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Theology in Public Discourse Outside Communities of Faith?

When people in a business firm meet regularly for a "bible lunch," is that "theology in public discourse outside communities of faith"? Or is it the emergence of a community of faith within the economic system? When a successful religious book becomes the subject of newspaper articles and of many people's conversations, is that "theology in public discourse outside communities of faith"? When the judicial system discusses the cross in the classroom or the ten commandments behind the judge's bench, is that "theology in public discourse outside communities of faith"? When church leaders address questions of social justice or of self-incurred ecological danger, is that "theology in public discourse outside communities of faith"? Or is it a question of moral pronouncements within communities of faith?

Such questions could be multiplied at will. They signal that it has become difficult to define clearly the boundaries that separate communities of faith from their environments. They also mark the problem of clearly distinguishing theological discourse from statements that, one way or another, deal with religion. The assurance that "it depends on the individual case" only postpones these perplexities. As long as we do not have any criteria for the boundaries of communities of faith and for the compass of theological discourse, we will remain in our uncertainties. The reflections that follow are an attempt to define those boundaries under the complicated conditions of pluralistic environments.

The issue of theology in public discourse outside of communities of faith has many layers, and raises at least the following two questions. On the one hand, it asks: Is there such a thing as theology in public discourse outside communities of faith? On the other hand, it asks: Should theology, which comes forth from communities of faith and is essentially developed in them, enter into public discourse outside these communities of faith? And if so, how? These questions are hard to answer because our pluralistic cultures and societies operate with various conceptions of theology. For example, we have sophisticated concepts of theology that make it almost impossible to say that there is theology outside communities of faith. But there are also loose concepts of theology that suspect the presence of theology even in very vague and minimal statements about God and matters of religion. This latter understanding of theology renders it difficult to discover areas in public discourse that are free from theology.

Do not all human beings and all cultural spheres have their "ultimate point of reference" somehow, somewhere, at least occasionally? Do they not all have something that "unconditionally concerns" them?

In order to avoid the confusions of thought, language, and expectation that arise from such different conceptions of theology, we have to try to clarify these conceptions and their interdependence. With our initial question in mind we thus once more search in the first part for an answer to the question which has often been asked in the course of history: What is theology? In the second part we shall investigate the problems presented to communities of faith by the rudimentary "theologies" in the publics outside those communities. In the third part we shall ask what the concrete tasks are that fall to theologies within communities of faith by virtue of the fact that there are such things as theological statements and theological discourses outside communities of faith. In this way we seek to discern the tasks of theology--in both the church and the academy--in multi-religious and pluralistic public life. We thus take up a concern that Abraham Kuyper advanced so provocatively in his time: namely, the development of a "public theology" that seeks to react to the differentiation of the societal subsystems of politics, education, the media etc., and thereby to face up to the tasks of Christian proclamation in modern society.¹

What is theology?

Not every remark about God is theological. On closer consideration, not even every pious utterance can be considered theological. The sigh directed to God and the silent prayer are no more theological utterances than the cynical remark about God or the presentation, consciously carried out under the rubric of religious studies, which makes clear that it is talking about a religion that is spiritually profoundly foreign to the speaker.

In order for an utterance to be acknowledged as theological, at least two things must be

¹ See Abraham Kuyper's *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid*, 3 Volumes (Amsterdam, 1893-1894), and the Stone-Lectures 1898/99, *Calvinism* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), which thematize the relations of Calvinism not only to "history and future", but also to religion, politics, science and art. See also A.A. van Ruler, *Kuyper's idee eener christelijke cultuur* (Nijerk s.a. 1944); Cornelis Augustijn et al., eds., *Abraham Kuyper: Zijn volksdeel, zijn invloed* (Delft, 1987); Cornelis Augustijn, "Abraham Kuyper", in: Martin Greschat, ed., *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte 9,2: Die neueste Zeit* (Stuttgart, 1985), 289-307. The beginning of Kuyper's impact on the theological discourse in North America is illuminated by Benjamin Warfield, "Introductory Note", in Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946, 1990), XXV-XXXIX.

present. First, a theological utterance about God or about matters religious does not have to evidence a well-developed "faith," but--to put it cautiously--it must show a minimum of conviction and a minimal degree of having been existentially touched. If this is not expressly true for the speaker, it at least needs to be true for the subject matter of the statement: for example, with regard to believers who are discussed in speaking about God. No matter what the reflective distance may be at which "faith" appears in theological utterances, if they do not evidence a minimum of certainty shared or valued by the speaker, if they do not at least evidence the search for spiritual certainty and truth or the need to believe, statements about God and matters religious can not be considered theological. Let me say explicitly: This is only the first of two conditions. On its own it is insufficient. But even the fulfillment of this condition does not go without saying in all utterances that claim to be theological. Members of church communities sometimes find this condition inadequately ensured in parts of academic theology.

The second presupposition is no less demanding. A theological utterance must be formulated in words and must be comprehensible. It must be such that others can follow its logic, and it must be capable of material development. In order to reach the level of **theological propositions**, religious utterances must express certainties that are communicable, comprehensible, and open to development with respect to their object and content. Academic theology sometimes finds this side underdeveloped in church life. Again and again there are individual religious utterances that not only in fact remain self-enclosed, but want to remain that way: hermetic certainties that do not allow either comprehension or connection. Such utterances--as worthy of esteem as they may otherwise be--also do not satisfy the minimal conditions for being theological.

We already have an important result: Propositions about God can certainly be fragmentary, rudimentary and distanced, and still be theological. However, they need to evidence an existential seriousness and a comprehensible treatment of content and subject matter in order to satisfy minimal conditions of being theological. This reveals a fascinating basic constitution of that which is theological. In speaking about God, theology connects and interrelates consistency of conviction and consistency of subject matter. Theology does not look only for certainty and consensus. Nor does it look only for correctness and accuracy. In the search for certainty, consensus, accuracy and correctness, theology asks for truth: that is, for the connection and mutual enhancement of consistency of conviction and consistency of

subject matter in speech about God.

Once the inner constitution of what is theological is recognized, we can value as theological even fragmentary utterances that we find in church communities and publics outside the church--and not only among so-called laity and outsiders. We can also acknowledge as theological very distanced utterances about God that we encounter, for instance, in some historical and philosophical academic theologies. We can accept as theological what is fragmentary, distanced and implicit, without blurring the boundary separating utterances that are not theological or not yet theological. We call statements about God and other contents of faith theological if they show an existential seriousness in the speaker and/or in the subject matter, and if at the same time they are comprehensible, communicable, and capable of material development. We presuppose this concept of theology when we say that all members of the church, all members of the body of Christ, are enabled to do theology. And it is this form of theology that we also find--more or less cultivated--in publics outside communities of faith.

This minimal (but at the same time sophisticated and demanding!) definition of theology is easily lost from view because frequently we understand theology as **talk about God in a highly developed interconnection between thought and conviction**. We see a well-elaborated interconnection of thought and conviction when we speak of, for instance, the theology of Calvin or Barth, the theology of the Lutheran confessional writings, the theology of a biblical book, or the theology of a mature religious person (who need not be a learned person). We see a well-elaborated interconnection of thought and conviction when we speak of the theology of a dogmatics, a congregation, or a church tradition. As a rule such well-elaborated theologies do not arise outside communities of faith. Even where they are developed by individuals, they presuppose religious movements, congregations, churches and church education, and in all this, tradition and intense spiritual exchange.

Whereas in all theological utterances the consistency of conviction and subject matter and their connection and mutual enhancement need only be latently present, in elaborated theologies we find them developed and verified. The verification of elaborated theologies in diverse questions of certainty, correctness and truth is a high good. Communities of faith are shaped by such theologies. Explicit theologies, which have taken shape in confessions and confessional writings, in catechisms and textbooks, in hymnody and liturgies, mark

communities of faith. But so do implicit theologies, which in the living processes of teaching, proclamation and spiritual discourse often find only fragmentary expression and are continually being developed. Major communities of faith with a long tradition are shaped by a whole hierarchy of theologies, which must be essentially compatible with each other, or which must be the subject of ongoing debate with regard to their compatibility. In this context one can speak of "a" or "the" theology of a community of faith, although the unity of this theology often becomes clearly accessible only in conflict, in the formation of confessions, in ordination vows, and in other such situations.

Because of the great value of the elaborated theologies that shape a community of faith, people often overlook the fact that elaborated theologies can become degenerate and deformed. Not just fragmentary theological utterances, but highly developed theologies and interconnections of theological reflection can prove to be false and deceptive. To be sure, every theology aims at certainty, correctness and truth. But no theology has a lock on the truth. For this reason elaborated theologies are not *eo ipso* a blessing. They can have devastating consequences, although they were developed and defended with the best of intentions.

We know that highly consistent, long-recognized theologies can undergird, transport and export bad ideologies. They may even become ideologies themselves. Precisely because elaborated theologies can acquire major formative influence, they can contribute not only to the strengthening, but also to the severe distortion of faith.² Today it belongs to the familiar forms of theological self-criticism to acknowledge that for centuries Christian theologies have supported patriarchal, chauvinistic, classist, and imperialistic attitudes. Moreover, we are beginning to see that particularly neo-Protestant theologies, by mixing and confusing "faith" with an empty religious certainty, have contributed to a systematic emptying out and individualization of religion in Christian churches. As the second millennium draws to a close, the classical mainline churches in the Western industrialized nations are suffering greatly from this problem.³ Specifically the systematically well-elaborated theologies, which

2 See Max Stackhouse, "The Sociology of Religion and the Theology of Society," *Social Compass* 37 (1990), 315-329, 325: "Of course religion can go sour and destroy social systems, just as can broken families, failed economies, violent regimes and meaningless cultural artificiality. It can, when badly formed, contribute to the destruction of these systems, just as its critics have claimed. Rotten religion can be sexually repressive, economically dysfunctional, politically oppressive and culturally ugly."

3 See William Schweiker and Michael Welker, *Integrity, Dignity, Truth. Beyond the Crisis of Christianity in the West* (forthcoming).

some regard as "theologies in the proper sense," can have highly problematic consequences. It is foolish and careless to regard highly developed theologies, which are developed within communities of faith and which demarcate these communities from their surroundings, as helpful and unproblematic across the board. Instead of pitting fragmentary theological initiatives against elaborated interconnections of thought and conviction, we have to address a more complicated constellation.

We gain access to this more complicated constellation when we see that there is a third sense in which we speak of theology and theologies. In this third sense we do not refer merely to a fragmentary intellectual and epistemic theological initiative, or merely to an elaborated interconnection of thought, but to a process that mediates between these two extremes. More precisely, we refer to a multiplicity of intellectual and epistemic processes that move back and forth between the two poles named above. These intellectual and epistemic processes become particularly clear in academic theology. For this reason many people equate theology and academic theology. However, this is not correct. To be sure, a relatively long period of education is necessary to become familiar with one or even diverse elaborated theologies, to penetrate them, to subject them to critical comparison, and to examine and test them. Such an education is hardly possible unless one's studies and vocation provide one the freedom to pursue it. But mere occupation with well-elaborated theologies can miss the decisive task of theology, if that occupation does not serve to promote both existential access to faith and the unfolding of the subject matter of faith, thereby serving to enhance theological labor "from below." This theological labor "from below," which can---but need not--aim at a comprehensive systematic theology--is by no means the privilege of academic theology. It is the task of every Christian--indeed in communities of faith outside of Christianity it is the task of every religious person--who wants to understand faith and who thereby confronts the question of truth.

When we speak of theology, then, we are faced with an interesting, complex, but not chaotic pluralism of forms which entails and relates in a multifarious way all three principle forms of theology we just described: a) a multiplicity of individual utterances about God and religious matters, where these utterances satisfy the minimal conditions named above; b) a multiplicity of relatively fleeting or relatively firm discursive unions, in which these utterances are communicated and developed--from the chance discussion about God to fixed established forms of common religious and spiritual education; c) a multiplicity of elaborated

interconnections of thought and conviction with regard to God, mostly in the form of theologies given written formulation; d) a multiplicity of individual and general efforts, methodically attuned to do comparative testing of the effective power of elaborated theologies, and to use these theologies to enhance the development of the many fragmentary theological initiatives; e) a multiplicity of individual and shared efforts striving intentionally for new, as yet unknown elaborated interconnections of theological thought and conviction.

We thus have before us an aggregation of relatively fixed and relatively fluid forms of theology: systemic forms, individual forms, forms growing out of associations, forms that privilege individual experiences, and forms that privilege shared convictions and established traditions. We need to pay attention to this pluralism--in the strict sense of that word--if we want to speak in a realistic way today of theology. This pluralism--which necessarily includes esteem for elaborated theologies, confessions, dogmatics and liturgies!--is by no means bad. In this pluralism, rightly understood, communities of faith can take God's vitality seriously. This pluralism of theological forms is not to be equated with either relativism or mere individualism.⁴ If this pluralism is not grasped, one-sided or confused or conflict-ridden conceptions of theology predominate. However, if it is understood, we can perceive in it the current chances for a revitalization of theology and piety both within and outside communities of faith.

Is There Theology in Public Discourse outside Communities of Faith?

On the basis of the differentiated conception of theology that we have developed, we have to answer this question in the affirmative. As soon as religious persons express themselves as such in content-related ways about God and their faith, are understood, and spur other persons to new and further utterances about God, there is also theology in public outside communities of faith. It is improbable that theologies in the sense of comprehensive interconnections of thought and conviction be elaborated in this way, unless communities of faith make themselves known or public regions becomes communities of faith. So the presence of diverse elaborated theologies is sure to remain restricted to communities of faith and to theological institutions.

4 See Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1995).

If we understand "publics" as ensembles of individuals whose attention and interest move them out of their latent state, and who repeatedly emerge in new forms, we will encounter in actual publics outside communities of faith only rudimentary and fragmentary theological discourses. But this does not mean that these publics and their theological discourses and forms of discourse are unimportant--quite the contrary. For example, the great cultural power of the political and media publics has major repercussions for communities of faith. Conversely, the rudimentary theological discourses outside communities of faith present these communities not only with abundant missionary opportunities, but also with abundant challenges to engage in religious criticism and self-criticism.

Again and again there have been attempts to diagnose or develop minimalist religious forms of thought supposed to be decisive for large societal publics, or at least for the realm of politics, in order to be able to specify in this way an apparently comprehensive theology for large publics outside communities of faith. This theme has been the subject of repeated polemics under the heading of "civil religion." In the 19th and 20th centuries in the sphere of influence of the mainline Christian churches we can observe at least five forms that have shaped not only the theologies within communities of faith, but also the religious mentalities and the capacity for theological expression beyond the confines of those communities.

First is classical theism with its belief in God as a transcendent agent or personality who brought forth and defines himself and everything else.⁵ This theism has found expression in formulae such as God as the "ultimate point of reference" (Gordon Kaufman), God as the "ground of being" (Paul Tillich and others), God as "first cause (in many popular conceptions of creation), and God as the "whence of our absolute dependence" (Friedrich Schleiermacher). Second, a religious holism has repeatedly been put forward that always presumes there is a relation to God and to religious themes whenever the conversation turns to "the whole" and to any form of "wholeness." Third, we find abundant forms of religiously imbued moralism, be they conservative or progressive. Religious thought specifies itself in a spectrum of particular

5 For a strong critique of this religious form and power see Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik II,2: Die Lehre von Gott* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1959); Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: MacMillan, 1927); Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie*, (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1993); Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992); Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality: Theological and Biblical Perspectives*, Warfield Lectures 1991 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998).

moral expectations and demands, and moral communication gains emphasis through an accompanying religious tone--a religious "second coding," as sociologists put it.

In our century, two further forms inside and outside communities of faith have had a great effect: namely, religious dialogism or personalism, and existentialism. It is remarkable that religious dialogism has flourished with the introduction of electronic mass media and totalitarian states, on the one hand, and pluralistic societies, on the other. Religious dialogism sees the relation between God, human beings and creation as an intimate "I-Thou relation," and attempts (in vain) to articulate all religious matters in this form. Influential Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber, and leading representatives of so-called dialectical theology like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, have contributed both indirectly and directly to the fact that dialogism has at times overshadowed moralism and existentialism as a theological form of thought in church and culture.

Finally, religious existentialism has been even more influential, especially in publics outside communities of faith. Existentialism draws the theistic God or the great "Thou" of dialogism completely into interiority and self-reference. "God" is the "other" in me, in my innermost certainty. This form has become extremely powerful. It has put itself forward as the purest faith, as pure certainty that takes particularly seriously God's ineffability and God's proximity to every human being. In truth this form can become the death of theology because it reduces faith to mere inner certainty, and deprives it of content and the capacity for expression and communication. With compelling logic, this religious form destroys theological communication inside and outside communities of faith. On the one hand, it seems to open rapid and immediate access to God in the same way for every person: Go inside yourself and your feelings, and you will find an "other" in yourself that stands over against you, yet at the same time is infinitely familiar to you. But in truth this form only draws attention to empty certainty and self-certainty as such. It puts an end to theological communication where it begins.⁶

From these observations we can draw a first teaching for the tasks of ecclesial and academic theology in contemporary multi-religious and pluralistic public life. To be sure, there are many initiatives toward theological communication in publics outside communities of faith.

6 See Schweiker and Welker, *Integrity*, fn 3.

There is even a series of overarching forms that shape this communication, and in which this communication in fact takes place. But it can not be the task of ecclesial and academic theology to content itself with these initiatives and forms. Still less can it be the task of ecclesial and academic theology to search out whichever of these forms happen to have the strongest resonance at a particular time, and to supply them with powerful reinforcement. If ecclesial and academic theology does not want to pave the way for a religious communication becoming captive to ideology outside communities of faith--but then recursively within them as well--it must continually critically examine the "major publicly effective religious forms." It must become much more sensitive to the fact that we can also develop and circulate self-destructive religious forms: for example, existential religious forms that reduce faith to mere subjective certainty, systematically emptying faith and condemning it to speechlessness, and then call this "mysticism" and celebrate it as true piety. But where are we to find alternatives and ways out of this dilemma?

Theology and Public Discourse

In the 1970s and early 1980s David Tracy powerfully drew attention to the fact that theology operates in three different environments, with different expectations that demand different sensitivities and forms of expression from theology. He called all these environments "publics": the public of society, the public of the academy, and the public of the church.⁷ This differentiation was a great achievement. It signified a progress in how theology deals with pluralism inside and outside the churches. At the same time, the homogenizing notion of "publics" has not allowed the particularities of the ecclesial community and the academic community to come to clear expression over against the media, political, and other publics.⁸ Moreover, the specification of only three publics did not sufficiently illuminate either theology's relations to other "societal subsystems" (N. Luhmann), such as education, family, and the judicial system, or the effects of the subsystems of the market and the media on academic theology, the church, and other subsystems and publics.⁹ The analysis of societal,

7 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3ff; Tracy, "Defending the Public Character of Theology", in *Theologians in Transition. The Christian Century "How My Mind Has Changed" Series*, ed. James M. Wall (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 113ff.

8 I owe this insight to John Polkinghorne.

9 In his own works and his critique of other positions Tracy has shown a particular sensitivity to the public effects of art in general and of literature in particular. More complex analyses of the interdependencies between societal subsystems and the publics generated by them are offered by classic sociological authors such

cultural and religious pluralism thus stopped halfway because the formal interconnection constitutive of pluralism--namely, a plurality of systemic forms, a multiplicity of societal associations, and their differences and interdependencies¹⁰--did not come clearly into view. Again and again, pluralism and postmodern polyindividualism were confused. This confusion showed itself both in the practice of equating pluralism with "plurality," "diversity" and "multiplicity,"¹¹ and in the diffuse enthusiasm or diffuse anxieties aroused by this confusion.

Academic and ecclesial theology must overcome both the naive notion of the "one public" (which is still customary particularly in European societies) and the homogenizing notion of societal, academic and ecclesial "publics." To be sure, church and science (*Wissenschaft*) comport themselves as publics, and they naturally have a multiplicity of public tasks. But if church and science become mere publics in the strict sense of the word--large ensembles of individuals whose attention and interest move them out of their latent state, and who repeatedly emerge in new forms--they have entered into a stage of decay. They then have given themselves up to the forces of the market, of the media, and of resonance to a much greater degree than Tracy would like to acknowledge with his view that "public" stands for "oriented toward truth." Theology must develop Tracy's concept further and, in so doing, learn how different communities and publics with their different normativities and codes can be both more clearly differentiated and more clearly related to each other.

Theology has a pressing need to increase its competence in societal and cultural criticism. This increased competence does not come about by theology simply taking over a specific theory of culture and society. Within communities of faith, theology must heighten its sensitivity to the fact that human beings do not develop theological convictions and questions free of the influence of the environments, subsystems and associations in which they live, in which they commit themselves to action, and by which they are normatively shaped.

as Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann See Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme, Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984); *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988); *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990); *Das Recht der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993); *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995); *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984). Important preliminary works on the themes of religion, family and media of society are to be found in *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977); *Liebe als Passion. Zur Codierung von Intimität*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982); *Die Realität der Massenmedien* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996).

¹⁰ See Welker, "... And Also Upon the Menservants and the Maidservants in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit," *Soundings* 78 (1995): 49-67; Wolfgang Huber, "Christliche Freiheit in der freiheitlichen Gesellschaft", *Evangelische Theologie* 56 (1996): 99-116.

¹¹ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

Theology must also awaken a critical and self-critical sensitivity to these environmental influences. These normative powers separate and alienate human beings from one another. Whoever is defined primarily by family life and by questions of education will develop a different worldview and a differently colored piety than the person who is occupied on a daily basis with judicial problems and with politics. The person who lives on a daily basis primarily with the rationalities of the market and the media will be occupied with still different questions. At the same time, these normative powers bind human beings together across time periods, traditions and cultures. Theology is faced here with a whole wave of tasks in self-education and the education of others, if it does not wish its words and its deeds to be increasingly beside the point with regard to public discourse outside communities of faith.¹²

In this effort to increase their competence in societal and cultural criticism, what preserves theology within communities of faith from being diverted from their actual content and object, and from losing sight of speech about God? This question can not be answered universally, but only for specific communities of faith. The theologies of the Christian communities of faith have been given an excellent basis on which to school their familiarity with speech about God in an abundance of contexts, in both their differences and their interconnections. The biblical traditions, which developed over a period of 1500 years, offer an abundance of contexts with very different exemplary existential, moral, political and cultural misfortunes and adversities in which faith in God has been formulated and communicated. From the Exodus to Paul's political sensibility, the biblical traditions document theologically oriented life precisely in interaction with diverse "situations in life." From the presentation of creation as the interdependence of cosmic, biological, cultural and religious processes, by way of the numerous reflections on the conflict-laden relations between Israel and the nations, Jews and Gentiles, and the church and Israel, to the description of the church as the body of Christ with many members and to the logic of the "pouring out of the Spirit," we encounter an abundance of creative theological contents and forms that must be repeatedly rediscovered. A theology schooled in biblical theology will develop and practice a sensitivity to good simplifications and to deceptive ones, to necessary ways of rendering something plausible and to false populism, to indispensable concentration and clarity and to bad reductionism.

12 See the reference to "the necessity of a theology of society" in Stackhouse, *Sociology of Religion*, 326ff.

Over and over again, it happens that when theology takes its orientation from the biblical traditions, the reductionistic systematic forms to which theology is captive both inside and outside communities of faith are broken open. Abstract theism, dialogism and existentialism must face the question of whether and to what extent they are really speaking of a loving creator and of God's creativity, whether they are able to cast light on the divinity of the risen Christ, whether they make it possible to talk about the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and--throughout it all--whether they enable people to call upon, honor, experience and think the triune God. Dogmatically, we need a renewed understanding of the living God--an understanding that, in the perception of many persons today, classical theism has hindered more than helped. But there is also a pressing necessity for a differentiated understanding of the word of God that makes it possible to bring the various dimensions (Christ is the one Word of God, sacred scripture as God's word, God's word in the form of law and gospel) into a consistent interconnection.¹³

Theology must continually resist and work against the temptation to generalize. This is true both in theology's orientation to its theological subject matter and in its effort to develop competence in societal and cultural criticism. Over against all versions of reductionistic generalization and of preoccupation with global integration,¹⁴ theology must continually seek to awaken delight in the specificity of faith's content. It must set an example by cultivating mentalities and forms in which both the certainty of faith and delight in faith's focus on its content and subject matter not only are awakened, but on the basis of the question of truth mutually challenge and stimulate each other. This occurs in the discursive process of coming to theological understanding.

It sounds strange to demand theology to cultivate discursive theological understanding. But this demand stands in conflict with systematic and practical theologies that, usually unintentionally, work toward holding people in theological immaturity, both inside and outside communities of faith. Which theologies contribute to keeping people theological immature? One can rightly point to theologies that condemn "the laity" merely to listen to

13 See Welker and David Willis, eds., *Towards the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

14 See my critique of Hans Küng in "God's Power and Powerlessness: Biblical Theology and the Search for a World Ethos in a Time of Shortlived Moral Markets," in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 39-55.

"the teaching church" or, put more mildly, release them from their theological responsibility. One can also point to theologies that, working from a generalizing mentality, deform and undermine both faith's certainty and its focus on its content and subject matter. With monohierarchical patterns of thought, with dualistic images of the world, with an ethos reaching no further than the realm of "I and Thou," with vague moralisms, and with an equally vague rhetoric of plurality, numerous theologies have contributed to a situation where faith, if it dares at all to express itself publicly, simply talks past contemporary culture and a halfway-educated common sense. Changing this state of affairs is one of the primary tasks of the theology that proceeds from communities of faith.

What is the guiding conception that can replace the bad orientation toward generalization and global integration? I think that the struggle for an exemplary orientation toward its subject matter distinguishes that theology arising from communities of faith which in the future can exercise a beneficial influence in public discourse outside communities of faith. Without surrendering the high esteem for personal certainty of faith, theology must learn to discover, and teach others to discover, faith's power to provide material orientation. This exemplary orientation to theology's subject matter must prove itself in turning to the decisive testimonies of the tradition, and in sensitive engagement with the burning questions that our contemporary cultures and societies pose.