

God's Justice and Righteousness

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For about 30 years, William Schweiker and I have been in theological conversation and academic cooperation. We planned, designed and co-chaired several multi-years international and interdisciplinary research projects.¹ In other projects, which I had organized together with scientists, William Schweiker took constructively part.² During his visits, his guest-professorship and his Mercator Professorship at the University of Heidelberg, we also team-taught compact-courses.³ Above all, we have been in continuous exchange about central issues in theology, social and cultural studies, and Christian and general ethics. The following contribution, taking up thoughts of my Heidelberg farewell lecture in 2014, gives a sample of main topics in this sometimes controversial, but always inspiring, discourse.⁴

¹ Cynthia L. Rigby, ed., *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (eds), *Having: On Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Michael Welker and William Schweiker, eds. *Images of the Divine and Cultural Orientations: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Voices* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015).

² See his contributions in Michael Welker and J. Polkinghorne, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, (Harrisburg: Trinity 2000), 124ff; Michael Welker, ed., *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 351ff.

³ 1902/03: Barmen and Belhar: Confessing Church in Fascism and Apartheid (with Prof. P. Naudé); Augustine, On the Holy Trinity (with Proff. Ch. Marksches and P. Naudé); 2011/12: Rawls on Sin, Faith, and Religion; 2012/2013: Kant, Zum ewigen Frieden; Witte, Religion and Human Dignity.

⁴ Cf. William Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 1ff; *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 1ff; 25ff; David Klemm and William Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism* (Blackwell, 2008), 57ff and 166ff; William Schweiker, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2008), 1ff and the text by Jean Porter, 227ff; "Morality and Natural Theology," in *Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. Russel Re Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

I. The Question of God’s Justice and Righteousness in a World Experienced Largely as Unjust

Anyone wishing to speak about God’s justice and righteousness must anticipate that listeners will likely view this subject with enormous skepticism given the distressing and disturbing disposition of the world in which each of us lives and which each of us encounters both in the news and in our own immediate experience. For is this world not characterized precisely by glaring and appalling injustice? How can such a world be reconciled with a God whom not just Christians but indeed almost all religions associate with justice, righteousness, and kindness?

Those who would speak about God’s justice and righteousness must take a position concerning the concept of natural law and its persistent influence, what Klaus Tanner has called the “long shadow of natural law.”⁵ Succinctly put, the reference is to efforts made over the course of Western cultural history to ascertain normative correlations between (1) divine legislation, (2) the regularities and order inherent in the cosmos and nature, and (3) the numerous political, legal, and moral attempts to establish salutary relationships and order among humans.⁶ Can one answer the question of God’s justice and righteousness by way of reference to natural law?

Those who would speak about God’s justice and righteousness are confronted with complex and fundamental religious concepts such as God’s law, God’s love, and God’s Spirit. Although precisely these fundamental religious concepts often appear rather unclear or even

⁵ Klaus Tanner, *Der lange Schatten des Naturrechts: Eine fundamentalethische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart, 1993).

⁶ Cf. M. Welker and G. Etzelmüller, eds., *Concepts of Law in the Sciences, Legal Studies, and Theology*, *Religion in Philosophy and Theology* 72, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

pretentious, and as such sooner strengthen skepticism against any talk of God's justice and righteousness, nonetheless they do—as I hope to show in the following discussion—offer points of departure for answering this question of God's justice and righteousness.

Although righteousness is not the *only* characterizing feature of God for what are known as the Abrahamite religions, it is nonetheless one of the *central* features characterizing God's being. For without righteousness, God would not be the true God. The true God is not interested in keeping his righteousness to himself in some transcendent glory. Instead, that righteousness is intended for humanity itself, and this bestowal of divine righteousness should prompt humans in their own turn to be grateful to God and to practice justice and righteousness with one another. The promise in Jeremiah 23:6, for example, picks up this nexus in maintaining that a righteous branch of David “shall execute justice and righteousness in the land,” receiving thereby the name of hope, “The Lord is our righteousness.”⁷ But even secularized and secularly inclined approaches associate God and righteousness, albeit with different accentuation. In his history of justice, *Storia della giustizia*, the Italian historian Paolo Prodi cites an anonymous adviser in the Republic of Florence in 1431: “God is righteousness, and whoever produces righteousness also produces God” [*Deus est iustitia, et qui facit iustitiam, facit Deum*].⁸ The following discussion will focus on both perspectives, namely, the theological and the secular.

Of course, a look at the world in which we live renders highly questionable such theologically alleged connections between righteousness as a characterizing feature of God, righteousness in the relationship between God and humanity, and interpersonal righteousness.

⁷ In the title of one of his books, Jürgen Moltmann transforms this configuration into a divine name: “His Name is Righteousness” (“*Sein Name ist Gerechtigkeit*”: *Neue Beiträge zur christlichen Gotteslehre* [Gütersloh, 2008]).

⁸ German translation, *Eine Geschichte der Gerechtigkeit: Vom Recht Gottes zum modernen Rechtsstaat* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2003), 14.

How exactly are we to understand God's righteousness when experience so clearly shows us that suffering, distress, and death rule in this world? After all, it is not just people who are old and sated with life who die; every day, people are torn from life in often gruesome fashion or do not even have the chance to develop fully their vital forces of life. And the grief and sorrow such deaths evoke among those left behind, among family and friends, is unfathomably profound. The pain of loss does not abate, nor do the scars heal. Illness and distress similarly can rob us of both our vital energy and our joy in life. In our world, however, such pain and suffering are apportioned in an extremely unequal and unbalanced fashion.

If with Ralf Dreier we understand justice rather aridly as "that property of law through which a generally consensus-capable order for compensation and for the distribution of goods and duties is preserved or established,"⁹ then we can only say that our world is one characterized by catastrophic injustice. How can the disposition of a world characterized by the extremely inequitable distribution of goods, burdens, and suffering be reconciled with talk of God's justice and righteousness?

An even more dramatic view emerges when we acknowledge, as we must, that innumerable conditions in this world that are utterly inimical to the quality of life have in fact not only been created but are also created ever anew, without interruption, by humans themselves. Even if we are hesitant to repeat the shrill accusation that humans are "evil from head to foot,"¹⁰

⁹ Ralf Dreier, "Justice and Righteousness V. Law," *Religion Past and Present* VII (Leiden, 2010), 113.

¹⁰ Thus, Karl Barth in his critique of Ludwig Feuerbach's identification between God and humans: "Indeed, anyone who knows that we humans are evil from head to toe, and anyone who considers that we must die, would recognize as the most illusionary of all illusions the assertion that the nature of God is that of humans. They would in any case leave the good Lord in peace with respect to such mistaken identification with such as we are, even if they considered him to be merely a dream in the first place." Karl Barth, "Ludwig Feuerbach," in idem, *Die Theologie*

we must concede that both consciously and unconsciously, individually and systemically, humans cause one another what can only be described as an infinite amount of pain. And yet, even these circumstances of experiencing suffering, on the one hand, and causing it, on the other, are woefully out of balance in this world. How can this sober realization be reconciled with references to God's righteousness if such righteousness aims precisely at prompting people to act in a righteous, just fashion?

Finally, all hope in the integrity of God's justice and righteousness seems to disappear entirely when we are confronted by a realization most people prefer to ignore, namely, that all life lives at the cost of other life. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead repeatedly addressed this theme, articulating it, moreover, quite succinctly in the assertion that "whether or not it be for the general good, life is robbery."¹¹ How can we speak about the justice and righteousness of God, of the creator of all things, if at the same time we see that the world in which we live is utterly permeated by sequential hierarchies of nourishment? Nature does, it is true, exhibit a high degree of beneficial organization, fruitfulness, and beauty. It surprises and delights through powers of regeneration and renewal. Every childbirth, every dawn, every reemergence of spring is capable of eliciting such surprise and delight. At the same time, however, natural earthly life also exhibits the ineluctable cruelty characterizing life at the cost of other life. Even vegetarians must destroy infinitely much life to nourish themselves. Hence any unqualified references to nature and life as salvific concepts, or certainly any equating of God and nature, is naive and carelessly considered. Those wishing to avoid living under perpetual

und die Kirche: Gesammelte Vorträge, part 2 (Munich, 1928), 212–39, here 237. Here Barth is essentially picking up Hans Ehrenberg's criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach.

¹¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); Corrected Edition ..., 1978), 105.

religious illusions, those striving for theological sincerity with respect to creation, must inquire concerning an understanding of God's justice and righteousness that acknowledges, incorporates, and does justice to this profound ambivalence attaching to natural life.

Even the Priestly creation account at the beginning of the Bible favors this sober understanding. On the one hand, God calls the works of creation "good," that is, salutary for life; indeed, creation is even called "very good," that is, very salutary for life. We read in Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." On the other hand, creatures themselves are given considerable independent power and thereby also the capability of potentially endangering not only other creatures but themselves as well. The heavens separate, the earth brings forth, the stars acquire a certain rhythm and establish ages in both nature and culture, and human beings receive what in recent times has been perceived as an offensive commission for dominion. The *dominium terrae* in Genesis 1:27–28 regulates conflicts of interest between humans and animals and is associated with the explicit determination of hierarchies in the chain of nourishment. The powers of heaven and the celestial bodies can similarly behave in both a friendly and a hostile fashion. The sun warms, yet it also burns. Rains refreshes, yet storms, tornadoes, and tsunamis also devastate and destroy. Even the fruitfulness of the earth and its living creatures is constantly exposed to destructive forces. Hence although natural creation is called "good," salutary for life, it is by no means paradise, that is, by no means life in divine glory.¹²

¹² Cf. Michael Welker, "Was ist Schöpfung? Zur Subtilität antiken Weltordnungsdenkens," in *Jahrbuch der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften für 2006* (Winter, Heidelberg, 2007), 84–88; idem, *The Theology and Science Dialogue: What Can Theology Contribute?*, Theologische Anstöße 3 (Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2012), 23–30.

Creation myths of antiquity divinized heaven and earth, the heavenly bodies, and even monsters from the depths of the sea. By contrast, biblical thinking demythologizes this view and in the process, respects the ambivalent independent power enjoyed by creatures. That is, the cosmos and nature are understood as having enormous independent powers at their disposal. Only uncultivated understanding can juxtapose creation and evolution antithetically. On the one hand, the cosmos and nature exhibit regularity, order, fruitfulness, and beauty. On the other hand, the forces of nature are transient and finite, subject to all sorts of danger and even self-endangerment, and they are intrinsically predatory: natural life can live only at the cost of other life. This radical difference between God and the part of creation, that is nature and the cosmos, must be taken quite seriously. Once we do this, however, what consequences does this view then have for our perception and understanding of God's justice and righteousness?

II. Can God's Justice and Righteousness be Grasped on the Basis of Natural Law?

The situation I have described requires that we examine critically the traditional references to natural law as well as all attempts to relate natural law, divine law, and God's justice and righteousness. The classical collection of Roman law, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, in its initial section, *Institutiones*, subdivides private law into "the natural law, the law of nations, and the civil law."¹³ In 533, the eastern Roman emperor Justinian legally sanctioned this doctrine—"in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In this view, natural law is

that law which nature teaches to all animals. For this law does not belong exclusively to the human race, but belongs to all animals, whether of the earth, the air, or the water. Hence comes the union of the male and female, which we term matrimony; hence the

¹³ *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, in *The Library of Original Sources*, Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., vol. 3: *The Roman World* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), 100–166. Ich habe den englischen Text nicht, es handelt sich um den Anfang von Tit.2, De iure naturali gentium et civili

procreation and bringing up of children.

Thus, it can be maintained that jurisprudence is not only the “science of the just and the unjust” but also “the knowledge of things divine and human.”¹⁴

The problems raised by associating natural law with justice and righteousness become clear the moment we no longer fix and restrict our discussion merely to loving family relationships. The introduction to the *Institutiones* states the following: “The maxims of law are these: to live honestly, to hurt no one, to give every one his due.” The commandment “to hurt no one” is indeed quite difficult to apply to “all animals, whether of the earth, the air, or the water.” The moment one accepts what is known as the “law of the strongest” as “natural law,” the commandment to “give every one his due” quite loses the aura that it somehow still involves justice and righteousness. The National Socialists, as is well known, positioned this expression—*to every one his due*—cruelly and cynically over the main gate of the Buchenwald concentration camp, legible, moreover, from the inside.

Paulo Prodi’s history of justice claims to reconstruct “how the concept of justice has been lived and conceived in our Western culture.” Although this book’s German translation bears the subtitle “*Vom Recht Gottes zum modernen Rechtsstaat*,” that is, “from God’s law to the modern nation of laws,” references to God’s justice, God’s law, and God’s righteousness are remarkably pale and vague in all the book’s sources and interpretive discussions. The guiding perspective focuses on the correlation between the cosmic and the natural, and the political-legal arrangement and ordering of living conditions and relationships. In this context, divine law in connection with natural law is assigned the role of guaranteeing the normatively binding character of laws and their just disposition.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In his book, Prodi traces the perpetually changing configuration of divine law, natural law, cosmic and natural regularities, and also of the various political and juridical concepts of organization and implementation over the course of Western history. In their own turn, these perpetually changing configurations have been accompanied by the constantly changing dominance of various ecclesiastical, political, theological, juridical, and philosophical institutions and thinkers. Luther's laconic dictum that "we prattle on a great deal about natural law" (*De lege naturae multa fabulamur*)¹⁵ is trenchantly confirmed by the history of the development and reception of this notion of natural law. In modernity's concentration on this theme, it is the human spirit and human conscience that acquire increasing significance. We now increasingly hear that natural law in fact resides in the human spirit itself, and it is the notions of individual conscience and moral communication that become important players in the multifarious conflicts between obedience to divine law, national law, the prince's commands, and positive law. What ultimately emerges is that, on the one hand, conscience and positive law are emancipated from religion, and, on the other, that conscience as the inner judge, often in the name of God, is polarized over against professional judges in the name of society. But does reference to God's law and God's justice and righteousness not degenerate here into a mere cipher intended to underscore and reinforce the subjective sensibility and feeling for morality and justice? Indeed, must we now abandon the question of God's justice and righteousness—between post-religious morals and vanishing stages of a subjectivist religious fundamentalism?

This situation has repeatedly prompted not only cries for a "return to natural law" but also laments over the loss of this particular point of orientation.¹⁶ In his famous dialogue with

¹⁵ Martin Luther, WA 56, 355, 14.

¹⁶ Cf. Rudolf Weiler, ed., *Die Wiederkehr des Naturrechts und die Neuevangelisierung Europas* (Vienna, 2005); cf. the criticism of Ingolf Dalferth, *Naturrecht in protestantischer Perspektive*,

Jürgen Habermas, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger found, on the one hand, that “the natural law has remained (especially in the Catholic Church) the key issue in dialogues with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about the ethical principles of law in a secular, pluralistic society.”¹⁷ On the other hand, Ratzinger had to acknowledge that “this instrument has become blunt,” indeed, that the “victory of the theory of evolution has meant the end of this view of nature.”¹⁸ It is not, however, the “victory of the theory of evolution” but rather the deficient systematic tenability of the association between nature, on the one hand, and law that takes its orientation from justice, on the other, that enduringly deflates any hope that this instrument might take us further in the question of God’s justice and righteousness.

III. God’s Law and God’s Spirit

In inquiring concerning God’s justice and righteousness, we are inquiring concerning a discernibly efficacious power in the midst of the ambivalent disposition and organization of natural, real life. Many religious traditions have viewed this power as being associated with the divine word, with God’s law, and with the divine Spirit. But we must first ask: What really is meant by this reference to “God’s law”? Some Christian communities refer to the entire Old Testament as “God’s law.” By contrast, certain theologians associate God’s law with a mere

Würzburger Vorträge zur Rechtsphilosophie, Rechtstheorie und Rechtssoziologie 38 (Baden-Baden, 2008); Michael Welker and Gregor Etzemüller, eds., *Concepts of Law in the Sciences, Legal Studies, and Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “What Keeps the World Together,” in Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 67–72, here 69.

¹⁸ Ibid. See in this regard Michael Welker, “Habermas and Ratzinger on the Future of Religion,” in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63/4 (2010), 456–473.

conceptual figure, for example, with the divine command or the divine imperative—which admittedly can certainly mean different things to different people. Many circles in Jewish thinking refer to the five books of Moses as “the Law.” Those five books of Moses contain three substantial law sections, including the Covenant Code (Exod. 20:22–23:33), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 4–26; 29f.), and the Priestly Code (Exod. 25–31; Lev. 1–7; 11–26; Num. 1–3). And finally, certain Christian catechisms especially refer to the Ten Commandments (in two biblical versions: Exod. 20:2–17; Deut. 5:6–21) as “the law.” What, then, is God’s law that reveals God’s justice and righteousness to us? The Old Testament, a canonical book that came into being over the period of a millennium? Certain selected texts from the five books of Moses? The Ten Commandments with their association of religious ethos and interpersonal ethos? Or is God’s law merely a religious-moral conceptual figure?

The various biblical texts that are referred to thus as “law” exhibit a clear, systematic fundamental structure. For Matt. 23:23, the “weightier matters of the law” involve the interrelation between “justice and mercy and faith.” And indeed, all the transmitted traditions of the law contain stipulations providing for the legal regulation of conflicts, stipulations focusing on the anticipated protection of the weak, and finally stipulations concerning both the individual and the collective arrangement of the relationship with God and of worship. Justice, mercy, and the cult—from the secular perspective one might say: justice, the systematic protection of the weak, and the search for truth. Here we encounter a systematic fundamental structure of the law.

This differentiated union of justice and mercy, or of righteousness and systematic protection of the weak, is of key importance for discerning God’s justice and righteousness and their normative and liberating potential, *for here the law establishes a value system that in fact runs counter to the natural tendency of life, namely, counter to the tendency to preserve oneself*

at the cost of other life (as discussed in part 1). This close connection between righteousness and mercy prompts humans to practice *free and creative self-withdrawal on behalf of others*, that is, to withdraw oneself so that another person or other people might have access to their full scope of development and life.¹⁹ In family life and in love relationships involving one's partner or parents, this free and creative self-withdrawal on behalf of others does indeed seem "natural," that is, as deriving from or given by nature itself. What, however, prompts people to exercise mercy and loving care and concern *beyond* the obvious circle of children, ill family members, or aging parents and grandparents?

An appeal to the doctrine of nature here suffices as little as does an evocation of the notion of interpersonal obligation or duty. As a matter of fact, the doctrine of God's justice and righteousness focuses on a paradox that is certainly also accessible to nonreligious thinking. The free and, in love, often joyous creative self-withdrawal on behalf of others, though running *counter* to the natural tendency of life for self-preservation and self-assertion, is nonetheless experienced *not* as a diminution and restriction of life but rather quite to the contrary as an *expansion* of life, an intensification of life. In innumerable, often inconspicuous acts of consideration, of loving care and concern, of gracious accommodation, of both small- and large-scale assistance to others, though also in more emphatic contexts of love and forgiveness—in all such situations, humans get outside and beyond themselves in the truest sense of that expression. Above all, however, the same, ongoing self-withdrawal and self-transcendence are exercised on their behalf as well by other humans. These powers of free, creative self-withdrawal on behalf of

¹⁹ Cf. Michael Welker, "The Power of Mercy in Biblical Law," in *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 225–35.

others, exercised far beyond, for example, parental care and concern, surround human beings no less than do the forces of nature.

In the midst of the fundamentally predatory disposition of natural life, forces are thus at work that warrant our closer attention. Biblical traditions as well as the Qur'an repeatedly associate God's justice and righteousness with God's mercy. The Jewish Kabbalah speaks of *the two hands of God, righteousness and mercy*, emphasizing that without God's mercy, the world would suffer grievously from God's righteousness.²⁰ The association of righteousness with mercy lends sensitivity, humanity, and universal charisma to the striving for justice and righteousness. The association of mercy with justice in God's law aims at expanding the protection of the weak *beyond* the context of family, cordial relations in daily life, and tribal thinking.

Despite the inconspicuous nature of countless individual actions and experiences of free, creative self-withdrawal on behalf of our fellow human beings, we are nonetheless dealing with a gigantic force, a power that changes and shapes life itself and that as such runs counter to the melancholy accompanying the perpetual transience of natural life. Religious faith generally views this force and power as a gift, a present, that distinguishes human beings in a special way. On the one hand, their natural life is wretched and frail; as Qoheleth says, all human beings, like animals as well, "are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Eccl. 3:20). On the other hand, God has assured human beings that they have been made but "a little lower than God" (Ps. 8:6). In all their life possibilities, human beings are created in the image of God and as such thus as

²⁰ See in this regard Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. the epilogue, 206–9.

witnesses to God's justice and righteousness, and it is through the divine Spirit that this power is bestowed upon them.

Although this divine Spirit has under the influence of certain philosophical traditions repeatedly been identified with intellect and reason, doing so does not adequately grasp either its inconspicuous nature or its power and charisma. Biblical traditions compare it to the natural forces of wind and rain. It comes over persons, is "poured out" over them. By saying that God's Spirit is poured out over men and women, old and young, male and female slaves (Joel 2; Acts 2), promises concerning the outpouring of the Spirit in the Old and the New Testament are introducing a subversive or even revolutionary perspective. Here the life conditions of the subordinate, dependent, and unfree members of society are being positioned at the center of attention in what are otherwise patriarchal, gerontocratic, and unchallenged societies of slaveholders. Expectation is being directed toward change, toward a transformation of unequal and unjust conditions, toward change on which God's law, too, focuses.²¹

An appeal to divine justice and righteousness is a message of the power of empathy and critical vigilance. In the midst of a creation that, in the *Gestalt* of nature and the cosmos, is radically different from God, a creation that despite features that do indeed attest order and beauty is nonetheless incontrovertibly predatory, frail, and transient—in the midst of all this, extraordinary and remarkable counterforces are nonetheless at work: forces of compassion, mercy, and love; forces accompanying the search for truth and justice; forces that despite their distinctly inconspicuous nature nonetheless possess enormous creative charisma; forces that direct us toward a life *beyond* the natural inclination for self-preservation.

²¹ See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), edition: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

The enhancement of life in free, creative self-withdrawal of human beings on behalf of their fellow creatures is the secret of divine justice and righteousness in this world. A decidedly non-illusory, realistic element of hope accompanies this justice. Fifty years ago, the pioneering work of Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, disclosed the powerful connections between spiritual, ethical, and sociopolitical impulses of hope.²² The power of free, creative self-withdrawal that surrounds us transformationally in an infinite variety of forms and figures is a constant source of hope. Although God's righteousness is simultaneously associated with broad temporal horizons that far transcend human planning and calculations, this notion does sometimes prompt the suspicion that the workings of the Spirit are nothing more than a beautiful illusion and that all this talk about God's righteousness is in reality but a poor strategy of consolation in the midst of wretched and unjust life.

In biblical contexts, divine justice and righteousness are associated with the disclosure of realistic horizons of recollection and expectation. Inspired by God's own Spirit, the human spirit can direct its attention outward, into grand historical contexts. Although it is indeed capable of becoming involved, through recollection and expectation, in the interests, concerns, and dynamics of power of its immediate spatial and temporal surroundings, it does not allow such concerns to fetter or blind it. In this sense, God's justice and righteousness are instead taken as the constant touchstone for assessing political and religious dynamics of power and rule. Even prophecy, which in principle represents a critical immune system against the abuse of political and religious power, must itself be measured and tested ever anew against God's justice and righteousness and be thereby distinguished from false prophecy. The openness of human beings

²² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1967).

to God's justice and righteousness becomes universally subject to being tested ever anew against the criteria of either increasing or decreasing empathy, mercy, willingness to forgive, and love, as well as against the criteria of the resultant freedom and peace.

Divine justice and righteousness renew and refresh the conditions of creaturely life in often quite inconspicuous ways. On those who allow themselves to be sustained and elevated by and through them, they bestow a charisma that wins over hearts and consciences. Such charisma is at work in many forms of gratitude, joy, and imitation in daily life. Indeed, it comes to representative, luminous expression in the life testimony of persons whose lives' paths may well have seemed to be characterized by failure.

Thus did Dietrich Bonhoeffer formulate his own message of God's nearness in the midst of oppressive experiences of anomy, violence, lies, and hopelessness, imprisoned in a cell in Berlin and subject to constant bombing attacks on the city. Martin Luther King, the target of violent hatred, recounts that after a day of being plagued by forty telephone calls threatening him and his family, a voice lifted him up in the midst of his despair, saying, "Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world."²³

The testimonies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King are but the tip of a powerful force of actions, utterances, behavioral modes, though also profound experiences of suffering that in any given instance are in fact not directly legible, as it were, or visible to any

²³ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens, with Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt, and Douglas W. Stott, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 58; see in this regard also Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 16–27; 304–13.

appreciable extent. They do, however, speak representatively for myriad lives that from within their own sufferings and impotence are seized by the power that becomes tirelessly engaged for justice, mercy, love, freedom, and peace—in a world characterized by a pronounced lack of peace, freedom, kindness, mercy, and justice.²⁴ Because this power is neither driven nor guided by nature, neither can it be comprehended or grasped by the concept of natural law. It is instead a free, creative mode of behavior and action that elevates finite, mortal existence that otherwise seems condemned to ultimate futility. In religious and spiritual contexts, this power is identified as God’s justice and righteousness.

Given the inaccessibility of this righteousness, its character as a gift, and precisely considering the fact that it does not correspond to the elemental dynamics of natural life, spiritual sensibility and thinking have instead maintained that it is discernible in a higher life, in divine, eternal life. For the Christian faith, this righteousness acquires clear contours in Jesus Christ, in his life, his charisma, and his spirit. The Christian faith and its churches try to witness in word and deed to this righteousness in charitable acts, in proclamation and teaching, and in the life of worship.

In his reformational inspiration, Martin Luther discovered the elevating, healing power of God’s righteousness, which had previously been hidden from him. He had, he writes, “come to hate this expression ‘God’s righteousness,’ which [he] had learned to understand according the general use of the expression by all the doctors,” namely, as the righteousness and justice with which God “punishes sinners and the unrighteous.” But when Luther finally comprehended that God’s righteousness is in fact a *gift* with which God heals and lifts up human beings, “I felt,” he

²⁴ Contemporary and historical contexts are illuminated by the contributions in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

recounts, “utterly reborn and as having entered paradise itself through open gates.”²⁵ It might be difficult today, 500 years after the Reformation, to awaken the kind of inspiration and excitement of the sort that Luther acquired for God’s uplifting righteousness. But it is high time to question critically the unfortunate alliance between God’s justice and righteousness, on the one hand, and an alleged natural law, on the other, and to arouse a new interest for God’s creativity in a creation that is clearly different from God.

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²⁵ See WA 54, 185–86, 24.