

**Michael Welker**

## **IS THE AUTONOMOUS PERSON OF EUROPEAN MODERNITY A SUSTAINABLE MODEL OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD ?**

I would like to present for discussion reflections on the concept of the person that combine ideas from philosophy, theology, and cultural sciences. I begin with a classic pre-modern concept of the person, namely "the mask". With the help of this concept I elaborate difficulties that we have today--that is in late modernity or in so-called post-modernity--in developing a persuasive concept of the person, that connects innerpersonal subjectivity and the public person. In Part 2 I describe the concept of the "autonomous person" of modernity. I shall show that the autonomous person of modernity attained a high anthropological level in serving this task, and I shall explore the question of whether the autonomous person of European modernity can be regarded as a sustainable model of human personhood. In Part 3 I ask whether Christian theology both past and present can with good reason claim that the person is constituted not by autonomy, but by faith.<sup>1</sup> I shall show that in the modern period a reductionist theology and piety with highly abstract concepts of faith and of the "God-human relation" has systematically obscured both the theological and the anthropological dimension of the person. In closing I shall consider the conditions under which the theological assertion that faith constitutes the person could be persuasive.

My presentation will suggest that the anthropological search for a concept of the person should take place in connection with work on theological questions. The search for a materially appropriate and complex concept of the person is supremely well-suited to test the cooperation of natural sciences, humanities, and theology or theologically schooled religious studies.

### **1. A pre-modern concept of the person and the difficulties it reveals in developing a**

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<sup>1</sup> Today, many persons prefer the term "spirituality". I will propose an understanding of faith which serves the intentions to address the emotional, affective and practical dimensions of piety, without losing the concentrated and cognitive aspects of the individual and communal relation to God.

### **complex understanding of the person today**

Most dictionaries and other reference books state under the entry "person" that the Greek word *prósopon* (face) and the Latin word *persona* refer to the **mask** through which an actor speaks. The expression can also signify the actor who wears the mask, and the role played by the actor. The expression thus intends a connection between the concrete individual (the actor), the typification on the basis of the role (through the mask), and the condition of being adjusted and attuned to a public spectrum of expectations (the role and its performance). However, modern thought seems to find it difficult to **understand** this pre-modern connection as "person" and the person as this complex interface. In general, modern common sense seems to mix up the person, the individual, the singularity of the body, the subject, the self, the "I," and other phenomena and concepts. It seems to have difficulties to differentiate and clearly relate the subjectivity behind the mask and the public, objective and objectified person in front of the mask.

Like the concept of "person," most of these key anthropological concepts (the individual, the I, the subject) **mediate between the individual as a "unique one" and the individual as "an example or representative of the species."** The polarity between, on the one hand, human singularity and uniqueness and, on the other hand, abstract human equality, as well as the mediation between these two poles, are obviously of the utmost importance to modern mentalities. The person represents such a mediation. This mediation is complex. It has to operate, so to speak, both in front of the mask and behind the mask. On the one hand, the person mediates human uniqueness and abstract equality objectively and for the outside world, for the surroundings of the individual: the objective and public self. On the other hand, the person links individual uniqueness and equality subjectively and for the inside. This inner, subjective mediation of singularity and equality brings about the differentiation and connection of the "I" and the self--a mediation that we attribute to **subjectivity**. George Herbert Mead, Erik Erikson and others differentiated the "I" and the self as subject and object of self-consciousness. A long anthropological debate, which is not yet consolidated, has reversed this relation and sees the self as the totality of "states, qualities and actions" of a human individual, whose unity is actualized moment by moment in the "I".<sup>2</sup>

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2 Vgl. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive*, Vandenhoeck: Göttingen 1983, 214ff.

The individual person is the connection between the person's intimate self-reference, the person's external self-presentation, and the interrelations of a person's environment to her or his self-reference and self-presentation (the public self). Or, to operate with the pre-modern image: The individual person differentiates and relates the processes "in front of the mask" and those "behind the mask." Via the person, via the mask, the individual mediates to the outside world uniqueness and equality, non-disposability and security of expectations. With regard to the mask from the inside, a person mediates and differentiates himself and his perception and stylization of himself. The person, visualized by the mask, is the interface both determined by and turned toward the outside world, and determined by and turned toward the inside. Through the person a human being adjusts and attunes herself both consciously and unconsciously in accordance with broad spectra of expectations directed toward the person.

We adapt to a certain spectrum of fixed expectations, role stereotypes, and habits; we influence other spectra in the direction of change; and we avoid a third group of expectations altogether. In this process of grasping, presenting and forming ourselves we are "a person." In this process we prove to be individually unique **and** individually typical; we prove our subjectivity to be a unique **and** a general phenomenon.

By way of the personal mask--that is, the connection of uniqueness and security of expectations directed toward the outside world and toward the inside--a human being can refer in a definite way to the image of himself, which is not only self-made, but also created in social interaction. The individual can (to a certain degree) transform the mask--that is, the forms of appearance, action and reaction typical of his public self. The individual can thus influence the spectrum of fixed expectations that are directed toward the person in a manner that seems to go without saying. The person can, of course, also have the mask transformed from the outside. Or she can perceive the changes made without her explicit knowledge, and can and will try to adjust and attune herself to the different spectra of expectations in a new way.

In the same process, the human being certainly must both differentiate and relate the "I" and the self behind the mask, so to speak, and develop her subjectivity. It is very difficult to grasp the interconnection of the processes behind and in front of the mask, the interconnection of the subjectivity, on the one hand, and the public and externally objectified self, on the other. Indeed, just the processes that take place **in front of** the mask and with reference to it are very

complex and difficult to grasp. The more the social environments become incalculable, the faster they change, the more difficult the integration of the person becomes. But if the culture and the individual fail to achieve this integration, the idea of the free person becomes nothing but an empty phrase.

As we have seen, the person integrates numerous problems and processes of adjustment and attunement that become blurred if we mix up person, individual, subjectivity, the "I" etc. This confusion on the part of common sense provokes a welter of different one-sided and reductionist conceptions of personhood that partly even conflict with each other, although they seem to speak of the same matter. Very different elements of personhood or constellations of those elements can be grasped as **the person**. A number of one-sided forms can be passed off as "the person," or can even be made to be the criterion for "the person," such as: an unsteady and bizarre individuality following his inclinations (the "post-modern individual"), a subjectivity who gives security of expectations but is socially quite unadapted (the Bogart-type), an abstract "I" seeking to become his own self (the identity-search figure), a self turning with the change of public-moral pressures (the typical petty-bourgeois individual), or a personality who controls the social environment with a strong sense for resonance (the success-type in market societies), to name only a few forms.

Several philosophers like Amélie Oksenberg Rorty<sup>3</sup> have drawn attention to the fact that with different social and cultural contexts, the definition of "person" and of the essence of personhood changes. If we consider conceptions of the person that predominate in contemporary Western cultures, it seems to me that the intellectual understanding of the person still concentrates on what is going on **behind the mask, obviously in an ongoing reaction to the unintelligibility and complexity of what in our day and social environments takes place in front of the mask**. Most of what modern consciousness hold to be holy about the person seems to lie behind the mask: self-reference and familiarity with one's own self; the ability to refuse demands from the outside world, to say "no" and to be self-determining; the free subjectivity in her differentiated adjustment and attunement of the "I" and the self; the free cultivation of individual capabilities in the process of education based on one's own power and authority.

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3 A. Oksenberg Rorty, *Mind in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*, Beacon: Boston 1988, bes. 31ff.

This process that we might term the "**subjectivization of the person**" seems still to be in full swing in our cultures. This process did not seem to be problematic as long as it took place in environments whose communicative structures were dense and closely connected, and as long as it was directed against powerful, stable and stratified public institutions and hierarchical forms of organization and order. Quite the contrary, this process led to a strengthening of individuals and to a vivification of culture. The one-sided concentration on the processes behind the mask made sense as long as the conditions existing in front of the mask and with respect to it were densely ordered and relatively clearly definable. The strong counter-movements to the stable public institutions and hierarchies produced common aims and common forms--that is, stability--in modern subjectivity. Many forms of unity emerged time and again in the manifold processes of subjectivization, because these processes reacted against the same environments, or against analogous, relatively stable environments. The individual variety of subjective self-references and the common belief in the person as a representative of the species were compatible. The communicative density of small or at least clear public contexts guaranteed the constant adjustment and attunement of individual one-sidedness and subjective arbitrariness to public expectations and realms of resonance.

The problems attendant upon this withdrawal "behind the mask" become obvious as soon as the strong hierarchical public institutions are substituted by market-type configurations and media-stimulated pluralistic developments. The negative consequences of the modern withdrawal behind the mask indeed become recognizable as soon as human beings have to act in thinly structured or relatively diffuse public environments. Earlier than anybody else, some North American cultural critics grasped these displacements with terms such as "the minimal self,"<sup>4</sup> "the culture of narcissism,"<sup>5</sup> "the decay and end of public life," "the tyranny of intimacy,"<sup>6</sup> etc.

If we read the cultural dynamics of contemporary western societies correctly, there is an unbroken fascination with the radical uniqueness of the individual in our societies. At the same time, in late modernity the abstract individualism of modernity becomes challenged in several ways. It is not without reason that nowadays competitive sports and electronic

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4 Ch. Lash, *The Minimal Self. Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, Norton: New York and London, 1984; A. Oksenberg Rorty, *Mind in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*, Beacon: Boston 1988, bes. 31ff.

5 Ch. Lash, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Norton: New York and London, 1979.

6 R. Sennett, *Verfall und Ende des öffentlichen Lebens. Die Tyrannei der Intimität*, Fischer Wiss. 1980, Frankfurt 1986 (engl. 1974).

popular music are the forms in which individuals can become "public persons" with an extra large realm of resonance. The public persons in competitive sports and entertainment music mirror the way in which current societies search and long for "the person." Modern culture provoked the subjectivization of the person, the withdrawal behind the mask. It thus aimed at the maximum increase in concrete individuality. What late modern cultures see, is that the maximum increase in concrete individuality is provided by the **single body** and by **individual feeling**. Now the single body and individual feeling have to be presented **in front of** the mask in a way that shows that this unique individual is to the highest degree also typical and able to function as a representative of the species in a way that finds immediate resonance. Without any doubt, we find successful syntheses with regard to such a public objectivization of the body in competitive sports, and with regard to the communication of emotionality in electronic popular music. If the latent cultural parameters remain what they are at the moment, there will be no diminution in the power of these one-sided and even distortive forms of centering on the person, which through their presentation via the mass media are surrounded with an aura that is nothing short of religious. On the basis of our findings it is, by the way, not difficult to predict that pornography will continue to experience a boom as a side-effect of the helpless search for the person with emphasis on the publication of both individual corporeality and individual feeling.

If we want to change this state of affairs it first is important to understand what help the modern concept of the autonomous person offered in mediating between the processes behind the mask and those in front of the mask. It is important to examine whether the modern concept of the autonomous person can be a paradigm of personhood as such.

## **2. Why the autonomous person of European modernity can seem to be a paradigm of personhood, and why it can not provide a sustainable model**

The tremendous integrative power of the modern concept of the autonomous person became clear to me at a conference of the Heidelberg International Wissenschaftsforum in the summer of 1997. We had brought together philosophers, psychologists, ethnologists and other scholars in the humanities from all over the world to consider the question of whether the concept of the autonomous person can also be found in non-European cultures. Sinologists, Egyptologists, Indologists and Hellenists, as well as ethnologists who study contemporary

cultures, put forward various candidates for the concept of autonomy, but the discussions showed that none of them measured up to the modern concept of autonomy. If autonomy is understood merely as autarchy, we find it present over 4000 years ago in Egypt (Jan Assmann). In the sixth century B.C.E. a concept of the soul (atman) was developed in India that focuses on a self that can be influenced only by itself (Klaus Butzenberger). Also an agile life in an abundance of roles and perspectives on oneself, engaging in mere resistance to heteronomy and to all varieties of being incorporated from the outside, does not measure up to the level of modern autonomy--although it represents a form that might appear as "autonomy" to so-called postmodern mentalities. This shifting and evasive identity, which I have termed autoplexy, is found not only among the yuppies of late modernity, but also, for example, in contemporary African tribal cultures (John and Jean Comaroff). An important basic characteristic of the European conception of the autonomous person is already found in the agonal self in classical Greece. Through permanent competitive self-assertion, this form of the self argues for regarding competition as a basic form of cultural formation (Egon Flaig).

But the modern European concept of the autonomous person is built upon several further differentiations. Using rabbinic interpretations of Old Testament traditions, Michael Fishbane called attention to an important differentiation that casts light on the constellations both behind and in front of the mask. In those rabbinic interpretations, one candidate for the "autonomous person" is the **religiously distinguished self, purified and immunized against external influences**. The other candidate is the **individual performer of a religiously coded moral activity**. As we shall see, both perspectives--on the one hand, a pure self immune to alien determinations (type: Noah, who "walked with God"), and on the other hand, a normative shaper of culture, society and the world (type: Abraham, who "walked before God")--are bound together, in secularized form, in the modern European concept of the autonomous person.

The modern autonomous person seeks to structure and shape the field in front of the mask by engaging in a continual struggle with himself behind the mask. The autonomous person of modernity must continually regain the unity of the person. At the most basic level, the autonomous person of modernity must **continually regain the unity and constancy of the person** by, on the one hand, striving for **coherence in rule-governed self-direction** and, on the other hand, **dominating one's own corporeal, sensual nature**. The "agonal self" is thus interiorized and verifies autonomy in an enduring battle with itself and in a continuous

process of triumphing over self. According to the modern credo, this continually renewed self-acquisition goes hand in hand with a moral self-presentation that commands respect and with a continual process of exercising rational and moral influence on one's social surroundings. The operations behind the mask receive their compensation in front of the mask, so to speak. Autonomy has a dynamically exemplary effect on other human beings, inasmuch as it summons them to become increasingly steady and increasingly perfected selves. In theory at any rate, this reciprocal process is supposed to lead to a steady increase in the moral and rational coherence of the entire community.

The most striking conception of the autonomous person, and the one which probably has most influenced cultural history, is to be found in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. According to the well-known teaching of this moral philosophy, the person acquires and verifies his autonomy:

- 1) not only by bringing sensual drives under subjective rules, but also by examining these rules to see whether they correspond to the universal law of reason;
- 2) by reforming the rules for his own action in accordance with the universal law of reason.

When Kant published his Critique of Practical Reason he was convinced that this concept of the autonomous person would quickly take hold of mentalities and become effective both theoretically and practically. In Kant's view, a consciousness of dignity, of self-respect and of freedom accompanies the experience of the autonomy of moral reason, and this consciousness will become ever stronger, eventually attaining dominance both in individual human beings and in relations between human beings. Yet in spite of the great success of his moral philosophy, Kant soon saw himself confronted with the following dilemma: The prospect of a steady progress in the dominance of reason over sensual drives was by no means clear, either in the individual course of life or in public morality. Kant had evidently overestimated the power of reason. At the same time he had underestimated the power of sensual drives. This led to the skeptical response that wondered whether it was a mere illusion to think that reason could achieve dominance in a sensually determined being.<sup>7</sup>

As is well known, in his later years Kant reacted to this problem by turning again to religion. In his writing Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, he invents a metaphysical history

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Welker, Der Vorgang Autonomie. Philosophische Beiträge zur Einsicht in theologischer Rezeption und Kritik, Neukirchener: Neukirchen 1975.

of the Fall. The Fall consists in the fact that human beings set up a false ordering in the relation between reason and sensuality. Because they subordinate reason to sensuality, because they confuse freedom with the condition of being driven by the senses, reason must gain itself a hearing by appearing as an "ought." Human beings must be brought to freedom by compulsion. And religion can, as Kant says, help by serving as a "vehicle" of morality in this arduous process of the forming the autonomous person.

In spite of the enduring success story of this concept of the autonomous person, today we have a fairly clear picture of the weaknesses and deficiencies that, already in Kant's work, displaced this concept from its status as a supposed fact to its status as an--even problematic--ideal. Kant's negative depiction of sensuality, and the attendant inability to do justice both to the concrete, unique human individual and to real, complex relations in social life, were seen early on as a problem. The intellectual development of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the most significant theologian of the 19th century, occurred in a continual effort to correct these weaknesses of the modern concept of the autonomous person.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the **modern understanding of autonomy not only fails to grasp the authenticity of the unique corporeal and sensual person. It also underestimates the contextuality of morality and the mutability of rationality.** Fixed on the disembodied person primarily behind the mask, fixed on abstract subjectivity and its moral powers of influence, the modern concept of the autonomous person can not assign any clearly definable place to the way in which human beings are shaped by modernity's social and cultural processes of differentiation. The modern concepts of morality and rationality were unable to prevent entire societies that appealed to these governing powers from being possessed by chauvinist, fascist, racist and ecologically brutal mentalities. Moreover, the modern concept of the autonomous person has extreme difficulty maintaining its claims to orientation and universality, because it seems unable either to coordinate the rationalities and moralities of the differentiated subsystems (media, economy, law, education, politics, religion, science), or to limit their powers of self-assertion.

Insight into the limitations of what can be achieved by the modern concept of the autonomous person does not automatically suggest that we should turn to a religious and theological

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8 Cf. M. Welker, "We Live Deeper Than We Think": Schleiermacher's Genial Earliest Ethics, *Theology Today* 1999.

understanding of the person. But a circumspect consideration of its limitations does direct us again and again to themes that are familiar from the history of theology: the relation between the "outer" and the "inner" human being; the relations between body, consciousness, and the somewhat nebulous entities "spirit" and "soul" (or perhaps entities that have **become** nebulous); faith in the care extended by the God who deserves to be called "Creator of the world" to the concrete, individual human being; God's engagement with the sin that can completely possess and corrupt our moralities and rationalities; etc. Yet it is not triumphalistically, but cautiously, even skeptically that I turn to the theological thesis: Faith constitutes the person<sup>9</sup>. Does faith or spirituality indeed constitute the person?

### **3. Why can Christian theology claim that faith constitutes the person?**

The popular understanding of "faith" in contemporary Western societies is that a believing individual is utterly certain of something "wholly Other," of a "transcendent" power, agent, or vaguely conceived Person, that at the same time, however, is intimately near. Since the "Beyond," the "ultimate point of reference of creaturely dependence" is included in this utmost certainty that is then called "faith," this relation of dependence approximates an emphatic self-reference. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was right when he described it as an "indirect Cartesianism": I feel somehow dependent, therefore I am.

This conception of "faith" approaches and even collapses into emphatic self-reference. Thus religious communication--in order to distinguish religious and non-religious experience of this inner certainty and feeling of otherness--has regularly thematized this "faith" while stigmatizing all forms of self-reference. To the same degree that the inner certainty--understood as "faith"--was treasured, all forms of self-reference were denounced as "sin." Any attempt to distinguish between innocent, trivial, healthy, distortive and even demonic forms of self-reference seemed risky. A paradoxical and neuroticizing mentality captured this religious form, since it proved extremely difficult, indeed impossible, to distinguish this empty certainty from a very simple and basic form of human self-reference that had come to terms with its inner structure: namely, that all self-reference has to include some element of difference if it wants to experience "certainty." The upside of this seemed to be that nobody

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<sup>9</sup> M. Luther, WA 40/I on Gal. 2:20, cf. Ebeling, Joest und Härle.

could escape this type of "faith"--at least not in cultures and among mentalities that are based on the self-reference of the individual, which is to say, cultures that belong to the the "modern world-society".

Seen from the outside, this impoverished form called "faith" contains in itself the elements of immediacy and negation, intimate self-awareness and the experience of difference. Since this form can appear both as a religious form and as a basic form of dialectical self-reflexivity (unity of unity and difference), it can be interpreted as the "feeling of the utmost dependence" (Schleiermacher), as the simultaneity of self-assurance and self-challenge in the encounter with the "Thou shalt" of the moral law (Kant), as the unity and tension of "essence and existence" (Tillich), and in multifarious other ways, both religious and non-religious, depending on the communicative context in which it occurs. From Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard to Bultmann and Gordon Kaufman there have been many theological endeavors to come to terms with this type of empty "faith." Most of them have in common that they want to demonstrate that this utmost certainty, on the one hand, is clearly an anthropological phenomenon while, on the other hand, it is seen as God-given, as sponsored by grace and not a trivial event or the result of an everyday perceptual enterprise.

This experience of immediacy and negation, of a religious certainty called "faith," could seem to be extremely precious. It seems to allow us to introduce religious communication at practically any point. Nobody can escape this experience of immediacy and negation. As soon as a person tries to thematize her "inner self" she runs into this religious certainty. What is the element of "otherness" I encounter when I reach the utmost depth of my inner self? Is this God? In a form that appeals to the modern mind, we seem to have at hand what Calvin called the "natural awareness," the presentiment of the Divine.<sup>10</sup> But it is a culturally tamed and domesticated natural awareness. Where Calvin saw a vague awe in the face of aesthetic powers, cosmic laws, and social orders, the modern religious variant has only this arid notion of dialectical self-awareness.

Vast regions of theology, of teaching and of proclamation in the classic mainline churches have treasured this form of abstract and empty "faith" very highly. They have done much to shield this empty certainty from the discovery of religious arbitrariness, availability and

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10 Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, I,3-I,5; M. Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), chap. 2.

ambivalence. They bought into the idealist assertion that this certainty was the "ground" of self-consciousness, the key to all epistemological and moral worth, and the very foundation of personhood. They clothed this poor form with abundant variants of the rhetoric of "wholeness." And they tried to reinforce the differentiation between a self-reference given by the divine and a self-reference taken or performed in the secular world. However, this differentiation could not be reinforced on the basis of the underlying theoretical construction. As the vast debates on the reflection theory of self-consciousness teach us, there is nothing but an arbitrary distinction between the predominance of the "active" side and the predominance of the "passive" side in this basic dialectical experience. Both aspects co-emerge in the experience of self-referential activity. The often heated debate over the question of what would and should be the true and "faithful" order of giving and receiving, of activity and passivity in the relation of God and the human being was like a fight over the question of whether "the emperor's new clothes" were black or white.

This analysis of the inner texture of a typically modern type of "faith," however, should not lead us to underestimate its power. This form of faith allows us to fuse religious and secular mentalities. It allows us to fuse religious and moral communication. Above all, it is an excellent focus for a culture that tries to trigger the greed-fulfillment mechanism as perfectly as possible: already but not yet, not yet but already; intimacy with myself and the encounter with otherness; utmost certainty and dialectical difference. Yet this type of faith allows for a religious coding of universalist mentalities. And it seems recursively to bless religious mentalities with a universalist aura. It continuously signals the message: "In a latent way, a reasonable person cannot but be religious!"

Like Calvin, who emphasized the power of the "natural awareness" of the Divine--despite its vagueness, ambiguity and ambivalence--we should acknowledge the power of the modern notion of "faith" just described. We should acknowledge its power, but we should also clearly indicate that it blocks and blurs a clear concept of the person and a convincing understanding of God. Having examined pre-modern and modern forms of personhood and having addressed difficulties the contemporary world has with the concept of the person, we can clearly see that theology has to do much better than promoting the reductionist understanding of faith just described. It is the task of theology to help explore the relation between God and

the human person without reducing both sides to mere reference points.<sup>11</sup>

We turn to this task if we take as our starting point not the vacuous modern understanding of faith, but Luther's or Paul's understanding of faith. Here we find a way of talking about faith in which the subjective relationship with God is always connected with objective faith, included in it, supported by it, and nourished by it. We find the subjective relationship with God always bound into a dynamic structure of persuasion traversed by certainties that have been tested in diverse ways, and by diverse quests for truth. This dynamic structure of persuasion functions as a medium of communication. Human beings can gain access to this medium--whether the position from which they are coming be one of uncertainty, of distance from faith, of lack of faith, or of enmity toward faith. In contrast to other communication media oriented toward truth (e.g., mathematics), faith in God is highly sensitive and open to the concrete individual and his emotional and affective forms of experience. "Faith" is thus also understood as that individual or shared access to the dynamic structure of persuasion with regard to the living God which both strengthens and is strengthened by this dynamic structure. When human beings believe in God, they gain access to the medium of faith, they enter into this dynamic structure of persuasion. The attendant problems of not confusing God and faith must not provoke us to construct a God without faith: for instance, as an empty point of reference of indeterminate individual certainty or of arbitrary private convictions. Luther was right when he saw that "God and faith belong together."

If we recognize that faith is constituted in this way, we can abandon false dichotomies such as "faith and knowledge." Since faith relates to the living God, and since it is open not only to the rational and cognitive experiences of human beings, but also to their emotional and affective experiences, it is so to speak softer, more open to revision than is knowledge. But it is most definitely accompanied and permeated by knowledge. This knowledge of faith, shared consciously by many persons and unconsciously by many persons, evinces astounding continuities and regularities--even in comparison with the knowledge of the natural sciences. The modern emptying out of faith's contents has in part driven the knowledge of faith out of public consciousness, so now this knowledge must be reactivated if we wish to grasp and to describe such complex phenomena as that of the person. In relating to the individual person by means of faith, God not only accepts and takes seriously the individual human being in her

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11 Without driving God behind the mask, too!

spiritual, corporeal, sensual and emotional uniqueness. In faith God also gives this human being a universal worth. For Christians this worth consists in their becoming one person with Christ, as Luther says. They become bearers of God's presence on earth.

It would be fascinating to investigate how this worth of the human being is grounded and brought to expression in other religions.<sup>12</sup> In any case we already see the first basic features of how the constitution of the person by faith brings with it a very complex concept of the person. On the one hand, the depth of the concrete, unique person can be taken seriously and must not be reduced to abstract subjectivity. On the other hand, the universal worth of the person is taken seriously, since in faith the person is ordained to be a bearer of God's presence on this earth. After we have seen that this God can indeed be reduced to an abstract entity inhabiting the "beyond," to an "ultimate point of reference," or to similar religious inventions, and after we have seen that this leads to faith becoming vacuous and to the sought after concept of the person becoming fuzzy or simply being lost, we will be somewhat more careful in how we handle the knowledge of faith. Within the Christian churches we shall have to ask what it means to become one with the person of Christ, with the Risen One who reveals himself in his post-Easter body with his various members and gifts. In conversation with non-Christian religions and with secular attitudes we shall have to pursue the question of what it means to be the image of the creative God when we do not go along with the modern reductionism and the systematic drive to religious vacuity. But in both contexts we need self-critical and critical conversation with philosophy, the humanities and the natural sciences, if we wish to prove that a theological orientation is helpful in the effort to attain an understanding of the person that is adequate to its object.

Without dragging you too deeply into technical theological questions, I have at least attempted in a fourfold way to call your attention to what a theological perspective with an interdisciplinary orientation can introduce into this discussion:

- 1) The uninhibited recourse to insights and concepts that lie far back in world history, and that we can not take over directly, but from whose sensitivity to truth and reality we can learn (the mask, the person constituted by faith).
- 2) The reconstruction of efforts at knowledge in popular cultural developments, from which

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<sup>12</sup> And, of course, how secular and agnostic mentalities describe the individual and common approbation of human dignity and worth.

highbrow social and intellectual discussion tends to keep its distance (the fixed concentration on heroes and heroines of entertainment music and of competitive sports as a plausible, albeit misguided search for the paradigm of personhood).

3) The critical and self-critical engagement with philosophically and religiously honed, extremely successful cultural forms (modern autonomy and vacuous faith as immediate relationship to that which is "wholly other").

4) Most important, though, is the perspective that I was only able to sketch within the framework of our theme: By relating the interdisciplinary questions to the living God, theology can open up new terrain for cultural and historical learning, if theology does not close itself off to the questions of certainty and truth posed by the other sciences, and if theology does not attempt to promulgate totalitarian religious thought. The constitution of the person by faith addresses not only the richness of the individual, its rational and emotional dimensions, its cognition and its modes of living. It also leads behind the mask and it structures the realm in front of the mask. It is God the creator who constitutes the complex unity of the person and the complex interdependence of the creatures. Without addressing God's creative activity, appreciated by faith, we do not gain a perspective on the unity of the public person and the unity of creation.

This does not mean that God relates to everything and that God connects everything with everything as totalitarian religious thought sees it. Totalitarian religious thought simply relates everything--in fact in a thoughtless manner--to God. God is the "Ground of all being," the "all-determining reality," the "cause of everything"--so run the corresponding ciphers and jargon phrases. Totalitarian religious thought remains undeterred by everything from the ironic queries as to whether God also created my pants button and willed the staggering steps of the drunk, to the very serious questions of theodicy. Totalitarian religious thought simply relates all and everything to God and God to all and everything--and thereby leaves faith and theology behind. It is by no means easy to make clear that totalitarian religious thought suppresses or stultifies faith and theology. Faith certainly sees the possibility that every event could in principle be related to God. But faith's interest in God, in the knowledge of God, and in the knowledge of reality in the light of the knowledge of God leads faith to ask where that relationship becomes clear. In totalitarian religious thought's vague assurance that everything is somehow or other related to God, **nothing becomes clear**. In my view, the great opportunity provided by interdisciplinary collaboration on a materially appropriate concept of

the person is that we will render both totalitarian religious thought and a tired agnosticism equally superfluous by the shared search for understanding and by the quest for the truth that illuminates and liberates both faith and knowledge.

What have we gained concretely with regard to the search for a model for human personhood?

The modern concept of the autonomous person has greatly distanced us from the corporeal, sensual person and from the culturally and socially conditioned person. It has contributed to idealist philosophy reigning for a while as queen of the sciences and humanities. But it has been unable to satisfy the high expectations it awakened. At the same time we need to value the major feat of integration that the concept of the modern autonomous person has accomplished with regard to many concepts of personhood and freedom. When it comes to consistency, this integration is simply superior to that of most pre-modern and postmodern proposals. The autonomous person of modernity poses itself the problem of how to mediate between the subjectivity behind the mask and the public person in front of the mask. Its answer is: by fighting against the sensual condition of the person and by shaping the moral communication. This answer has lost its convincing power. But this does not mean that the assertion that faith constitutes the person will find open ears, without further ado.

In the modern period, the theological concept of the person constituted by faith not only has fallen victim to philosophical reductionism, but has also been completely emptied of content spiritually. Therefore the abstract God-human relation, which combines two points of reference by means of a primitive relation of unequal powers, must be replaced by a materially appropriate description of the relation between the living creative God and the human person in the midst of creaturely existence. We have tried to unfold the notion of the person with the help of the pre-modern notion of the mask. We thus saw the need and the difficulty, to relate the subjectivity behind the mask to the public self in front of the mask. We saw the need to do this in a different way than fighting and denouncing the sensual self. We also saw the difficulties to gain a notion of the unity of the public self without losing the richness of the concrete person and its complex environments. Here the relation of the living and creative God to the human person, encountered and disclosed by faith becomes a very attractive focus to explore the unity of the public person and its relation to the sensual, bodily self. To work on this description is the task of theology, which must free itself from subordination to a reductionist philosophy. But to work on this description is also the task of

the sciences that wish to hold themselves critically accountable to the classical religious and philosophical standards for a complex concept of the person. If we ask for the unity of the public person, the unity in front of the mask, and if we explore its relation to the concrete subjectivity in the fullness of its cognitive and emotional, theoretical and practical striving behind the mask, we can not escape the religious dimensions of human life and personhood.