

Christian Theology: What Direction at the End of the Second Millennium?

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Christian Theology: Crisis at the End of the Second Millennium!

In many parts of the world, churches deriving from the Reformation and Counter-Reformation seem paralyzed. Bad moods - characterized by helplessness and fatigue - are spreading. Faith seems empty and incapable of articulation. Love is taken back into the private sphere, where it often suffocates in the struggle for self-assertion. Hope has no goal, no clear perspectives, and has even become extinct. Many worship services are sterile, joyless, and poorly attended. Scholarly theology has the reputation of being either elevated and incomprehensible, or banal and boring.

On the other hand, general religious questions abound. At least in a vague way, people are questioning and searching for enduring inner stability, for supportive surroundings filled with a consciousness of responsibility, with trust, and with shared joy. They are searching for consolation in the face of the finitude and perilous nature of life. And they are asking about the meaning of existence. Similarly, genuinely real distress also abounds, distress that obviously cannot be overcome merely politically, economically, legally, and morally. This includes the tormenting consciousness of guilt and complicity in the oppression and miserable circumstances of weaker people both near and far; or the perception of spreading indifference and brutality toward foreigners, toward the socially disadvantaged and excluded, toward weak elderly people, helpless children, and dependent young people; or the realization that humankind is systematically and rapidly damaging and destroying air and water, earth and forests, animals and plants; or the dull feeling that a life spent in individual striving for success, in orientation toward entertainment and consumption, and in narcissistic selfishness to the point of addiction - that such a life is vapid and false.

There seems to be hardly any escape from this distress. The more incisive and pressing the situation is recognized to be, all the more futile do all the suggestions, admonitions, and offers of direction seem to be. Amid apathy and an attitude of doom, perplexity, and cynicism, people settle into a rut of simply going on.

Under the spell of such perceptions of the world and self, many theologians in the Western industrialized nations find themselves confronted by the question: What direction can theology take in the third millennium? At the same time, Christian theology must ask itself whether and to what extent it has itself contributed to this crisis in orientation.

Has theology taken seriously its task of bringing to people's attention God's vitality and love for human beings, God's creative and delivering power? Or has it rather directed their thoughts and feelings to some rigid authority in the beyond that has merely formal "relations" to the world and to human beings? Or has it directed them to mere projections of deliverer and deliverance amid the various problems and crises?

Has it, in its questions concerning God, assiduously exhausted the biblical sources of knowledge of God, sources that grew for more than a millennium and that for more than two millennia have shaped "world culture" for both good and bad? Or has it contented itself with theological abstractions that are seductive because they offer

simple, integrative syntheses, thereby offering to common sense simple impressions of God and of salvation?

Has it developed forms enabling people of different cultural and social spheres to organize their various searches and questions concerning God as well as their various experiences of God into a critical and creative framework? Or has it become specialized in "the God-human being relation" characteristic of abstract, imperial modern thinking, or in those particular contextual experiences of God that maintain their immunity against any enrichment and questioning by other experiences of God?

Has it released the powers of distinguishing between experiences of God and images of idols, between illusions of self-redemption and an orientation toward God's saving acts? Or has it largely specialized in strengthening religious claims of immediacy and religious moralism?

Has it found forms for critical discernment that do justice both to the vitality and *doxa* of God on the one hand, and to the creative freedom of creatures on the other? Or has it stabilized old, long-transparent forms of dominion and self-preservation in order to avoid the difficulties of real joy in God's vitality, genuine fear of God, and the vitality of human experiences of God?

These self-critical questions about whether theology has not contributed to the present crisis in religious orientation direct our attention to a religious in normative and religious orientation just as much as does half-hearted, immature searching for alternatives.

The Collapse of Classical Theism: A New Beginning for Christian Theology?

In many parts of the world today, churches deriving from the Reformation and Counter-Reformation are facing the collapse of a religiosity shaped by classic bourgeois theism. This theism, characterized by the idea of a God who in absolute dominance and control brings forth and maintains both himself and everything else, is crumbling¹ The evocation of a transcendent personality that brings forth both itself and everything else hardly counts now as "true faith" and "true worship." The abstract notions of God's "omnipotence" and "omnipresence" are no longer theologically tenable. For many people, such notions perished in the Holocaust, in the world wars, in global environmental destruction, though also in the countless events characterized by suffering and injustice that are reflected daily and made public on a worldwide basis in the media. Monotheism needs a new theological understanding.²

God's "omnipotence" and "omnipresence" must be understood theologically anew.³ God cannot possibly be self-evidently and enduringly present at or focused on every point in the time-space continuum. We must understand anew what the biblical traditions call God's invisible and hidden nature. We must understand what those traditions understand by God's face turning away, lowering itself, and being concealed. We must make clear just what they mean by God's Spirit becoming weaker, attenuated,

¹ Concerning theological criticism of classical theism, see Jüriegen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 207ff.; Eberhard Jüngel, *God As the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), esp. §B.

² For many theological conversations that strengthened my persuasion in this regard I owe thanks to my colleague and friend William Schweiker, and to the interdisciplinary group "Bible, Theology, and Cultural Critique."

³ Cf. in this regard Wilfried Härles's suggestion that we understand God's omnipotence and omnipotence as characteristics of that particular *love* that is essential to God: *Dogmatik* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1995), 258f., 264ff.

and ultimately extinguished, and what they mean by the Spirit being chased away and fleeing. We must pose anew - and not only and not for the first time only with regard to the cross of Christ - the questions concerning the relationship between God's revelation and God's mighty acts in the world on the one hand, and God's absence and the world's distance from God on the other.

There are no doubt experiences of suffering, crises in orientation, and feelings of meaninglessness that prompt the suspicion that God is absent, at least temporarily, in certain parts of the world. And yet God's relative absence cannot be discerned in these situations of distress themselves. It must rather be perceived and portrayed in the light of God's revealed presence in this world. The question acquires contours only in view of the challenge of discerning God and God's presence in this world, and of discerning this presence - in the light of God's revelation - in the face of the collapse of classical theism and of the contemporary crisis in religious and normative orientation: What direction can theology take in the third millennium? In the following answers I draw on conceptual initiatives of the Reformation in describing directions for its further development, oriented toward contemporary developments in the theology of the Western world that have persuaded and shaped my thinking in this regard.⁴

The Renewal of Reformation Initiatives as a Future Task of Christian Theology

By "Reformation initiatives" I am not referring to the insurance of confessionalist incumbency. I am trying rather to pick up some of the most important impulses of the Reformation renewal of the church, impulses that even Counter-Reformation and non-Reformation churches have appropriated, and some of which have, to be sure, paled in parts of Reformation churches. In my opinion, such impulses include:

1. The search for the living God and the inquiry concerning God's intervention in this world, and trust in that intervention (an impulse that in Christian theology must be taken up by a theology of the Trinity).
2. Biblical orientation as the basis and measure of any tenable Christian theology.
3. An understanding of the church as the congregational church *and* as ecumenically based Christendom.
4. Concentration on a theology of the cross, as well as a resistance to even subtle notions of self-redemption.
5. The challenge of distinguishing between "law" and "gospel" as an unfinished task for theology, one whose realization should also realistically determine the relationship between church and culture.⁵

⁴ Throughout this undertaking, programmatic and divinatory features are unavoidable. As hesitant and with as much justification as the theological guild may well react to such features in the sphere of the scholarly disciplines, just as much does the theme of this volume call for a consideration of precisely these things.

⁵ In my reference to "Reformation initiatives" I am cognizant of the fact that many of the Reformers developed merely pale trinitarian theologies, that the Reformation was unable to overcome the medieval doctrine of satisfaction, and that in the distinction between "law" and "gospel" they often operated with a distorted understanding of "law" and with extremely vague notions of "gospel." Similarly, the conceptual dichotomies of the Reformers are still in need of correctives. Finally, their understanding of a believer's immediacy to God was often formulated such that personalism, individualism, and subjective feelings of right could appeal to such an understanding and could also religiously transfigure themselves in an often fatal fashion. All these forms are in need of theological critique and revision. My attempt at a constructive and critical appropriation of Reformation impulses has learned a great deal and been enriched by Berndt Hamm, "Einheit und Vielfalt der Reformation - oder was die Reformation zur Reformation macht," in B.

1. Tasks for a Theology of the Trinity

At the end of the second millennium, theology stands before the task of explicating anew the doctrine of the triune God. This will call into question traditional totalitarian, personalistic, or moralistic notions of God. Theology must illuminate the relationship between God and creatures, between human beings and God, and must seek to promote its various forms for the sake of arriving at a realistic knowledge of the unity, vitality, personality, efficaciousness, and *doxa* of the triune God. In the process, it must take as its orientation the complex weave of witnesses of the biblical traditions and allow modes of perception to emerge that are shaped by differentiated social, cultural, scholarly, and other considerations.

The most influential conceptual initiatives in trinitarian theology during the past few decades have emerged either from hybrids of christological orientation and classical theism (employing the doctrine of the two natures), or have been appropriated from notions of “divine sociality” (adopting the doctrine of the perichoresis as its basis). Both of these initiatives for developing a theology of the Trinity contributed to the dissolution of classical theism, though they still failed to satisfy both theological thinking and Christian devotion. Instead of developing a consistent doctrine of the triune God, these initiatives either bogged down in Unitarian thinking (with at most vague perspectives on the Holy Spirit), or they were diluted in quasi-mystical notions of mutuality (the “sociality” of God and of all things) offering no really persuasive basis for a faith seeking understanding and support.⁶

Fully developed alternatives are not yet clearly discernible, though those particular well-worn paths down which an escape from these difficulties has repeatedly - and futilely - been sought are easily identifiable. Neither the conceptual game with derivatives of the “Unmoved Mover” nor the theological “application” of modern conceptions of subjectivity and person have provided any persuasive gains for a theology of the Trinity. Neither is any progress discernible in the continuing increase and variation of linear relational figures that still dominate many current trinitarian theologies today (lover - love - beloved; I - address - thou; God comes from, to, as God, etc.). Rather, there is reason to doubt that with the initiatives of Reformation theology (and with a continually growing number of theologians in the present) any genuinely tenable and persuasive doctrine of God can be developed on the basis of “top down” speculation. A new trinitarian-theological initiative “bottom up” must address anew Eberhard Jungel’s pertinent insight that the gospel “cannot be maintained as a *joyful* word” where theology and piety allow “God’s *earthly* existence among us to be denigrated and allow God to be God only *above* us.”⁷ In the Gifford Lectures of 1993/94, the theoretical physicist and Anglican theologian John Polkinghorne asserted that “many theologians are instinctively top-down thinkers.” He warns: We in the natural sciences “have learned so often in our own explorations of the physical world that

Hamm, B. Moeller, and D. Wendebourg, eds., *Reformationstheorien. Ein kirchenhistorischer Disput Ober Einheit und Vielfalt der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), pp. 57-127. I would also like to thank him for helpful suggestions concerning the following reflections.

⁶ For a criticism of these dilemmas, see M. Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1995), pp. 42ff.

⁷ E. Jüngel, „Thesen zur Grundlegung der Christologie,“ in *Unterwegs zur Sache. Theologische Bemerkungen* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972), pp. 274ff., 278: “The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be had as a *joyful* word without the *skandalon* of the earthly existence of God and the doctrine of the Trinity that reflects upon this *skandahn*.”

‘evident general principles’ are often neither so evident nor so general as one might at first sight have supposed.”⁸ Polkinghorne thus advocates inquiring whether and how the great theological speculations consistently reflect “what we know of the process and history of this present world.” This initiative corresponds not only to the scientifically fruitful initiative of modern thinking, one that countered the rationalism and intellectualism of the Middle Ages by pledging itself in a thoroughgoing fashion to examination and support derived through observation,⁹ but also to the origins of Reformation thinking that in 1518 already connected the demand for a binding of all theology back to Scripture on the one hand, with the planning of an anti-Scholastic reform of universities and scholarly disciplines on the other. Not only criticism of Scholastic philosophy and theology, but also the adoption of humanistic concepts of education (a study of the sources, philological competence, etc.) serve such reorientation in the theological search for knowledge - from the “bottom up.” This initiative from the “bottom up” by no means excludes the discovery of christological, creation-theological, and pneumatological forms of power, forms whose differentiated interplay it is trinitarian theology’s task to disclose. Quite the contrary. But it does work to counter any mistaking of these forms of power for merely metaphysical accomplishments and simple, highly abstract commonsense notions. It prompts the discovery of these forms of power through an orientation toward the complex relationships among the multifarious witnesses of Scripture. It stands in perpetual conflict with all artificially constructed attempts - attempts guided by a single fancy, by an impression of plausibility, or by a variously demonstrated conceptual figure - to perceive God’s divinity or to find orientation in questioning and searching for God. Neither can such conceptual figures and procedures be sanctified by even a long tradition and a history of success. They acquire validity not just through the constructive development of their internal rationality, but rather only in proving themselves within the weave of witnesses of the biblical traditions, traditions that have taken centuries to develop. A theology of the Trinity must distinguish God’s “unity” from the abstract simplicity of an “ultimate point of reference” (G. Kaufman), from the diffuse complexity of an “ultimate reality,” or from the alleged coherence of an “all-determining reality” (R. Bultmann and W. Pannenberg). Similarly, it will have to replace the abstract and dualistic attempts to distinguish between God and creatures with distinctions that bring to expression both christologically and substantively/creation-theologically and pneumatologically God’s relationship with creation.

A theology that thinks “bottom up” and allows itself to be measured against the witnesses of the biblical tradition will not only have to pick up and deepen the Reformation insight that “Jesus Christ is not without his own,”¹⁰ but will also have to realize that the creative God does not wish to be and act without the creatures, and that the Spirit is not attested without those who are seized and animated by the Spirit.¹¹ This puts before us the extraordinarily far-reaching questions: (a) whether we will not have

⁸ John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist. Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker: The Gifford Lectures for 1993-4* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 4, cf. pp. 4f.

⁹ See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), esp. ch. 1

¹⁰ Cf. M. Welker, “Resurrection and the Reign of God,” in *The 1993 Frederick Neumann Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Hope for the Kingdom and Responsibility for the World. Princeton Seminary Bulletin. Supplementary Issue, 3*, ed. Daniel Migliore (1994), pp. 3-16.

¹¹ Cf. M. Welker, “What is ‘Creation’?: Rereading Genesis 1 and 2,” *Theology Today* 48 (April 1991): 56-71; idem, *God the Spirit: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, trans. John H. Hoffmeyer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994).

to develop equivalents for the christological doctrine of the two natures for the first and third articles of faith,¹² and (b) whether it is not precisely the theology of the Trinity that must develop a nondualistic *distinction* between God and creature that does justice to the complexity of the relationship between the triune God on the one hand, and creation on the other.

2. Biblical Theology, Polycontextual and Inductive Thinking

In the third millennium, the crisis of classical theism and the need of churches in pluralistic societies for orientation will confront theology with new urgency with the Reformation task of examining and renewing their dogmatic forms and content on the basis of the biblical traditions. In this regard, theology must develop conceptual forms and methods that - differently than in many traditional concepts of "biblical theology" - allow one to proceed multisystematically, historically, "bottom up," inductively. In the process, theology can no longer "despise the day of little things."¹³

In his article "Why Jews Are not Interested in Biblical Theology,"¹⁴ John Levenson, a Jewish Hebrew Bible scholar at Harvard, not only criticizes the "intense anti-Semitism" found in many of the classical works of leading Protestant exegetes,¹⁵ but also rejects any form of "biblical theology" that imputes or tries to demonstrate a specific conceptual form or a specific theoretical nexus as *the* form and systematic framework of *the* biblical traditions. He similarly criticizes all so-called "biblical theologies" that emphasize a single theme (for example, reconciliation, covenant, God's dominion, God's holiness, etc.) as "*the* content" of the biblical traditions, or that try to impose such a theme on those traditions. Levenson finds that "the effort to construct a systematic, harmonious theological statement out of the unsystematic and polydox material in the Hebrew Bible fits Christianity better than Judaism because systematic theology in general is more prominent and more at home in the church than in the yeshivah and the synagogue." Over against this, as he puts it, "inclination of Christians to systematize," he emphasizes the "stubborn Rabbinic resistance to losing the particular in the general."¹⁶

But does this characterization of "biblical theology" really correspond to the discussion and interdisciplinary cooperation that has taken place under the auspices of this programmatic formula since the 1980s, especially in the United States and in Germany? Is the issue really a search for the pan-integrative form, for the all-encompassing theme, for the "one great idea" informing all the biblical traditions? As Rolf Rendtorff has already suggested in his discussion with John Levenson,¹⁷ this is hardly an adequate

¹² Here one should be aware of the difference between the total entry into creaturely existence in the Incarnation on the one hand, and the Creator's and Spirit's relationship with creation on the other. Neither would I advocate maintaining the concept of "nature" in this context. It would, however, have to be replaced on the basis of a trinitarian-theological foundation. For fruitful discussions on trinitarian-theological "bottom-up" conceptual initiatives, I am extremely grateful to the "Consultation on Science and Theology" at Princeton.

¹³ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), preface (with reference to Zech. 4:13).

¹⁴ John Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in J. Neusner et al., eds., *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 281-307.

¹⁵ Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested," p. 287.

¹⁶ Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested," pp. 296, 298.

¹⁷ R. Rendtorff, „Wege zu einem gemeinsamen jüdisch-christlichen Umgang mit dem Alten Testament,“ *EvTh* 51 (1991): 43ff.

description of leading Christian exegesis today. And it certainly does not describe the enduring concerns and forms of research and of interdisciplinary exchange presented under the rubric of “biblical theology” or “new biblical theology” in, among other places, the *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (since 1978), in the periodical *Horizons*, in the *Frederick Neumann Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (since 1986), in the *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (since 1987), or in the project *Bible and Theology* (since 1989) or *Bible, Theology, and Cultural Critique* (since 1995). Similarly, many initiatives undertaken during recent years toward feminist and liberation-theological scriptural interpretation do not fit Levenson’s description. On the contrary, those particular examples of research, discussion, and documentation consciously associated with the programmatic formula “biblical theology” are incisively different from the initiatives toward an “absolute way of looking at things” critically presented by Levenson.

Rather, these examples take the Bible seriously as - to take Heinz Schürmann’s formulation - a “remarkably pluralistic library with traditions spanning more than 1500 years.”¹⁸ Their own systematic initiatives are consciously “pluralistic.” For them, the different biblical traditions with their differing “settings in life” are important precisely in those differences. It is just those differences that point toward a reality of God that every age and culture try to comprehend in their own way and that nonetheless cannot be “conceptualized” definitively by any single age or culture. The conceptual and research initiatives of theology under the title “biblical theology” take seriously the fact that the biblical traditions bring to expression experiences and expectations of God that are both continuous and discontinuous, both mutually compatible and at least not directly capable of being mediated between one another. They take seriously the fact that not only the appropriations that have accrued throughout church history, but also the biblical traditions themselves offer distortions and dissimulations of perspectives on God and on the reality intended by God.

This pluralistic initiative in biblical theology is shaped - from a systematic-theological perspective - by the realization that important, indeed even central theological concepts in our cultures often function now only as ciphers. Complex key religious terms and conceptual frameworks of the biblical traditions (for example, creation, world, sin, atonement, sacrifice, righteousness, God’s reign, God’s Spirit) that once functioned to a high degree as points of orientation have been worn away to the point of incomprehensibility through repeated accommodation to culturally imposed conceptual habits and to specific conceptions of rationality and morals. Hence the content and forms that these “great theological words” conceptualize must be recognized anew in their “settings in life” and in their *complexity and coherence*. “Seek simplicity - and distrust it!” is the basic scientific-theoretical guideline formulated by A. N. Whitehead. Since theology has for so long forced the search for “simplicity,” for simple, highly integrative abstractions and for quick plausibility, it is now time to rediscover the substantively adequate complexity and the complex substantive adequacy of the content of faith. This theological content can be regained only through biblical-theological reorientation that assumes a critical posture toward quick and selective “systematisation.” Only on the basis of an acknowledgment of the differentiated reality attaching to this content can it again demonstrate its multifarious fruitfulness and inherent vitality. Through interdisciplinary cooperation, theology must counter a mediocre reductionism that boasts of its “universal” clarity and its unobtrusive accommodation to general culture. It must offer guidance in learning to distinguish deceptive reductionist clarity from substantively adequate clarity, as well as in addressing the difficult distinction between the creative presence of religion within culture and religion as “systemic distortion.”¹⁹

¹⁸ H. Schürmann, *Gottes Reich – Jesu Geschick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983), p. 246.

¹⁹ Some initial suggestions can be found in the volume *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine*, W. Schweiker et al., eds. (forthcoming); cf. also M. Welker, „Auf der theologischen Suche nach einem

3. Recognition of the Fundamentally Local and Ecumenical Disposition of the Church and of Creative Pluralism

Theology that takes seriously God's vitality, and that pledges itself ever anew to a reorientation toward the biblical traditions - traditions that developed over a period of one and a half millennia - should be characterized by a "freedom under the Word"²⁰ that is formative not only for theological work but also for church life. The richness of "God's Word" and the multiperspective accessibility of the "pluralistic library 'Bible'" make it necessary for theology and the church to arrive at an understanding of its content, at self-understanding, and at organizational forms capable of mediating this inherent complexity and coherence. The non-monohierarchical and yet clear disposition of a creative-pluralistic church must be both recognized and tended (whereby pluralism is not - as is often the case - to be confused with relativism and individualism). On the one hand, the church emerges from the authentic communication nexus of the congregation assembled and united through God's Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. On the other hand, in its orientation back toward Scripture - an orientation common to all churches - it has ecumenical scope. The theology of the third millennium will have to develop forms that allow the "freedom of the church under the Word of God" and the authority of Scripture to be related such that the development, testing, and transformation of confessional, organizational, institutional, and other forms of the church can be implemented and followed from both a congregational and an ecumenical perspective.

Historically, the church's most efficacious conceptions either were based on stratified organizational forms tying the church to the clear form of a specific hierarchical figure, or were shaped by "congregationalist," "social," or "primary congregational" concepts that emerged from the elementary process of free association and then tried dogmatically or morally to justify, guide, and shape just this dynamic. This tension between hierarchical systemic conceptions of form and an orientation toward associative forms can still be observed today. It manifests itself in the noticeable uneasiness attaching to contemporary sociological discussion that tries to understand the church either as a subsystem of a secondary system within a functionally differentiated society (N. Luhmann), or as an ensemble of "civil-social" associations (J. Habermas). Whereas the one side is unable to determine the specific system quality of the church, the other is unable to distinguish clearly the association "church" from other civil-social associations.²¹

This fails to recognize the special disposition and public nature of the church that necessarily connect systemic and associative forms. This one-sided perspective fails to see that the ecumenical church, at all times and in all parts of the world, is subdivided into numerous confessions with all their accompanying, particular perspectives on the content of faith, and that every day and every week, the church can be generated and renewed from within this concentration on Word and sacrament, especially in the millions of congregational "associations." Until now we have lacked (both inside and

, Wehethos' in einer Zeit kurzlebiger moralischer Märkte. Küng, Tracy und die Bedeutung der neuen Biblischen Theologie," *EvTh* 5 (1955): 438-56.

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2 (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1956) pp.695ff.

²¹ In this regard see the discussion with Habermas conducted by D. Tracy and F. Schüssler-Fiorenza, in Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, eds., *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); E. Arens, ed., *Habermas und die Theologie. Beiträge zur theologischen Rezeption, Diskussion und Kritik der Theorie kommunikativen Handelns* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989), esp. pp. 115-44. See also 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* 78/1 (1995): 49-67; cf. further M. Welker, "Niklas Luhmanns Religion der Gesellschaft," *Sociologia Internationalis* 29/2 (1991): 149-57.

outside theology) the conceptual means for understanding and consciously cultivating the interplay and dynamic tension between systemic forms and associative forms. In its own turn, this lack made the church inclined to take “counter entities” as its point of orientation for self-description, entities that with respect to universality and authenticity were actually beneath it. It did this in order to understand itself in a delimitation from such a “counter entity,” in Europe especially with respect to the relationship between “church and society” or “church and state.”²²

In the third millennium, theology will have to develop a self-understanding of the church as an ecumenical entity in congregational form, or as a congregation with ecumenical consciousness and ecumenical efficacy. In this way, it might counter false notions of powerlessness and irrelevance. It might also be in a position to replace false notions of homogeneity both in view of the church itself and in view of its cultural and social surroundings with a “nuanced historical sense” and a “subtle social analysis.”²³ Such ecumenical self-understanding from a congregational perspective will make it difficult to maintain provincial, regionalist, chauvinist, and similar distortions of church and faith. The congregational disposition of the church at all times and in all parts of the world, however, is indispensable for authentically living and maintaining the freedom of the church under the Word of God. Here the churches will have to develop more intensively than was previously the case interactive forms for regular proclamation in ever new scriptural interpretation and an ever new understanding of the present.²⁴ Similarly, churches will have to develop a more differentiated understanding of the interplay among the various “offices” as well as corresponding organizational forms in order to do justice to the multiplicity of charismatic phenomena that in the classical high churches of the West in the present must be persistently “muted,” not least because of the internal and external (structural) disposition of churches.

Finally, it must become clear that freedom of scriptural interpretation does not simply serve a regional strengthening of faith within a congregation, but rather the ecumenically significant question concerning knowledge of God, the reality intended by God, and the truth of such knowledge. This *ecumenical responsibility* characterizing the search and inquiry concerning God, the responsibility manifesting itself in every proclamation, in every assembled congregation, and in a reverse fashion the concrete congregational authenticity in which this proclamation itself is supported and defended - are of significance for any serious search for God’s Word as well as for the church’s own vitality. Both in this search and in the engagement of its vitality, the church must continually deal with its own self-endangerment. In the classical high churches of modernity, this great self-endangerment of the church has been veiled by massive but false religious claims of immediacy toward God, and by a no less massive religious fascination with various forms of morality.

4. Confronting Religious Moralism and Religious Claims of Immediacy toward God: The Theology of the Cross and Hamartiological Considerations

In the third millennium, Christian theology - beginning with itself - must more clearly and realistically disclose the threatening and destructive powers of individual and collective life. It must identify the strategies of concealment and assuagement and help

²² See the issue *Kirche-Staat-Gesellschaft* (EvTh 54/2 [1994]).

²³ Concerning the development of these forms also independently of “biblical theology,” see C. West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times. Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, I (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 1993).

²⁴ Cf. Welker, „Auf der theologischen Suche,“ 438-56.

uncover the illusions and lies that veil such self-endangerment and destruction. Without precipitating and inciting the “moral struggle of all against all” (Karl Barth), it must promote a culture of sober individual and public recognition of sin. It must promote this recognition of sin in order to make clear to people in a differentiated fashion the enormous earthly power of their own capacity for destruction. But it must also promote this recognition of sin in order to reveal the fatal consequences and vanity of the use of this power. It must promote this recognition of sin in order to work toward multiform change and renewal. Christian churches can reacquire this beneficial recognition of sin ever anew only by taking as their point of departure the recognition of the cross of Christ and its evocation in proclamation and celebration of the Eucharist.

In his book *The Crucified God*, Jürgen Moltmann draws attention to the fact that the event of the cross must be comprehended in a differentiated fashion in both its religio-critical and its politico-critical dimension. Jesus of Nazareth is killed both as a “blasphemer” and a “rebel.”²⁵ This conceptual initiative should be taken up and developed further. Jesus of Nazareth was condemned to a shameful and agonizing death and executed in the name of religion, in the name of two kinds of law, in the name of predominating politics, and supported by “public opinion.” The cross thus confronts us with the horrible realization that religion, law, politics, morality, and public opinion - all of which are advances designed to serve piety, public order, justice at large, the promotion of the good, and the community - that all of these can work together to drive people who make use of these advances away from God, into untruth, a breach of the law, compassionless behavior, and lawless disarray. The systemic form of sin in its multifarious forms and the entanglement of individuals in this demonic power are revealed “beneath the cross.”

Retrospectives on world history sufficiently attest the fact that a community of human beings can be thoroughly blind, corrupt, and incapable of recognizing what is good, just, liberating, and commensurate with God. Very few people would deny that the “Third Reich” or Stalinism created utterly rotten societies with utterly false orientations in which the very powers providing orientation were employed in a conspiracy against life itself. Over against such ravages, the cross of Christ refers us to an exemplary and horrible expansion of this, since according to the witness of the biblical traditions, both natives *and* foreigners, the occupied *and* the occupiers, Jews *and* Romans, Jews *and* Gentiles worked together to bring Jesus to the cross. The entire representative world worked together, cooperated, and conspired in this abysmal “will to be distant from God” (H.-G. Geyer). The “final correctives” of world opinion, of a different system of justice, of a different religion, or at least of “the enemy” - all these are eliminated here. Not only the elite, but also the general public, and even Jesus’ most intimate associates cooperated here. The cross of Christ confronts us with an unsurpassable depth of destructive and self-destructive human power. It confronts us with chaos and horror. It confronts human beings with the abyss of their own power to disseminate meaninglessness and hopelessness.

In the third millennium, theology must guard against relating such insights solely to the simple self-relation of “human being” and “world,” both of which are allegedly “*incurvatus in se*” and “self-centered” with respect to God. Instead of approaching human beings with religiously embellished moral appeals, theology must comprehend these systemic normative forces and forms of power in their destructive interplay, and learn how to recognize them in their fruitful interdependence. From theology we should expect orientation aids for distinguishing between destructive and beneficial normative forms and developments. Theology can fulfill this task, however, only if it does not assign such recognition of sin to mere morals alone. Rather, it must make it clear that morals - the communication of mutual acknowledgment, the interplay of giving and

²⁵ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, ch.4.

withholding respect - can be occupied and guided by the most varied forms of ethos. Theology must contribute to a recognition of the ambivalence and corruptibility of morals, though it must do so without engaging in a blanket denigration of moral communication (which is, after all, indispensable). Quite in accord with this, it must provide initiatives for critical and self-critical dealings with legal, political, mass media-related, and other forms of normative entities. This enlightenment of transindividual formative forces affecting life, and the corresponding trans-individual recognition of sin, both presuppose that theology will have at its disposal an intensified willingness to engage in education. It also presupposes a willingness to be subject to criticism - criticism from the perspective of a theology of the cross and on the basis of hamartiological considerations - the religious admixture of piety and self-righteousness that has in modern times largely made theology a matter of individual religious and moral feeling. To prevent this basic theological posture from generating what in its own turn is a destructive, self-righteous, power-hungry theology, all believers must be taught the basic theological distinction between law and gospel.

5. Realistic Theology and the Distinction Between Law and Gospel

In the third millennium, theology will have to rediscover the significance of the basic Reformation distinction between “law” and “gospel.” In the process, it will have to reject the common abstractions and caricatures of the law, its reduction to the Decalogue, as well as numerous airy notions of the gospel. In place of the pairs “indicative and imperative,” “demand and gift,” “promise and claim,” it must provide more differentiated insights into the inner disposition of the law and its “sublation” (its relativization accompanied by a preservation of its intention) by the gospel. Only a theologically and substantively appropriate understanding of the law and of its potential for being perverted through the power of sin will reveal the tense but fruitful alliance of hope involving both the church and Israel. An understanding of the culturally formative dynamic of the law’s own normative nexus of form, and of its dialectical relationship with the gospel, however, will put interreligious dialogue back on a substantive basis, and will reestablish theology’s “cultural competence.”

This distinction between law and gospel confronts theology with the power of demanding normative relationships, with their destructive deformation (under the power of sin, revealed in an exemplary fashion in the cross of Christ), as well as with their liberating and creative transformation (through the gospel, the coming reign of God, and the outpouring of the Spirit). These normative relationships are conceptualized as “the law” both by and in connection with many biblical traditions, and although they do exhibit inner structures and developmental dynamics that seem to transcend culture, these structures and dynamics are for now only partially transparent in their powerful interdependencies.²⁶

All the biblical traditions relating to the law contain norms serving to secure justice, to protect the weak, and to promote mercy, and norms serving the publicly regulated relationship with God, namely, the cult. The interdependence of these relationships generates developmental dynamics in which the norms themselves are progressively completed and refined, and at the same time an effort is made to thwart their dissolution (which is, of course, the threat attaching precisely to such continued development). Hence - to take only a few examples - the ethos of mercy and similar notions secure the universality of striving for reciprocity before the law. In its own turn, the law works counter to paternalistic and therapeutic inclinations in morals shaped by

²⁶ My own persuasion in this regard were strengthened by a seminar in the Heidelberg *Graduiertenkolleg*, „Religion and Normativity“, conducted with Jan Assmann, Klaus Berger, and Bernd Janowski, and by the ensuing discussions.

mercy. The cult secures a basis for this normative thinking in collective recollection and expectation, whereas justice and mercy also focus on the general accessibility of the cult, securing thereby its supportive function.

The biblical traditions, however, demonstrate not only that deficits arise in the various subdivisions pertaining to keeping the law, but also that the entire complex of the law itself can be perverted. Mercy can be ignored, justice bent, and worship misused - again, in mutually supportive ways. Christian theology must on the one hand make clear at all times the revelation of the lost human condition under the perverted law; and, on the other hand, it must draw attention to the saving power of the coming reign of God and to the new creative presence of the Spirit, with which God, by taking human beings themselves into service, counters this particular situation of distress and perversion. Precisely this basic orientation is served by (1) trinitarian-theological concentration on God's vitality, (2) a preeminent orientation toward the witnesses of the biblical tradition, (3) freedom lived under the Word of God in both the congregational and ecumenical church, and (4) the ever new reflection back to the revelation of the lost condition of the world beneath the cross.

More intensively than has hitherto been the case, theology should show that law and gospel have become formative forces not only of church life, but at a different level also of culture at large, and are forces that can be ignored only at the price of enormous insecurity in orientation.

One recent example is the intensive debate concerning literature and morals, a debate at least strongly stimulated if not actually generated by Harold Bloom's book *The Western Canon*.²⁷ Bloom polemicizes against the invocation of a practical ethical function for art and literature, against a critical view of the canon for the sake of representing "voices" within national, ethnic, sexual, and other differentiations. He attacks the moralization and politicization of literary texts, and tries to maintain a canonical collection of literature that is to be kept out of the reach of what he considers to be such "relativization." Here Bloom fails to recognize - fixated as he is on the dimension of the cultic (or on a subdivision of the cultic) - the tension-filled, dynamic relationship between cultic, legal, and mercy-related forms that culture has activated with its own "pluralistic" differentiation of various "contextual" and social-moral movements. According to the systematic insights generated by the distinction between law and gospel, a "canon" can maintain itself only in a continual, vital complementary relationship with forms that guarantee equality of access, and forms that continually strive to include outsiders, minorities, and repressed perspectives. Only such mutual support between forms can guarantee a vital and living normative condition, one toward which canonical literature, in its own way, is working. Anyone who one-sidedly laments dissolution, and reviles a critical posture, fails to recognize the relationships of form to which our culture owes a decisive dynamic of depth within its own development.²⁸

"Realistic" theology will have to preserve these insights in a constructive and creative cultural critique and in an analysis of systemic distortions in culture and society. The avoidance of such prophetic and critical objectivity can only result in serious damage to both culture and society.

²⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994)

²⁸ An additional current example is the virtually desperate search for a "world ethos" (for example, H. Rung), along with the problems of orientation it unintentionally generates. See in this regard M. Welker, „Auf der theologischen Suche nach einem ‚Weltethos‘ in einer Zeit kurzlebiger moralischer Märkte. Küng, Tracy und die Bedeutung der neuen Biblischen Theologie,“ *EvTh* 5 (1995); W. Huber, *Die tägliche Gewalt. Gegen den Ausverkauf der Menschenwürde* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), pp. 150ff.

