

Michael Welker

God's Power and Powerlessness: Biblical Theology and the Search for a World Ethos in a Time of Shortlived Moral Markets

We had agreed to describe *Sitze im Leben* in which biblical-theological orientation in general, and in particular the recognition of the connection between God's power and powerlessness, are meaningful for human beings of our time. I have selected the following experience and problem: *In the face of global dangers, moral communication finds little or at least insufficient practical resonance among those to whom it is directed.*

Many human beings in different contexts of experience suffer under the depressing consciousness of the powerlessness and ineffectiveness of moral appeals (including moral appeals brought into circulation by the mass media!) directed against obvious global crises, dangers and threatening catastrophes. Why does the force of worldwide moral appeals not suffice to stop the financial exploitation of the Third World through interest payments, after even renowned bankers have publicly considered canceling debts as a realistic possibility? Why does the force of public moral appeals not suffice to put the brakes on logging the tropical rain forests? Why does the force of such appeals not suffice to stop French nuclear experiments and to shut down highly insecure Russian atomic reactors in order to prevent a second Chernobyl? Why is what we call "public morality" not strong enough to reverse the dynamics of progressive criminalization, drug abuse, child abuse and other developments uniformly perceived as curses? Why is it that "public morality" is not strong enough even to put a recognizable damper on those developments?

Certainly there are numerous possible ways to answer this question. In what follows I would first like to call attention to the phenomenon of the market constitution of morality. I would also like to draw attention to the related decomposition of moral communication in our societies, as well as to the acceleration of the rate at which that decomposition occurs.

Next I shall discuss two prominent religiously-inspired attempts of our day to counteract this development. At issue are Hans Küng's search for a "world ethos" and David Tracy's attempt – normative in a more subtle way – to "name the present". Küng's approach, though surely

unintentionally, is in fact authoritarian and hierarchical. Tracy's conception is emergent and mystical. I shall attempt to show some of the fundamental difficulties to which these two approaches lead.

Taking up the intentions of Küng and Tracy, in the final section of my reflections I shall call attention to the strength and the promise of religious communication which consciously orient themselves in relation to biblical traditions with an eye toward decoding and reshaping the "implicit axioms"¹, which still inform or even direct our moral discourses. Precisely the normative potential in the biblical traditions – which lies in the connection of God's power and powerlessness – can render theologies of *metaphysical one-upmanship* (or theologies of the 'I'll go you metaphysically one better' style) superfluous and can help answer the open question concerning the *revelatory potentials and communicability* of the "prophetic-mystical" alternative described by Tracy.

In the Face of Global Dangers, Moral Communication Finds Little Practical Resonance Among Those to Whom It is Directed.

Among the realizations which have practically ceased being disputed, at least in the intellectual disciplines, is the insight that contemporary societies are distinguished from earlier societal forms by the fact that contemporary societies' most important subsystems are *functionally differentiated*. In these societies areas like economy, politics, law, religion and family each have tasks which are undeniably important "for the whole society." That these areas are functionally differentiated means that they seek to optimize their tasks, and *must* seek to optimize them, by becoming increasingly capable of standing on their own over against the other subsystems. Although they all fulfill an indispensable task for "the whole", each subsystem optimizes its own function by developing a specific code and specific modes

1 Cf. Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology. A Brief Account of the Relationship Between Basic Concepts in Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1986, esp. Part I.H.2: Regulative statements (implicit axioms). "The methods of guidance which for an individual or a group see to it that thought and language can be examined and action guided can be called 'regulative statements' (= implicit axioms). They are not necessarily and in every instance statements actually formulated in language, but they lose their value as guidance if they completely escape formulation. On the other hand there is a danger of formulating them with excessive haste in an undesirable fixed form and thus often with a superficial and trivial content." *ibid.* 108f; see also M. Welker, *Implizite Axiome. Zu einem Grundkonzept von Dietrich Ritschls "Logik der Theologie"*, in: W. Huber et al., eds., *Implizite Axiome. Tiefenstrukturen des Denkens und Handelns, Festschrift für Dietrich Ritschl*, (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1990), 30ff.

of procedure. Thus society does not possess a middle, a center, an apex or an ultimate goal. Society is not a readily surveyable whole which admits of being regulated by one code. Instead society is polycentrally organized and can be understood and described only by taking account of its polycontextual constitution. A plurality of publics conducts not "the discourse," but diverse discourses of this society. And these publics obey different interests in and laws of development and optimization. Therefore their discourses are partially incomprehensible or inaccessible to each other. Each of the publics has only a limited capacity to resonate to the communication addressed to it by the others. If they are compelled to communicate, either there is only a mutual reception of "static",² or the contents are so highly abstracted and so thoroughly trivialized that they hardly if at all influence real forms of experience and patterns of behavior.

Yet because these publics partially overlap, and because concrete human beings can and do simultaneously belong to different publics, the situation as described is difficult for *common sense* to comprehend. Common sense advances the argument that every human being is in some wise a private citizen, in some wise educated, in some wise a consumer, in some wise informed by means of mass media, etc. How can it be claimed that "the" general public is a fiction? How can it be claimed that the idea that societal developments can be accurately regulated through appeals to this public and to "the subject" is an illusion, except in extreme cases? The situation as described is also difficult for a religion to comprehend which has claimed jurisdiction over "the most important," "the whole," "the central," "the first and the last." Religion and common sense are always trying to use some new *tour de force* to combat the unmanageable multiplicity of definitions (mostly implicit) of "the first and the last," "the most important," "the central," and "the whole" – definitions which do not admit of being ordered according to the scheme of parts and whole. Hans Küng's attempt, which we shall be examining below, is but a current example of this type of *tour de force*.

The capacity to communicate about the whole, about reality, about society and about social life eludes not only common sense and religion, but also moral sensibility. For each societal subsystem a different morality predominates. The *criteria according to which recognition is*

2 Cf. N. Luhmann, *Ökologische Kommunikation. Kann die moderne Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdungen einstellen*, (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986); M. Welker, The Self-Jeopardizing of Human Societies and Whitehead's Conception of Peace. Niklas Luhmann on his 60th birthday, *Soundings*, LXX 1987, 309ff.

given or withdrawn (i.e. the criteria of moral communication) are different in family life than in the economy's process of communication. They are different in politics than in intellectual life. To be sure, there are regions in which the boundaries are blurred. To be sure, there are extreme situations which temporarily generate the illusion of "societal unity." Yet there are no blanket homogeneous and universal conditions for the gift of or the withdrawal of respect. They are established according to each particular system of reference. They take their distinctive coloration according to each particular cultural situation and societal form. On top of that they vary relative to specific groups. This allows great flexibility in the change of "fundamental moral positions." The rapid displacement of the parameters of moral markets is clearly seen when one merely casts a backward glance over the last two or three decades in North America and Europe, not only with regard to sexual morality, or with regard to expectations and commitments concerning the carrying out of familial roles, but also in relation to many other "basic" positions and attitudes.

The processes in which the conditions for the gift of and the withdrawal of respect are established are continually readjudicated by more or less large groups of affected persons. For each of those processes the relative duration and the "half-life" admit of very poor prognostication. Spectacular integrative power does not necessarily argue for long duration: The "thousand-year *Reich*", for example, endured for only 12 years and internal morale collapsed shortly after the beginning of the war. Persistent public criticism does not argue for a lack of effectiveness; the morals attached to the much-decried technological ideologies of our century seem to have great staying power. Multiform emergent presence does not argue for predictability and clear recognizability; in politics and education there is ongoing puzzlement both concerning the susceptibility to crisis of the moral potential of the civil rights movements and concerning that potential's capacity for regeneration. On the whole we still know little about the laws for the construction and decay of moral markets, little about the genesis and the structure of the processes in which human beings reciprocally influence each other not only by somehow establishing expectations of each other, but also by correlating the fulfillment and disappointment of these expectations with respect and the withdrawal of respect. It does indeed seem to be the case that under the conditions of "post-modernity" the decomposition and recomposition of moral markets are accelerated. That reinforces the helplessness of religion, common sense and moral communication over against "the public" and "the state of the world."

Although in principle it is hardly possible to think of a theme which can not be moralized, all attempts to grasp "the whole" or to address in fact "the" individual turn out to be dead end streets. They run into various moral restrictions and prejudices. Political or economic or intellectual or judicial or familial or group-specific considerations, considerations which are correlated with gender, race, nation and social status, require specific moral options or accommodation to specific moral expectations. This conditions a relative regional solidity which blocks individual dispositional freedom. But it also leads to tensions over against demands which aim at "the universal," "the whole," "the state of the world," and dominant crises defined in a seemingly transperspectival manner. The solidity of the binding to specific moral markets is definitely not of such a nature that it could remain immune to displacements in the so-called *Zeitgeist*, to economic changes, to intellectual trends and fashions of style, to career changes, changes in age, etc. Moral markets undergo mutation and positions of individuals within them are displaced. Even when specific parameters hold constant, the way in which fundamental options are grouped undergoes realignment. It is thoroughly comprehensible that in this situation the "danger of a vacuum in meaning, values and norms" (Küng) would be invoked. It is thoroughly comprehensible that in this situation theologians would set out on the "search for a fundamental universal ethos" and would undertake the attempt to uncover a fundamental universal ethos of all world religions which would put an end to the unmanageability (*Unübersichtlichkeit*) of moral markets, to their practically unpredictable transformations and to their reciprocal blockages.

Hans Küng's Hierarchical-Authoritarian Attempt to Ground a "World Ethos"³

3 The quoted passages are taken from Küng's "Towards a World Ethics of World Religions: Fundamental Questions of Present-Day Ethics in a Global Context, *Concilium* 1990/2: *The Ethics of World Religions and Human Rights*, eds. H. Küng and J. Moltmann, 102-119. They overlap with similar reflections that he offers in: *Projekt Weltethos*, (München: Piper Verlag, 1990); "Die Funktion der Religion zur Bewältigung der geistigen Situation. Versuch einer zeitgeschichtlichen Analyse", in *Wissenschaftliche Theologie und Kirchliche Lehre, Pannenberg-FS*, ed. J. Rohls and G. Wenz, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1988), 138ff; "Dialogfähigkeit und Standfestigkeit. Über zwei komplementäre Tugenden", *EvTh* 49 (1989), 492ff. Parts of my critique were published under the title: "Hans Küngs Projekt Weltethos. Gutgemeint – aber ein Fehlschlag," *Evangelische Kommentare*, 6 (1993): 354-356; cf. Hans Küng, "Nicht gutgemeint – deshalb ein Fehlschlag. Zu Michael Welkers Reaktion auf "Projekt Weltethos", *Evangelische Kommentare*, 8 (1993): 486ff. and M. Welker, "Autoritäre Religion. Zur sachlichen Prüfung von Küngs "Projekt Weltethos", *Evangelische Kommentare*, 9 (1993): 528f.

Hans Küng's "project world ethos" begins with clear diagnoses of crises. He formulates these diagnoses in the form of questions addressed to the different societal systems of reference. He asks: Why shouldn't human beings lie to, deceive and steal from fellow human beings? Why should politicians resist corruption? Why should the businessperson set limits to his or her greed for profit? Why shouldn't the embryo researcher develop a commercial reproductive technique? Why can't a people, a race, a religion hate and bully a people who are different or who believe differently? Küng first diagnoses a crisis of orientation which makes it hard for human beings to know "what the basic options are which should help them make the daily minor or major decisions in their lives, what preferences they should follow, what priorities they should set themselves, and which role-models they should choose" (Küng, 103). It is obvious that Küng's concerns are about the crisis of orientation in pluralistic societies shaped by the mass media.

He too casually blocks out the crisis of orientation brought by totalitarian structures, e.g. states, which attempt to develop a uniform "morality" across society and which know how to indoctrinate human beings in a corresponding manner, or at any rate attempt to do so. In any case it is with a certain astonishment that we must recognize that in Küng's opinion we have never seen, "at least in Germany and Japan," "scandals in the world of politics, the economy, unions and society" (Küng, 104) on such a scale as in the present absence of orientation. Part and parcel of this one-sided focus on order is Küng's prediction that "with increasing glasnost and perestroika, we shall ultimately see exactly the same signs of a lack of orientation, not only in the [former] Soviet Union but also in Catholic Poland ..." (Küng, 104). Against this background Küng poses the large and open question: "What is the relation of modern democracy to morality?" Küng notes the "dilemma" that the modern democratic state "cannot decree precisely what meaning life should have and how it should be lived; it can not prescribe any supreme values and ultimate norms" (Küng, 105). On the other hand Küng asserts that "without a minimal basic consensus on particular values, norms and attitudes there is no possibility, either in a smaller or a larger community, of living together in a manner which befits human dignity ..." (Küng, 105).

It is worth remarking that Küng sets up his answer in such a way that the die is already cast before he takes recourse to religion. He describes the "necessary fundamental consensus" as "the main direction" and as "the goal." For Küng that "necessary fundamental consensus" is

the answer to "the desire to cling to *something*, to rely on *something*...to follow *some kind* of guideline...to possess *something like* an underlying ethical orientation" (Küng, 106; emphasis mine). On the basis of these vague formulations one could object that human beings naturally both choose some "ligatures", some kind of binding ties and some kind of criteria in each particular case, and reach partial agreements about their choices. These objections make clear the problem which preoccupies Küng: the limited scope, the instability and the rapid change of guiding criteria. But that means that little is gained by invoking "binding ties" if their durability, if the depth of the "fundamental consensus" and if the stability of the goal are not given – in Küng's terms, if the "main direction" is withheld.

The fact that his concern is with precisely this problem is shown by comparing his reservations to the "retreat" of recent philosophical ethics "to the customary practices of different lifeworlds and forms of life" (Küng names A. MacIntyre, R. Rorty, M. Foucault and R. Bubner as representative figures.). But towards that philosophy which, like Küng, is concerned with "the grand whole," he assumes a different attitude. Into the lap of that philosophy he tosses the problem of how "pure reason [should] decide between true and illusory, objective and subjective, acceptable and reprehensible interests" (Küng, 110). A *religiously* grounded ethos is in Küng's opinion apparently released from that worry as well as from the vague concern whether one can "therefore meet every danger of spiritual homelessness and moral waywardness with pure reason" (Küng, 111; similarly *Projekt Weltethos*, 66).

Küng thinks that the "*unconditionality* and *universality* of ethical obligation" (Küng, 113) are religiously grounded on the basis of a very simple insight, indeed a simple idea. This simple idea is "the primal ground, the primal support, the primal goal of humankind and the world which we call God" (Küng, 114). Readers are almost sure to respond with the following questions. How is "that primal ground, that primal support" or "that primal goal" in a position to prevent the specific crisis situations described above? How does the "primal ground, primal support and primal goal" enable us to distinguish "between true and illusory, objective and subjective, acceptable and reprehensible interests"? Does the "primal ground, primal support and primal goal" enable us to counter "every danger of spiritual homelessness and moral waywardness"? If so, how? Such questions initially run up against the arid assurance that the "primal ground, primal support and primal goal" presents a "transcendent authority," (Küng,

113) and that on the basis of this "primal support, primal ground and primal goal" religions can speak with "absolute authority" (Küng, 114). The few moves which Küng makes towards more precise determination of the absolute authority of religion are frightening. It is frightening when Küng informs his readers: "religions have means of shaping the whole of a human being's existence – and this will be tested by history, adapted to a particular culture and given concrete form in the individual case" (Küng, 114)⁴. This general recourse to the positivity of the psychic and social *power* of religion is particularly frightening in a country which has experienced a religiosity which was fully corrupted both politically and morally. Coming from the mouth of a man who has let his public identity and impact be characterized by chronic critical engagements with authoritarian styles of religious leadership, such a statement provokes the return question whether religions do not also possess the means to *deform* the entirety of a human being's existence, and to do so in a way which is "historically tested, culturally adapted and individually concretized"!

At first glance this question does not seem to leave Küng at a loss. He repeatedly emphasizes that he is concerned with religion which serves "the *humanum*," religion in which theonomy and autonomy are set in the "correct" relation, as Küng's Tillichian formulation puts it (Küng, 118). The modern ethos and modern reason are to take part in the project "world ethos" in a formative and engaged manner in spite of the relativism strikingly described by Küng and in spite of their ultimate failure to establish a secure foothold for themselves. But by invoking autonomy as a criterion for distinguishing between religiosity which forms existence and religiosity which deforms it, Küng finds himself holding precisely the same difficult ball which he had initially tossed in the lap of the philosophers and the general culture. Everything which Küng piles on the shoulders of philosophical positions and of a culture devoid of orientation can now be tossed back in the lap of his abstract religiosity – in order to diagnose the same dilemmas. The "primal ground, primal support and primal goal" invoked by Küng oscillates between a *carte blanche* for an authoritarian religiosity and, to use a phrase of Hegel's, a "pliable material upon which any and every arbitrary invention can impress itself."⁵ The fact that Küng has been compelled to make his peace with arbitrariness is shown when he

4 Cf. the German original: "Religionen besitzen Mittel, um die ganze Existenz des Menschen zu formen – und dies geschichtlich erprobt, kulturell angepaßt und individuell konkretisiert." *Concilium* 26, 161; compare with *Projekt Weltethos*, 78.

5 G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Philosophische Bibliothek 124a, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), 16.

concludes by informing his readers that "an ethic⁶ is concerned in the last analysis not with a variety of theoretical frames of reference but rather with what should or should not be done, quite practically, in life as it is lived" (Küng, 118). Since the "primal ground, primal support and primal goal" can come to have either a life-promoting effect or a demonic one, and since mere autonomy can not distinguish between "true and illusory, objective and subjective, acceptable and reprehensible interests," the final remedy can be distinguished from the deplored initial situation only on one condition. That condition is that people be prepared to place their hope and trust in what – N.B.! – the "leaders and teachers" of the great religions will do with – N.B.! – "all the means and possibilities at their disposal" to propagate and to execute the project "world ethos" (Küng, 116).

At one point Küng seems at first glance to be successful in breaking through relativism, or perhaps the religious camouflage of relativism. This occurs when he sees a convergence of the great religions not on the basis of the "primal support, primal ground and primal goal," but "in absolute agreement in some basic ethical imperatives" (Küng, 116). According to Küng these imperatives are: "Thou shalt not kill the innocent. Thou shalt not lie or break promises. Thou shalt not commit adultery or fornication. Thou shalt do good." (Küng, 116). Yet it is not difficult to show that precisely the process of determining who is "innocent," what is "sexual immorality" and what is "good" is in an extreme measure dependent upon the particular moral market in question. That is all the more true of the question of how to stabilize promises in a rapidly changing global situation and social reality.⁷

David Tracy's "Mystical-Prophetic" Vision of the Present and of the Future⁸

David Tracy has developed an approach that stands in opposition to Hans Küng's conception⁹, which is undoubtedly, albeit involuntarily, authoritarian and hierarchical. As human beings

6 In my terminology, an "ethos."

7 Küng himself casts light upon two of the problems of consensus which emerge with regard to these "imperatives" (*Projekt Weltethos*, 98ff).

8 The following quotations are taken from: David Tracy, "On Naming the Present", *Concilium* 1990/1, "On the Threshold of the Third Millennium", 66-85; see also: D. Tracy, "Approaching the Christian Understanding of God", in *Systematic Theology. Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Vol.1, ed. F. Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 131ff.

9 Küng's venture can be characterized in Tracy's terms as "neoconservative."

seek help and support, religions are not to operate upon them with "absolute authority" on the basis of a "primal support, primal ground and primal goal." Still more clearly, religions are not to operate upon them through "leaders and teachers" and, in certain cases, "with all the means at their disposal." Such an attitude towards the operation of religion includes an unclarified and internally contradictory relation to autonomy, which leaves autonomy to oscillate between the positions of modern and pre-modern consciousness. Tracy clearly describes the tension in which the thought of Hans Küng, among others, moves. He sees that tension as a conflict between the "modern" emphasis on the autonomy of the subject and the "pre-modern" longing for "the return of the repressed traditional and communal subject" (Tracy, 66). At the same time Tracy is open to relativistic positions of "post-modern" consciousness, noting that for the post-moderns "at their best, the hope of the present is in the reality of otherness and difference" (Tracy, 66).

Tracy has an acute perception that "modern" theologians (an identification he explicitly applies to Hans Küng) could easily further a situation in which they "will be tempted quietly, even unconsciously, to retreat to social-evolutionary scenarios which secure modern centredness at the price of illusion for self and destruction for others. They will be tempted to hear others only as projected others – projections of their present fears and anxieties, hopes and desires" (Tracy, 82). Tracy develops his vision over against the moderns, over against the fundamentalist and neoconservative anti-moderns who seek to reverse societal development, and over against the post-moderns, "proud and ironic in their centrelessness" (Tracy, 82). Over against all these, Tracy develops a vision which takes up the "best forms" of the post-moderns and attempts to direct them out of their "proud and ironic centrelessness" under the impetus of liberation theologies: "Where, in all the discussions of otherness and difference of the post-moderns as well as the moderns and the anti-moderns, are the poor and the oppressed? These are the concrete others whose difference should make a difference. For through them the full and interruptive memory of the Gospel is alive again among us. In their prophetic speech and their liberating actions lies hope for the true time of the present before a judging and saving God. In their actions, historical subjects act and speak ..." (Tracy, 82).

Tracy's "naming of the present," his description of currently valid developments, of developments of paradigmatic weight and paradigmatic worth, can be described as a *post-modern perception of an emergent development of polycontextual liberation movements*. In

these liberation movements the subjectivity of modernity is concretized and transformed in a plurality growing out of diverse experiences of suffering. At the same time the emergent development may very well awaken hope for the "working of a different reality" and offer a future equivalent for the object of "pre-modernity's" longing. Post-modern, modern and pre-modern impulses and developmental tendencies reciprocally transform each other in this polycontextual community of the poor and oppressed. Tracy explicitly names the "various and, to be sure, often conflicting theologies of liberation" (Tracy, 83) as bearers of the reality which he perceives. This reality aims at a new "world ethos," but not on the basis of a "primal ground, primal support and primal goal" determined and mediated by teachers and leaders. Rather the reality sketched by Tracy moves toward a new "world ethos" in a polycontextual and emergent manner from concrete experiences of suffering and liberation.

At issue is a radically polycentric movement with centers in "Latin America, Asia, Africa, Eastern and Central Europe" and in "the African American theologians, the native American theologians, the communities of Christian feminist and womanist theologians throughout the world" (Tracy, 83). In and from this polycentric movement Tracy sees an ecclesial public developing which can be identified as the "global Church" because in the Spirit of Pentecost it "promise[s] liberation for all" (Tracy, 83).

Tracy terms the theology emerging in this movement "mystical-prophetic" theology (Tracy, 83). In that designation the expression "mystical" comes across as externally imported and tacked on. On the basis of the biblical traditions and of regard for the working of God's Spirit, the characterization of this emergent community as a community of "prophetic" communication makes good sense. But the aptness of the term "prophetic" is matched by the difficulty one has in understanding why at this point Tracy explicitly employs the concept of "the mystical," burdened as it is with various associations of subjectivism, cognitivism and elitism.

To be sure, the communication processes of the polycentric community of the poor and oppressed are difficult to grasp. But should we invite indeterminacy with the expression "mysticism"? It is also difficult to grasp Tracy's hope, oscillating between positions of modern and anti-modern consciousness, that "a new historical subject in the Western centre itself [could] emerge after the death of the modern subject" (Tracy, 82-83). Should mysticism

bridge the gap between modern subjectivism and pre-modern religious attitudes? Is something like a "postponed neoconservatism" or a vague hope in somehow reshaping modern consciousness the light at the end of the tunnel of mysticism? In pluralistic societies the pressure is intense to muster forms of experience and of thought which are simple, easily rendered plausible, yet extremely flexible and capable of generating a high degree of integration. Gordon Kaufmann's "God as ultimate point of reference" or Kūng's "primal ground" can be regarded as reactions to that need. The interest in mysticism moves in this same direction, although on a more demanding level, since it includes transcendental stances.

Yet this interest in mysticism, which seems to be enjoying new life in regions of recent North American Catholicism, lies below the level of Tracy's pluralistic approach. At least in the undeveloped forms so far exposed¹⁰ – it blurs the differences between positions of post-modern, modern and anti-modern consciousness. It threatens to drag back into indeterminacy the prophetic will to express and expound a position, the prophetic readiness to take a stand and to assume responsibility. Without further clarification and qualification, it threatens to individualize and to empty the spiritual and ethical processes, which Tracy tries to "name".

We must therefore ask what alternative there is to a concept such as "mysticism" which covers over or even consecrates the fact that it is very difficult to reveal or lay hold of the processes of emergence accurately described by Tracy. I think that the placement of self in contemporary polycentric experiences of suffering and hopes for liberation must not be lost in mystical indeterminacy. The revelatory power of the prophetic can also, on the basis of polycentric concreteness, be capable of communication, assume solid form and lead to a new, common religious language, vision and form of life. The recognition of the connection in the biblical traditions between God's power and powerlessness allows us to speak of God and God's action without a metaphysical back-up, without invoking an authoritative primal support, primal ground and primal goal meant to stabilize hierarchies. This approach makes it possible, to cite Tracy yet once more, to renounce the "desire for totality" which is "the concealed wish and death-dealing fate of modern reason" (Tracy, 78-79). It makes it possible to do this without sliding off into the indeterminacy of the "radically apophatic tradition" (Tracy, 78) in which totalizing and particularizing forms merge indiscriminately into each

10 It would be important not only to name but also to specify traditions and positions which in theology and praxis were able to combin prophetic and mystical spirituality in communicable and revelatory ways.

other.

Epistemic Connections and Forms of Communication on the Basis of "Biblical Theology"

Since the 1980's a "new" biblical theology has been developed.¹¹ This biblical theology disassociates itself from all earlier attempts to read out of the biblical traditions – perhaps to read into them – a single form or a single theme (e.g., reconciliation, covenant, Kingdom of God, God's holiness, etc.) as "the form" or "the content" of those traditions¹². Instead the new biblical theology adopts a consciously "pluralistic" approach. It takes up and takes seriously the *diverse biblical traditions with their differing "Sitzen im Leben"* – traditions whose experiences of God and expectations of God evince *both continuity and discontinuity, both compatibility and an absence of any direct possibility of mediation*. This theology assumes from the start that no human experience has "God in Godself" at its disposal, but rather that God's revelation mediates itself in a multiplicity of human testimonies to God's presence.

Since these are human testimonies, they are in each case threatened by distortion, error, falsehood, the thirst for power, and the attempt to make oneself look good. But in so far as these testimonies point to God's revelation and to a humanity destined for justice and freedom, they can in manifold ways reciprocally challenge and strengthen each other, and can lead to clearer knowledge of God and of the reality intended by God.

This new theology critically engages not only metaphysical and politico-ideological totalizations. It also attempts to lay bare the patriarchal, class-based, imperial and militaristic ideologies and forms of thought which permeate the biblical traditions themselves. Finally, in

11 Limiting myself to the academic realm, narrowly construed, I name as examples only the series and "instituted" forms: *Overtures to Biblical Theology*, edited by W. Brueggemann and John Donahue S.J. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press); the *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, since 1987); the "Frederick Neumann Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture" (Princeton Theological Seminary; annual event since 1986). See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But SHE said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

12 J.D. Levenson rightly criticizes this conventional form in: "Why Jews are not Interested in Biblical Theology" in: J. Neusner et al., *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 281ff; cf. D. Ritschl, ""Wahre", "reine" oder "neue" biblische Theologie? Einige Anfragen zur neueren Diskussion um "Biblische Theologie"" in D. Ritschl, *Konzepte. Ökumene, Medizin, Ethik. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 111ff.

this theology the development of a sensibility for *differences and discontinuities* of these traditions is hardly less important than the interest in continuities and forms of unity.

In contrast to the metaphysical "primal ground" or to the "abysses" of mysticism, here we have a pluralistic continuum of experience which stimulates and promotes self-criticism and creative communication. This continuum of experience aids in perceiving relative continuities and discontinuities between different political, social, moral and psychic realities. It allows the differentiated and differentiating identification of diverse present, future, and past stances of consciousness, as well as definitions of multiple "presents." It demands complex critical engagements and communication between these varied realities. It allows different forms of common sense to locate themselves in different ways. It allows critical engagement and reciprocal fertilization between these different forms of common sense. It allows for multi-systemic cultural and social critique and for the perception and stimulation of creative emergent processes.

An apparent weakness of this pluralistic continuum lies in the fact that it does not attain the Olympian standpoint of metaphysical totalizations and "ultimate" points of reference from which can be generated the ultimate and final worldview.¹³ Nor does it attain the indifference of moral markets. This pluralistic continuum has specific forms and contents, albeit with a high degree of complexity and far removed from all one-dimensionality. And some of these forms and contents function as "implicit axioms". In this way the pluralistic continuum is – again in highly complex forms – "value-laden" in both positive and negative ways. Therefore sensibilities must be developed for the limits and biases of those who communicate on the basis of this continuum of experience. It encourages the development of what Cornel West describes as "a nuanced historical sense" and "a subtle social analysis."¹⁴ Yet, at the latest in a more radically "postmodern" culture than today's, this supposed weakness could prove to be a strength. If the constant development of sensibility for limits and biases were carried through, it would not impede communication with other great religious traditions and with secular forms of consciousness, but rather it would improve it.

13 Cf., in this volume, Vincent Wimbush, *Contemptus Mundi Redux: The Politics of an Ancient Rhetoric and Worldview*: "Christianity is fundamentally a proliferation of social formations inspired by *contemptus mundi* as worldview."

14 Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times: Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, Volume I (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993), 3ff.

On the one hand, the secret and unintentional absorption of foreign ways of thinking by metaphysical, moral, prophetic, mystical and other "fundamental" positions which are only *apparently* neutral would have to be exposed and limited in a more radical way than has previously been done.¹⁵ On the other hand, bridges would have to be established between the *contents* of the different complexes of traditions and experience – likewise more clearly than has happened previously. The apparently more comprehensive and more fundamental commonalities which were imputed with the help of highly abstract forms and of ultimate referents which existed only in the realm of linguistic mystification would have to yield to specific sets of questions about content in boundary situations and relations of proximity uncovered by investigation.¹⁶

This new biblical-theological approach intends anything but a "neoconservative" securing of what has been acquired in the past. It is not the intention to secure perduring narratives from the past, not to mention an overarching "metanarrative" (Lyotard), which would have the right to expect a hearing whenever and to whomever it was told. The concern of this new biblical theology is instead to open access *to a continuum which guides spiritual experience and prophetic communication in a multiplicity of emergent processes*. This continuum makes it possible continually to test key points of view – although not arbitrary ones – by placing them in the center of experience and communication particular to each concrete case. Indeed, this continuum compels such placement and testing. This process of placement and testing calls into question theologies of one-upmanship as well as theological conceptions which could be called "theologies of absorption."

It compels us to take our leave of many familiar conceptions of God's power and of religious confrontation with that power or participation in that power. It compels us to take radically seriously the connection between God's power and powerlessness. It compels us to come

15 Cf., in this volume, Catherine Keller, "Power Lines." Keller offers several disclosures of hidden apocalyptic forms in theological modes of thought and practices, which are widely appreciated and still badly needed.

16 Cf. John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker*. The Gifford Lectures for 1993-4, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4ff.: "We have learned so often in our exploration of the physical world that 'evident general principles' are often neither so evident nor so general as one might at first have supposed. Many theologians are instinctively top-down thinkers. I do not deny a role for such ambitious intellectual effort. I am merely wary of it and wish to temper its grand generality with the questionings that arise from the consideration of particularity."

down from the mountain and out of the clouds in order to inquire after God's presence and God's effectiveness, posing our questions from many concrete and authentic contexts of experience, and from the problems of finding common wavelengths of communication which both burden and enrich those experiences.

God's Power and Powerlessness

The connection of God's power and powerlessness provides a starting point not only in terms of content, but also formally, structurally, existentially, hermeneutically. This starting point is not dictated simply by the requirements of our pluralistic cultures after the collapse of the continuum of reality and rationality, and in the midst of a multiplicity of moral markets. The connection of God's power and powerlessness is intrinsic and essential to many biblical traditions. It is essential in a context of traditions whose paradigmatic "*Sitze im Leben*," formative at a basic level, are to be sought in acephalous societies with neither king, acropolis, bureaucratic staff, or power of military enforcement. Yet not only the pre-state and anti-state genesis, but also the internal constitution of a people which understands itself as liberated slaves and strangers reflects the essential connection of God's power and powerlessness. The *paradigmatic public*, cultically constituted, gives a continually renewed anchoring to the consciousness that God, the God of the Exodus, essentially acts out of powerlessness and oppression, of weakness and of collective helplessness. To this corresponds the frequent promise, in the mercy laws and in the prophetic traditions, of God's particular partiality specifically for the weak. To this corresponds above all *God's presence in God's Spirit*.

Beginning with the earliest witnesses to whom we have access, the working of God's Spirit is perceived as an action upon or in the midst of a ruptured, threatened community which in and of itself can not generate capacities or strategies for deliverance, successful interaction, or communal action. God's Spirit characteristically acts in and through emergent processes which transform communities which are either powerless or disparate and which are either potentially or actually in conflict. The notion of the "pouring out" of the Spirit shows with particular clarity the way in which a plurality is led to emergent community. The Spirit of messianic promise works out of and in the midst of a plurality of international hopes for

justice, mercy, and knowledge of God. The tensions present in this international public are considerable. Yet the working of the Spirit does not remove this international and multicultural differentiation, as is evident not only in the Pentecost story but also in earlier events. Instead, the relative powerlessness in this plurality is a condition of the possibility of bringing justice, mercy, and knowledge of God (the intentions and functions of "the law") *to a greater fullness*.

Homogenization and simple hierarchical constructions do not go hand in hand with the bestowal of God's countenance and the pouring out of God's Spirit. This becomes particularly clear in the promise of Joel, which is then taken up in the Pentecost account: the pouring out of the Spirit leads to pluralistic and prophetic openings of access to experiences of God and of the reality intended by God. The unimpeded presence of God's countenance is attendant upon precisely this plurality. In precise correspondence to this fact, according to chapter 42 and other passages in Isaiah, the promised bearer of the Spirit *does not use the typical political and moral forms for acquiring power and loyalty. It is out of public powerlessness, indeed out of public misunderstanding and public contempt, that the promised bearer of the Spirit gathers God's people as a community not structured along the lines of a single hierarchy*.

This community is not simply an ensemble both of conceptions of the world and of religious schemes of totality which are in part compatible with each other and in part incompatible. This community is upheld by faith in the revelation of God's *justice* and in the connected promise that justice will be realized for human beings. This justice gains material reality not only in the community's relation over against God, but also in its relations between human beings. In this dynamic it is again God's partiality for the weak, oppressed and marginalized which serves as the source of unwavering processes for the generation of order and reality, as well as for the transformation of reality.

For this renewal of the relationships of human life, orientation on the suffering Messiah and on the crucified Jesus of Nazareth is an initial experience. But this orientation fails if it is not seen in the context of the legal traditions and the promises of the Spirit embedded in the biblical traditions.¹⁷ It degenerates at least into an incomprehensible, abstract principle which

17 Cf. Rita Nakashima Brock's and Catherine Keller's critique of the religious use of the Dual "powerful parent / powerless child".

can be turned back to authoritarian uses. In the context of the legal traditions and of the promises of the Spirit, which can function as "implicit axioms", does it become clear that it is proper to the orientation on the suffering Messiah and on the crucified Jesus of Nazareth to release specific, formative experiences which are capable of communication, but which above all are situated in various socio-political and other contexts of life. At issue are experiences which challenge and instruct us to grasp the salvific connection of God's power and powerlessness in our own contexts of life, to experience that connection and to let others experience it.

Such communication of the connection of God's power and powerlessness can counteract authoritarian hierarchical constructions, be they intentional or unintentional. It can also counteract intentional and unintentional escapes into indeterminacy in the face of situations which overwhelm moral and communicative resources.