannot be derived from the properties of the components . . . but nevertheless consists only in the interplay of the components.”³⁹ Common sense then says: *The conversation has taken a surprising turn; the discipline has undergone a reorganization; the world has changed*. These generalizations name changes only of relative wholes. But these changes are actually to be traced back to the fact that, by means of specific changes in the interplay of the so-called parts, an *across-the-board* change of the interplay of the parts has occurred. The across-the-board change of the interplay of the so-called parts is then perceived as a change of that which is “more” than they are. The term “emergence” seeks to take this so-called self-transformation of the whole, this change that produces the new “more,” and to understand it with regard to the changes of the configurations of the parts, with regard to the changes of their interplay. The term “emergence” forces us to think relativistically.⁴⁰ It requires us to compare two or more coherent patterns of entities or events with regard to changes of configurations that lead to a so-called new whole.

This state of affairs can be readily grasped in a relatively trivial manner by looking back at the process by which a new idea made its appearance between two slices of a conversation. At first, that process was boring, but then the exchange of ideas X, Y, and Z resulted in a new perspective. This state of affairs is likewise still relatively easy to grasp by looking back at the process by which stratified political forms made their appearance in the midst of segmented societies.⁴¹ At first, clans attempted to provide each other with protection against hostile encroachments. As such encroachments steadily increased, more solid organizational forms for providing defense developed. Bound up with this development was the emergence of new political forms for living together.

The situation becomes difficult and requires the help of theoretical reflection only when we wish to observe, judge, and influence continued qualitative transformations in complex constellations. It becomes difficult when we attempt to grasp as yet incomplete developments and relative advances in complex constellations: that is, when we have to do with so-called uncompleted developments. We are then forced to hold simultaneously present in *at least*

³⁹ W. Krohn and G. Küppers, editors, *Emergenz: Die Entstehung von Ordnung: Organisation und Bedeutung*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 984 (Frankfurt, 1992), p. 398. See also (following the lead of A.N. Whitehead and S. Alexander) George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (La Salle: Open Court, 1959), pp. 65ff.

⁴⁰ Cf. Michael Welker, “Hegel and Whitehead: Why Develop a Universal Theory?” in *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy*, edited by G.R. Lucas (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), pp. 121ff.

⁴¹ The excellent *Harper Atlas of the Bible* uses the term “emergence” for the process by which qualitatively new configurations of political power appear on the scene: e.g., “The Emergence of the Iron-Age Kingdoms in Syro-Palestine” (*Harper Atlas of the Bible*, edited by J.B. Prichard [New York: Harper and Row, 1987], p. 70).

three different configurations - a reciprocal interconnection of ideas, a reciprocal interconnection of events, or a reciprocal relation of human beings.

One example: For a long time, most people in Germany have seen the refugee problem in the perspective of protecting the weak and integrating minorities. In theological terms, it has been seen primarily as a matter for the mercy law.⁴² Recent political developments have shown that new forms of perception are now emerging that make people perceive the refugee problem increasingly in the perspective of a threat to their own life's reality and its inner constitution. Considered theologically, the problem is taking on formally cultic dimensions. Constructions of reality are at stake in which people seek, and think they have found, something to hold onto. If that is accurate, one could predict the steady increase in defensive postures and brutality, of unrealistic relations to self and world, and of corresponding political and social conflicts. An incipient solution - admittedly not yet a particularly creative one - could consist in the emergence of forms that at least allow the mediation of both perspectives on the refugee problem. This requires the *emergence* of new conditions of communication: that is, the emergence of transformed, mutually stimulating perceptions of self and environment. Every good intention, every good proposal, every moral appeal, every political initiative that does not recognize this will only spin its wheels.

As soon as we combine what we have learned on the level of content and on the level of form, we can understand that the reign of God is a world-transforming power and a perceivable reality, although it is difficult to pin down and to define. The reign of God is a process of emergence inasmuch as it is always issuing human beings a new challenge *to grasp the reciprocal relations of free self-withdrawal as uncontrollable qualitative transformations of concrete life patterns*.

That is hard for human beings to do. We see that these reciprocal relations are concrete and lively. We see that these relations are inconspicuous and "fluid," so to speak, and thus constantly endangered. And we recognize in all this no unmovable foundation, no fixed point of reference for the conduct of our lives. We see the possibilities for control slipping from our grasp. To be sure, experiences of other persons' free self-withdrawal in favor of their fellow persons and our own free self-withdrawal in favor of others are perceived as surprising experiences that bring happiness and radiate power. Yet we shrink back in fear before the prospect of entrusting ourselves to this power as the power of the qualitative transformations of our life relations.

Doubtless, the experiences and forms of behavior in question are striking and, in a subtle way, powerful. When we become aware of free self-withdrawal, we are almost always amazed by its power. Experiences of the free self-withdrawal both of ourselves and of others incisively correct our fixed self-perceptions and our self-images, as well as the prejudices of our so-called knowledge of human nature. Life relations that we call thoughtful, loving, and peaceful are characterized by people being mutually ready to withdraw themselves freely in favor of their neighbors. Then why can we not recognize and accept free self-withdrawal in favor of fellow creatures as a basic experience and a basic attitude that permeates and shapes all life relations?

The parables of the reign of God answer this question by saying that free self-withdrawal in favor of fellow creatures already is this basic experience. Yet under the conditions of finitude, free self-withdrawal works in processes to which people can indeed help to give concrete shape but which are not at their disposition. In short, self-withdrawal works in processes of emergence. The basic force can be experienced, but it cannot be rendered fixed and immovable. Life with validity permeates and influences real earthly life processes in ever new and creative ways. The reign of God is present, immanent, and externally perceivable in such

⁴² See Part I and the works cited there.

a way as to transform earthly life patterns in an emergent manner. At the same time, it remains future inasmuch as it is not exhausted by the transformations of earthly life relations, but works as a motive force that takes human beings into its service without their being able to control and manipulate it. Because it remains in principle in this futurity, people can rightly characterize it as “transcendent” and can take its certainty into their inner life.⁴³ But if this attitude becomes predominant, the resulting development is of course the typical unhappy, bifurcated consciousness. This consciousness is still dominant in the religious culture of the Western industrial nations, although Hegel’s masterful analysis has in principle historicized it.

In the complex constitution of the reign of God, the power of God works in the reality of earthly life relations.⁴⁴ This subtle and complex constitution leads to the fact that the emergent coming of the reign of God can be and is hindered and obstructed to a high degree by contrary forces.

For various reasons, human beings have difficulty perceiving the reign of God. We have difficulty rejoicing in this creative, lively, divine power that bears upon earthly life relations. We have difficulty giving this joy a lasting existence by means of our participation in the reign of God.

IV

The coming of the reign of God cannot be predicted concretely. *Free* self-withdrawal in favor of other creatures remains contingent, and the more urgently it seems to be required, the more implausible it becomes. The same hardened, unfree life relations that could be transformed only by self-withdrawal, only by the conversion of the strong, seem as a rule to be distinguished by a particularly tenacious power of resistance. It is precisely their transformation that appears particularly implausible. Where it succeeds, it appears to be a highly contingent, fortunate, one-shot deal.

The Synoptic writers show a clear nose for this when they connect the driving out of demonic powers with the fact that the reign of God has come. These demonic powers block the people upon whom they come from voluntarily exercising direction over their own lives. The demonic powers possess the people upon whom they come, to the injury of the latter and to the horror of their environment.⁴⁵ The Synoptic writers give striking descriptions of the helplessness of the people around those touched by this affliction. Forces are at work here that are too much for even the common power of action of well-intentioned persons. The removal of the demonic forces cannot be planned, learned, or expected. Yet the deliverance out of collective helplessness and seemingly unavoidable concrete affliction is no chimera. Rather, the removal of various forms of concrete affliction is characteristic of the coming of God’s reign. It is evident that precisely the power of free self-withdrawal in mercy, in forgiveness, and in many other forms is able to break open hardened relations of affliction and powerlessness.

This remarkable state of affairs - that the reign of God is evidently present and yet can be grasped only with difficulty, and cannot be planned - is expressed by the statements that talk

⁴³ See also Dietrich Ritschl’s concern about any attempt “to provide a hypothetical solution to unsolved theological problems, or phenomena that lead to problems, by displacing them into the future” (D. Ritschl, *Zur Logik der Theologie: Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1984], p. 306).

⁴⁴ “One of the forms by which this power works is hope. See Jürgen Moltmann’s insistence that hope for the coming reign also make its mark on “life, action and suffering in societal history.” A material and realistic eschatology, of which we have urgent need, must not fall below the theological and moral level attained by the transcendental turn Moltmann has given to this doctrinal locus. [See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975)]

⁴⁵ See Welker, *Gottes Geist*, esp. pp. 185ff.

about the presence of God's reign, and at the same time insist that it cannot be pinned down to a concrete location in time and space. This is most clearly stated in Luke 17:20f: "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the reign of God was coming, and he answered, 'The reign of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For in fact, the reign of God is among you.'"

The forces of conversion, of free self-withdrawal in favor of others - forces directed against creaturely suffering, against distress and oppression - already are having an effect on this earth. These forces have an invigorating effect - recognizably and unrecognizably, steadily and intermittently - on creaturely life patterns. They set the standard, even when human beings cannot grasp this standard. They bring to birth life with validity, even when the way of the world again and again seems to repress this life, indeed to swallow it up. The reign of God is emergent: In ever new ways the reign of God persistently influences and shapes shared creaturely life, transforming it so as to foster life. As emergent, the reign of God is *in coming*. Its inconspicuousness and its strength, its hiddenness and its attractiveness, its persistent and emergent coming and the varied forms of hindering and obstructing its presence are made especially clear by the parables of Jesus. They can be regarded as nothing less than a typology of human defensive postures against the coming of God's reign. In its elements, the reign of God is inconspicuous, easily overlooked and easily deprecated, as is registered by the ⁴⁶parables⁴⁷ of the mustard seed⁴⁸ and of the leaven,⁴⁹ as well as by the different parables of sowing. It is not surprising if people who know nothing about farming, when they look at a freshly cultivated field, perceive only the bare earth or nothing at all. But it is also not surprising if other people see here the coming of their daily bread for the immediate future and of the natural basis for the future life of a community. Looking at the same sown field, people can perceive germs of hope or worrisome growth. Different horizons of experience, different horizons of expectations give rise to different perceptions of emergent processes and also condition different practical attitudes towards them. After a bad harvest, even the unimpeded growth of the sown seed is perceived by many people differently than after a normal harvest. Along analogous lines, events of free self-withdrawal are differently perceived by people relative to different experiential contexts - or they are overlooked and ignored in different ways. In a variety of ways, self-withdrawal can actually or apparently lead to nothing at all. There are likewise many instances of free self-withdrawal in favor of others that do not evoke or make known any interplay, let alone any life transformations. In the perspective of the parable of the sower, this means: The word of the reign of God, the announcement of the emergent coming of the divine domain, the permeating of human life relations by this power is not perceived, not understood. It remains unfruitful. But where, in the midst of the inconspicuousness of its concrete activity, the power of God is recognized, there rich fruitfulness of the good seed can be expected. The parables of the treasure and of the pearl⁵⁰ describe, in addition, the overwhelming joy of persons who arrive at the knowledge of the reign of God, difficult as it is to know, and who find it utterly desirable.

The parables show not only the difficulty of *perceiving* and *recognizing* the reign whose coming is inconspicuous as it emerges in manifold concreteness. As Matthew emphasizes in

⁴⁶ Concerning the hermeneutic function of the New Testament parables, see Christian Link, *Die Welt als Gleichnis. Studien zum Problem der natürlichen Theologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1976), pp. 288ff.

⁴⁷ Mark 4:30ff; Matthew 13:31f; Luke 13:18f.

⁴⁸ Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20ff.

⁴⁹ Mark 4:26ff; 4:1ff; Matthew 13:1ff; Luke 8:4ff.

⁵⁰ Matthew 13:44ff.

the parables of the wheat and the tares and of the fishing net,⁵¹ there are also offensive counterforces and contingently attendant events that are not in accord with the intentions of the reign of God. These discordant forces and events obscure the knowledge of God's reign and hinder its coming. The parables of the wheat and the tares and of the fishing net conclude with the promise of the eschatological separation of eternal life, life with validity, from life that is lost. Here as well, the way in which the parables follow the lead of the law is obvious.⁵² After the separation of life with validity from life without validity, the just will shine in the reign of God like the sun.⁵³ But the life that is outcast and without validity, the life that will not last, is that led by those who are "causes of sin" and "evildoers" (Matthew 13:41). Yet there are still more obstructions to the reign of God and hindrances to its coming. Several parables, for example, those of the entrusted money and of the ten virgins, point to hindrances in the form of laziness and carelessness on the part of persons who are already among those expecting the reign of God.⁵⁴ Finally, the parable of the royal wedding feast⁵⁵ depicts people who are swallowed up by the busyness of the world, and who refuse to devote their time and strength to this happy event. What seems requisite to many people is not free self-withdrawal in favor of others, but the reduction of self in favor of daily cares and affairs, despite the fact that the *joy* of possible participation in life with validity is something they can *foresee* and *expect*.

The parables of Jesus cast light upon these various hindrances to the revelation of the reign of God and upon the self-imposed hindrances of people who stand in such helplessness before the concrete proximity and the recognizable joy of God's reign. The parables do not cover up the difference between life with validity and life without validity. In a culture that seems to hallow "looking out for Number One" without regard for others, or with the smallest possible dose of such regard, the parables are clearly handwriting on the wall.

Yet there is another basic element of these parables that is much stronger than any threat and more prominent than the reference to judgment. The parables depict the inconspicuousness of the reign of God and the difficulty people have in grasping it. They show the various obstructions and disturbances, the multiple conscious and unconscious postures of defense and refusal of people faced with the coming of God's reign. In doing so, the parables encourage people to forego unnecessary self-imposed hindrances.

Thus, they can be understood as manifestations of God's love to human beings. They prove themselves to be a caring summons to take hold of joy in the power of God that, due to its emergent concreteness and proximity, is so inconspicuous.

With the petition "Your reign come," people make it known that this summons is not in vain. By asking that God fulfill this petition, again and again they make known to God their readiness: We want to become involved in the renewal of the world by the power of free self-withdrawal in favor of others.

⁵¹ Matthew 13:36ff and 13:47ff.

⁵² Cf. Part I.

⁵³ Matthew 13:43; cf. also 13:49.

⁵⁴ Matthew 25:1ff.

⁵⁵ Matthew 22:1ff; Luke 14:15ff.