

Michael Welker

THEOLOGY, TRUTH, AND SCRIPTURE

The following chapter offers a contribution to two topics that James Fowler has risen in his more recent publications: How to support what he terms "the moral and faith formation" in social and cultural environments which by their very texture do not seem to welcome this enterprise?¹ How to engage "the Christian Story in a New Key" in this attempt?²

I. THEOLOGY, *theology* and *Theology*

"Theology"--in history and in the contemporary situation--meets us in an overwhelming wealth of forms, a vast array of methods, topics, interests and goals. In the midst of all these appearances of "theology", it seems advisable to distinguish three basic and general forms of theology. For the sake of a comfortable overview and cognitive control I would like to speak, first, of maximalist theologies--let's name them **THEOLOGY** written in capitals--second, of minimalist theologies, **theology** written with no capitals and third, theologies moving between maximalists and minimalists theologies, **Theology** written with a capital "T". These forms of "theology" must necessarily interact if theological reflection and existence are to remain vibrant and valid.

By **THEOLOGY** written in capitals we understand an elaborate interconnection of thought and conviction related to God and God's workings. When we speak, for instance, of the **THEOLOGY** of Augustine, Luther or Schleiermacher, the **THEOLOGY** of the reformed confessional writings or of the **THEOLOGY** of a specific biblical book, we refer to such a **THEOLOGY**. **THEOLOGIES** written large can, but need not be theological classics. We can speak of the **THEOLOGY** of a dogmatics, a congregation, or a church tradition, without necessarily praising or even accepting it. Many **THEOLOGIES** written large can be

1 See James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church*, Harper: San Francisco 1991, esp. 172-197; *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, Abingdon Press: Nashville 1996, esp. 221-236. I am very grateful to William Schweiker for his comments on an earlier version of this text. .

2 See Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation*, 117-142.

unconvincing for us or even appear dead. The elaborated interconnection of theological thought and conviction is the point of THEOLOGIES written large. Such an elaborated interconnection can be a blessing or a curse. Schleiermacher warned against trying to press on people theologies which cultivate modes of thought and imagination "in which nobody really thinks any longer". On the other hand, THEOLOGICAL voices from the past, written large, are constant challenges to investigate and reshape our own theological thinking. Such elaborated THEOLOGIES rarely arise outside communities of faith. They presuppose religious movements, congregations and churches as well as church and academic education, and in all this, tradition and intense spiritual exchange. They presuppose not only other THEOLOGIES written large. THEOLOGY written large presupposes also the other two basic forms of theology.

We refer to theology written without capitals when we claim that every pious person, every member of a religious community is enabled to theological utterances and contributions. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere³, not every remark about God is theological. Not even every pious utterance can be considered theological. The sigh directed to God and the silent prayer are no more theological utterances than the cynical remark about God or the presentation that makes clear that it is talking about a religion that is spiritually profoundly foreign to the speaker.

Although a theological utterance about God or about matters religious does not have to evidence a well-developed "faith (a task, the fulfilment of which is expected of THEOLOGY written large), it must show **a minimum of conviction and a minimal degree of having been existentially influenced.** "No matter what the reflective distance may be at which faith appears in theological utterances, if those utterances do not evidence a minimum of certainty shared or valued by the speaker, if they do not at least evidence the search for spiritual reliability and truth or the need to believe, then these statements about God and matters religious can not be considered theological." But this is only the first of two conditions to qualify an utterance as theological. "The second presupposition is no less demanding. A theological utterance must be **formulated in words and must be comprehensible. It must**

3 John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker: Faith in the Living God, SPCK: London and Fortress Press: Philadelphia 2001, chapter IX; cf. also "Theology in Public Discourse Outside Communities of Faith?" in: Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham-Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-first Century, hg. Luis E. Lego, Preface by Max Stackhouse, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2000, 110-122.

be such that others can follow its logic, and it must be capable of material development.

In order to reach the level of **theological propositions**, religious utterances must express certainties that are communicable, comprehensible, and open to development with respect to their object and content." Although academic theology sometimes finds this side underdeveloped in individual piety and church life, we should not operate with a cliché that leaves conviction and existential involvement to the church, and comprehensibility as well as material development to the academy. By its very commitment to teaching and research the academy can not avoid reaching out for existential commitment, personal certainty and conviction. Academic theology decays when it simply administers THEOLOGIES written large, treating them as more or less interesting museum pieces.

II. Theology in Truth-Seeking Communities

This observation leads us to the third basic form of Theology, written with a large "T". This Theology navigates and mediates between THEOLOGIES written large and theologies written small. This Theology--characteristic for a sound academic Theology--is exercised in "truth-seeking communities". "Truth-seeking communities"--I am indebted to John Polkinghorne for this expression⁴--are not to be confused with groups that announce more or less loudly that they have found the truth and now possess it. **Truth-seeking communities are groups of human beings that indeed raise truth claims, but which above all develop and practice open and public forms and procedures in which these truth claims are subjected to critical and self-critical examination.** The academy, active in research and education, is one such truth-seeking community.

On the one hand, truth-seeking communities advance processes in which certainty and consensus can be developed, interrogated, and heightened. In doing so they are to guard against reducing truth to certainty and consensus. On the other hand, truth-seeking communities advance processes in which complex states of affairs can be made accessible in repeatable and predictable ways. In doing so they are to guard against reducing truth to the repeatable, predictable, and correct investigation of the subject under consideration.

⁴ John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 149; *Faith, Science and Understanding*, 29-30; John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2001), esp. chap. 9.

In my view, the path of the search for truth is adequately characterized only by the reciprocal relation between, on the one hand, the interrogation and heightening of certainty and consensus and, on the other hand, the repeatable, predictable, and correct investigation of the subject under consideration. This path can be traveled only in open and public critical and self-critical communication.

We ought not to make light of the accomplishment, the worth, and the blessing of truth-seeking communities, even though we must self-critically take account of the fact that these communities are always guided by other interests. For example, they are also guided by the search for maximum cultural resonance and for moral and political influence, as well as by vanity and the desire for power and control. The sober recognition that there are no pure and perfect truth-seeking communities can help us to balance appreciation and self-critique. It helps us to be very careful about the blind self-privileging of academic work. We must not attach lesser value to "justice-seeking communities" or to communities that aim at "physical and psychic therapy and the restoration of health." We also have the obligation to respect communities that seek "political loyalty and a corresponding exercise of influence," communities that seek "economic and monetary success," and communities that seek to maximize "public attention and resonance." It is characteristic of pluralistic societies that truth-seeking communities do not absolutize themselves, but that they recognize and delineate their important and indispensable contributions to the entire society, and enable them to be perceived in other contexts as well.

Why is scripture so crucial for Theology in truth seeking communities? Although theologies written small are by their very nature on the path of truth--namely by their simultaneous insistence on individual certainty, cognitive communication, and progress in insight--they can easily settle with mere certainty and some reductionistic truisms. So they have to become challenged time and again, to move on from certainty and correct and defensible insight toward truth, thus reaching higher levels of certainty and consensus, higher levels of mediating complexity and coherence in the knowledge of faith. But not only do theologies written small have to be challenged. Convincing and successful THEOLOGIES written large are held in esteem and interpreted in the church and the academy over long spans of time. They are quite likely to have been born out of the search for truth. But great THEOLOGIES can prove to be ignorant in respect to crucial issues of faith. In extreme cases, THEOLOGIES written large

can degenerate into dangerous religious ideologies, e.g. when they cease to stimulate the theologies written small in their search for truth and even block or suppress these searches. Now we see why all three forms of "theology" have to interact. Only in their interaction do we aim at utmost coherence, existential relevance and plausibility, and orientation toward validity and truth. When the three forms are shattered and falling apart, the dangers of creating religious ideologies, pious and moral simplification and self-righteousness and mere academic procedure arise. Here the third topic of our enterprise comes into perspective.

III. The Canonic Texture of Scripture

Not all, but many religions on this planet center on Holy Scriptures. Some of them try to develop THEOLOGIES written large and theologies written small in truth-seeking communities. Without making a judgement on the Holy Scriptures of other religious traditions, I would like to claim that the **canonic texture** of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, is of the utmost importance for a critical and self-critical lively Theology in the move from certainty and shared insight to truth. The canonic texture of the biblical tradition, rightly understood, is a continuous stimulus and challenge for the development of vibrant theologies in truth-seeking communities. The canonic texture of the biblical traditions continuously invites and challenges them to search for encompassing concepts, images, figures of thought and narratives. It is, however, also a challenge to examine and question those encompassing concepts, images, figures of thought and narratives. The canonical texture of the biblical traditions continuously challenges theologies written small and THEOLOGIES written large not to settle with minimalist certainties and reductionistic insights on the one side or with grand worldviews and all-encompassing religious or academic ideologies on the other.

It is crucial for this insight to acknowledge that the biblical canon, grown over a millenium, has a thoroughly **pluralistic texture**. By pluralistic and pluralism I do not mean vague plurality, diffuse diversity and chaotic polyindividuality. I have argued in several places against this confusion that in my view is the most devastating intellectual plague of our time.⁵

⁵ See M. Welker, "'... And Also Upon the Menservants and the Maidservants in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit'. On Pluralism and the Promise of the Spirit". *Soundings* 78, 1995, 49-67; *Kirche im Pluralismus*, Kaiser: Gütersloh 2nd ed. 2000.

Pluralism, rightly understood, is neither chaos nor constant combat. It is a rich textured form of our societies, of our academy, of the biblical canon and of other precious religious and cultural forms and achievements. The fact that many people have great difficulty in moving beyond monistic, dual or dualistic forms of thinking, understanding and orientation should not stop us from rising to the challenge of clearly understanding structured pluralism over against vague and relativistic plurality. The very texture of the biblical canon can help us in this endeavor.

With two seminal insights the Heidelberg egyptologist Jan Assmann and my junior colleague Andreas Schüle have helped me in my understanding and appreciation of the pluralistic texture of the biblical canon. In lecture given on occasion of an honorary theological doctorate at the university of Münster Assmann reconstructs "five steps on the way to a canon".⁶ The desire for canonization arises, he argues, when human beings are communally haunted by radical ruptures, discontinuations of their lives. For Israel, the loss of the land, the deportation and the exile were such experiences of radical historical discontinuity. For the New Testament the crucifixion of Christ is such a shattering of the foundations.

These experiences of radical discontinuity, disruption, and the threat of chaos become textured in potentially canonical texts. The radical discontinuity requires interpretation. For the process of canonization it is crucial that a limited **multiplicity** of exemplary interpretations is developed in order to explain and to bridge the catastrophe of discontinuity. Different worldviews, different views of history, of ultimate norms and possible futures condition a specific multiplicity of interpretations. Only when a small "pluralistic library", as Heinz Schürmann put it, only when a structured pluralism of different interpretations becomes textured and coded, the substance of a canon is guaranteed. The canon can operate with several centers, but it also draws and negotiates boundaries. We still have to explore the complex theological reasons for the boundaries of the biblical canon. I would be prepared to argue that in respect to many deuterocanonic texts we could show why theologians and councils were rightly insecure whether they should include them or not. An alternative view to Assmann's was proposed recently by Andreas Schüle in his second doctoral dissertation.⁷ Schüle's proposal is that the post-exilic experience of a discontinuity now overcome made

6 Jan Assmann, *Fünf Schritte auf dem Weg zum Kanon*, Lit Verlag: Münster 1999.

7 Andreas Schüle, *Israels Sohn - Jahwes Prophet. Ein Versuch zum Verhältnis von Religionsgeschichte und kanonischer Theologie anhand der Bileam-Perikope (Num 22-24)*, ATM 17, Lit: Münster 2001.

possible a pluralism of interpretations, many of which, possessing complementary potential for knowledge, could no longer be suppressed. As the Jewish community resp. the early church grew in multiple contexts, it, too, could not do without this pluralistic potential for theological knowledge. Thus, scripture acquired its canonical weight.

This canonical weight was acknowledged by Karl Barth and other theologians with the phrase that the canon "imposed itself on the church".⁸ I have argued elsewhere⁹ that the canonical weight is grounded in the theological weight of scripture, namely in God and God's workings to which it gives a complex polycontextual witness. The canonical weight is also connected with an enormous historical and cultural weight radiating in a great existential, moral and symbolic richness. The often rightly bemoaned fact that scripture was used to spread suppressive ideologies and even suppressive THEOLOGIES written large, the suspicion that it even contains dangerous theologies written small and written large should not blur the great blessing of its canonic texture.

IV. Canonic Memory and Truth-Seeking Theology

In his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*¹⁰ Assmann offers an impressive examination of the cultural shaping power of communal memory. Taking up ideas from Maurice Halbwachs¹¹, Claude Lévi-Strauss¹² and other theorists of the culture of memory he shows that memory is not just an individual or a communal mental phenomenon. It is the power to construct a common world. Assmann differentiates "communicative memory", which always remains fluid, which is continually being enriched, and which is also continually disappearing, from formed, stabilized, and organized memory, which he calls "cultural memory."¹³ Events such as the French Revolution, the Civil War, and those of September 11 mark our cultural

8 See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* vol. I/2 (New York: Harper, 1961), 473ff and 597ff.

9 Michael Welker, "Sola Scriptura? The Authority of Scripture in Pluralistic Environments," in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003).

10 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Beck: München 1992, 2nd ed. 1997.

11 Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Frankfurt 1985 (Paris 1925); idem, *Das kollektive Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt 1985 (Paris 1950).

12 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Paris: Plon, 1962.

13 Cf. *ibid.*, 48ff.

memory, giving it enduring contents, bases for orientation, and directions for learning.

Taking up these insights and the insights in the genesis of the biblical canon I have proposed to discover and to investigate a third type of memory, namely the "**canonic memory**", a living cultural memory which should be of the greatest interest to Theology. When a cultural memory is codified in a specific plurality of different interpretations, I have argued, the cultural memory potentiates itself and becomes a "canonic memory." A structured and bounded pluralism of interpretations leads to a necessarily restless memory that continually opens itself to its content and source and which calls forth new interpretations without losing its centering. Communal memory is challenged to stay in a constant search for truth without losing its focus. The sustenance of truth claims and self-critical, communicative evaluations of certainties and insights go together in this type of memory.

The Christian faith affirms the vitality and inexhaustibility of the canonic memory of the risen Christ by desiring to cultivate this memory until Christ's *parousia*. Recently David Tracy has rightly emphasized that the theme of the *parousia* should by no means be left to fundamentalism. Living cultural or canonic memory is oriented toward a future that remains beyond its control, because it moves toward that future out of many temporal contexts that are concentrated on it. An anti-ideological and anti-triumphalistic power lies in this canonic memory as it grows ever anew out of many testimonies. It is a communicative, critical, and self-critical memory. Canonic memory seeks certainty and growth in certainty. At the same time it examines, relativizes, and corrects certainty in an ever renewed quest for truth. Christian Theology referred to God's Spirit when it spoke of the processes we have just taken into view. Classic but intriguing topics such as the inspiration of scripture and the relation of Spirit and truth could and should be re-examined in the light of what we have just explored.¹⁴ But this would lead us beyond our topic "Theology, Truth, and Scripture", which is already vast enough.

¹⁴ See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, translated by John Hoffmeyer, Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1994.