

Michael Welker

Realistic Eschatology

The five contributions in this part of the book offer five different, yet complementary, perspectives on a realistic eschatology. This means that they contribute to a theological eschatology which is well aware that it does not merely deal with a reality that can be grasped within the boundaries of materialistic naturalism alone. This means above all and in a positive way, that all contributions are aware of the fact: eschatological realities have to stand in both discontinuity and continuity to realms and forms of experience related to material nature, if they are supposed to make sense to the natural and cultural sciences and if they want to stay attuned to important strata of the biblical witnesses. A theological eschatology does not mean travel and traffic in hyperreality.

Gerhard Sauter focuses on the Christian hope and the biblical notion of "hope against hope". This hope is not just optimism but a "transfiguration of our intentionality", based on the hope of resurrection. It is a complex "alliance with life". In the biblical traditions hope affirms God's promises of justice, of peace, of rest, of knowledge. Sauter deals with the difficulties to affirm and to awake this hope in personally and existentially desperate situations. Christian hope is not just a mental attitude, but a given reality which overcomes, as he argues, the ambiguity of self-identification and despair. Sauter examines the great alternative in current Western cultures: the consolation that "life goes on", which often seems to be "more realistic" but which--not least under the impact of the natural sciences on eschatological moods--breaks down as a convincing alternative to hope. Sketching the great impact of this breakdown on our cultures (the spreading of the idea of being deceived by faceless powers and the many consequences of this in mentalities of distrust) Sauter presents Christian "hope against hope" as the alternative to facing a faceless fate.

From another angle Kathryn Tanner examines future-oriented, this-worldly eschatologies and their problems with scientific end-time scenarios. She shows that an eschatological concentration on "the ongoing redemptive relation to God that holds for the world of the past, present and future" could relativize the predominant future orientation of modern eschatologies and their current preoccupation with cosmic finitude. On the basis of a broad

spectrum of biblical insights she offers new perspectives on the understanding of "life in God". She shows how this leads to a re-evaluation of "death" and "life" and to a realistic understanding of "eternal life": "Eternal life infiltrates, then, the present world of suffering and oppression, to bring life, understood as a new pattern or structure of relationships marked by life-giving vitality and renewed purpose."

Tanner carefully examines several theological, political and ethical concerns which ask to hold on to the future-oriented eschatology and warn against a too simple spiritualization of God's eschatological gifts. She shows that an eschatology out of joyful recognition and gratitude for the life in God we are given rather strengthens than weakens the ethical and political struggle against "injustice, exclusion and impoverishment, which make up the realm of death". This eschatological re-orientation will not only strengthen those who have the power to work for the better in this life. Even to the suffering and the victimized, so Tanner argues, the awareness that this innerworldly realm of death does not have the power to disconnect creatures from the life in God will give greater strength than the traditional future-oriented eschatologies.

"What remains of our lives when we die? ... Where are the dead?" From the perspective of a strongly future-oriented eschatology Jürgen Moltmann asks these burning questions. He examines classical theological answers that tried to give a meaning to death and argues that death should be seen "as a fact which provokes grief over transience, and longing for the eternal life of the future world". He critically examines religious and philosophical ideas about the "immortal soul" and theological and philosophical attempts to develop other concepts of "immortality". Moltmann argues that notions of immortality which abstract from God's eternity and God's life and the participation in it remain unconvincing and empty. He examines three eschatological concepts developed in Christian and other religious traditions which try to grasp God's relation to the dead after death: the purgatory, the resurrection at death and the reincarnation.

He points out that any valid eschatological concept of life after death has to account for the "completion" of "the life of those who were unable to live and were not allowed to live: the beloved child dying at birth; the little boy run over when he was four; the sixteen-year-old friend torn to pieces by a bomb as he stood beside you ... and all the many people who have been raped and murdered and exterminated". Over against "traditional societies" modern

societies have lost a whole world of forms that allowed people to live in a community of hope shared by the dead and the living. Moltmann does not simply argue for a retrieval of the eschatological mentalities of traditionalist societies. But he argues for a "culture of remembrance" which tries to do justice to the dead and seeks to give room for their "second presence". Only this culture of remembrance could free a "culture of narcissism" from an endemic loss of hope and its destructive impact on culture, ethos and personality.

Miroslav Volf wants to concentrate his investigation on the eschatological transformation of the physical and cultural dimensions of human beings. He wants to explore the transition from this present world ("in which human beings are caught in the net woven of the consequences of their physicality's transience and of their cultural productivity's sinfulness") to the state of freedom in God's "new world". He argues that the grand eschatological themes--the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment--address precisely the transformation of the physical make-up and cultural matrix of human life. Volf develops his own contribution in a critical evaluation of Jüngel's, Pannenberg's and Moltmann's dealing with these eschatological themes.

Volf is highly sensitive to "eschatological moves" which just offer translations of earthly states of affairs into conceptual or even rhetorical realms. Thus he insists, for example, that the problem of death cannot be adequately addressed via the notion of a taking up time into eternity. He argues for an eschatological honesty that does not override our life and time under the conditions of finitude and sin by conceptions of an all-integrating totality and infinity. Nor can eschatology just offer visions of restitution without judgment and transformation. Eschatology has to conceive of a "post-mortem change", as Volf puts it, of "the resolution of the problems within the sphere of cultural productivity; without it past cannot be redeemed and history cannot be set aright". Eschatology which has to take life after death seriously has to conceive the resurrection of the body as an aspect of the comprehensive *transformatio mundi*. This embodiment of our lives and world in the time, space and matter of a new creation (John Polkinghorne) is "thinkable only as human beings' undiluted enjoyment of God, one another, and of their environment in a new world of perfect love".

Volf's insistence that a "realistic eschatology" cannot give up on a salvific transformation of this world and our lives beyond our dwelling on earth raises the question what theological means help us to reach out to this realm and not to lose the eschatological credibility and

realism. Volf himself points into the direction of Christology and trinitarian theology in order to face resurrection, divine judgment and the eschatological transformation of finite lives under the power of sin.

In order to gain ground for such eschatological claims Michael Welker investigates the New Testament resurrection accounts and asks for the reality of the resurrection. He shows that a diversity of witnesses open up a field of tension between the palpability of the resurrected body and the mere appearance of the risen one. This spectrum of witnesses makes it very clear that the resurrection is not just a physical reanimation. Even the palpable encounters are followed by the acknowledgment of a theophany--and by doubt. Nowhere in the Bible is the pre-easterly Jesus simply welcomed back. But what reality has the "glorified" or the "spiritual" body of the resurrected that the New Testament witnesses speak of?

Pointing to the phenomena of "cultural memory" (Jan Assmann) and of what he calls "canonic memory" Welker claims that the knowledge of Jesus' resurrection is as little an illusion as the discovery of justice or of mathematics. Cultural and canonic memory is a real power which shapes remembrance, experience and expectation. It is rooted in a reality and generates reality. The resurrection of Jesus Christ brings forth this reality-grounded and reality-shaping memory in which the fullness of Christ's person and life becomes present. "In this canonic memory which is only one dimension of faith and of the working of the Spirit--although a most important one--the resurrected Christ, in the fullness of his person and in the fullness of his pre-Easter history, brings his presence to bear." Proclamation and Holy Communion become central forms of celebrating and experiencing this presence of the resurrected Christ, although there are many elements and events of his life that can ignite the canonic memory.

The "eternal life" which becomes palpable in the life of the resurrected Christ with its orienting, judging, healing, consoling, strengthening, ennobling powers is presented by the New Testament traditions in a twofold way. It encounters us in an "eschatological complementarity": as a life which guides our lives in the merciful transformation of earthly life into eternal life; and as a life that reveals the difference between earthly and eternal life to us. This "eschatological complementarity" generates different styles of eschatological memories, experiences and expectations. The adequacy of these styles to the presence of the resurrected Christ, their intelligibility, their coherence and consistency, their spiritual, theological and ethical fruitfulness--and in this all--their eschatological realism are explored

in the discourse of science and theology.