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CHRISTOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT WESTERN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

For the most part of the 20th century, Christology, seen from the perspective of Western theology, was in a most complicated or even dismal state. In several ways theology itself was responsible for this development as it distorted and blocked serious Christological thought. There was a broad consensus in the academic community that we have no knowledge of the pre-Easterly life of Jesus Christ. The so-called “new quest for the historical Jesus,” now known as the “second quest for the historical Jesus,” resulted in a total historical skepticism which claimed that we do not know the historical Jesus, but have him only in “legendary paintings.” On this basis – that is, without clear perspectives on the historical Jesus – the problem arose that the crucified, resurrected and elevated Christ could not gain contours either.

In addition, the cross of Christ was associated with the suffering God only. Bonhoeffer’s powerful statement that “only the suffering God can help,” was repeated by leading theologians of different schools. It often seemed to carry the message: “It is only through His suffering that God can help.” But it was not clear at all how this help was to be conceived of. Finally, there was a constant battle about the resurrection which was perceived as resuscitation and reanimation, an understanding affirmed

by fundamentalists and ridiculed by skeptics. Behind the heated battle between the two equally misleading positions it remained totally unclear how a merely resuscitated Jesus could become the Lord and Savior of the world. Both sides, existentialists and supernaturalists, became easy targets for a critique of religion in general and of resurrection thought in particular.

The last 30 years, however, have ended this agonizing situation. A “third quest for the historical Jesus” started to change the landscape of Jesus research. The discussion of the theology of the cross in connection with work on the historical Jesus and his time, a period dominated by the global Roman power, opened new perspectives on the revelatory potential of the crucifixion.¹ Moreover, the discourse of systematic theology with biblical scholars on the one hand and with scientists on the other led to freeing insights into the spiritual reality of the resurrection.²

In the following, I propose that in the light of these developments we can and should, first, once again focus on the teaching of the *munus triplex Christi* – the threefold office of Christ – in order to renew

1 Cf. Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, translated by John Hoffmeyer (London: SPCK and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000; second printing 2004); Dirk Smit, “‘... Under Pontius Pilate’: On Living Cultural Memory and Christian Confession,” in *Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today? Pathways to Contemporary Christology*, ed. Andreas Schuele and Günter Thomas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 19-49; and his *Essays in Public Theology: Collected Essays 1*, ed. E. Conradie (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007).

2 Cf. *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000); *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert Russell and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); *Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung*, ed. Hans-Joachim Eckstein and Michael Welker (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2002, 4th ed. 2010).

christological thinking in the West and beyond. The differentiation of the three offices or the threefold office, which can occasionally be found in the church fathers, reached the status of a dogmatic teaching in Calvin's *Institutes*, book two, chapter 15. Here Calvin states: "To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all at three things in Him, the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood." Calvin develops a biblically-based teaching of Christ's threefold saving activity, first the prophetic office, second the kingly office, and finally the priestly office.³

Edmund Schlink observed in his *Ecumenical Dogmatics*⁴ that the spreading of the doctrine of the threefold office of Christ is a unique ecumenical phenomenon. It reached its dogmatic shape not before, but after the separation of the churches and yet it became common teaching in the different confessional traditions. Through Johann Gerhard's nine-volume work *Loci theologici* (1610-1622, IV, 15), this teaching was taken up by Lutheran dogmatics and transported into the 19th century by Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*. In the 20th century it reached virtually all confessions and churches. Josef Scheeben⁵ implemented it in the Catholic traditions. Vatican II made ample use of it, and also in Orthodox dogmatics (cf. Schlink) it gained an important place. In an emergent way it became ecumenical consensus not only in the

3 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vol., The Library of Christian Classics XX and XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I, 494-503.

4 Edmund Schlink, *Ökumenische Dogmatik: Grundzüge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 414f.

5 Matthias Scheeben, *Handbuch katholischer Dogmatik*, ed. Carl Feckes (Freiburg: Herder, 2nd ed. 1954), part 5, 2.

Reformation churches, but also in the broad run from the Orthodox to the Pentecostal churches⁶. The teaching of the threefold office of Christ allows us to focus clearly on the *public Christ* in different domains of life, and it allows us to differentiate and to relate Christ's presence in ecclesial, political and moral contexts.⁷

Two additional moves are crucial in order to gain the full impact of this dogmatic orientation. The *first* of these further moves is already present in Calvin's *Institutes*. With reference to Is. 61:1-2 and Luke 4:18, Calvin states: "We see that he (scil. Christ) was anointed by the Spirit ... not only for himself that he might carry on the office of teaching, but for the whole body that the power of the Spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the Gospel" (496). Calvin stressed an insight which had already become most important in early Christianity: Jesus Christ is not only the one on whom the Spirit of God *rests*, Jesus Christ *pours* the Spirit to constitute his post-Easterly body. He pours the Spirit in order to live in his witnesses and to allow his witnesses to live in him.⁸

6 Cf. Edmund Schlink. 413f; or more specific Frank D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), Chap. 6 and 9, esp. 169, 174ff. and 277; for an orthodox example see the analysis of Staniloae by Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002), 224f.; and Panagiotes Trempelas, *Dogmatik der orthodoxen katholischen Kirche (in Greek)* (Athens: Zoe, 1959), 143-203.

7 This has been a key concern of Douglas Meeks in many of his publications from early on. Cf. *Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era*, ed. with Max L. Stackhouse, Peter L. Berger, and Dennis P. McCann (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1995; cf. also *Politische Theologie. Neuere Geschichte und Potenziale*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Klaus Tanner, Michael Welker, *Theologische Anstöße 1* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011 = Engl.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

8 Cf. James Dunn, "Towards the Spirit of Christ: The Emergence of the Distinctive Features of Christian Pneumatology," in: *The Work of the Spirit*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids:

The *second* additional move is concerned with the different offices of Christ. How do we *avoid all sorts of arbitrary constructions of the three offices*? How do we avoid the danger that all sorts of religious and moral ideas shape our view of the offices of Christ according to our own possibly contingent desires and needs? In short, how do we avoid the problem that Christ is functionalized or even ideologized? In my view, the most helpful recommendations⁹ propose that we orient the three offices of Christ with respect to his pre-Easterly life, his cross, and his resurrection.

What can the pre-Easterly life of Jesus contribute to the teaching of the three offices? The clear awareness of the multidimensionality of the real life of Jesus Christ opened up totally new potentials in the search for the historical Jesus and in the orientation derived from it. The search for the historical Jesus and for the radiation of his life, for the constitution of faith and fellowship has to take into account the likelihood that Jesus had a different impact on the rural population of Galilee than on the urban population of Jerusalem. It must consider the likelihood that all those who resisted the Roman occupation and wished to hold the Mosaic Law or the temple cult in high esteem received Jesus differently from those who wanted to embrace the Roman culture. We have to consider

Eerdmans, 2006), 3-26.

⁹ Cf. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd ed. 2004), 186f.; and Michael Welker, *Gottes Offenbarung. Christologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2nd ed. 2012) = Engl.: *God the Revealed: Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

the likelihood that those who experienced Jesus' healing and acceptance gave different testimonies than those whose main impression of Jesus was formed in the conflicts with the religious and political forces in Jerusalem. It is the life of the historical Jesus itself which gives rise to and nourishes the multiplicity of memories, expectations and experiences. It is the pre-Easterly life of Jesus which leads to different images of Jesus which stand in tension and even in conflict with one another. This refined view of what is historical enables us to see that the desperate reductionistic search for the lowest common denominator is a mistaken path. We cannot treat Jesus like a stone in the desert. Historically important and revealing are precisely the differences and tensions among clusters of biblical testimony which, however, are in themselves coherent and consistent.

We now see that the real life of Christ radiates into different contexts and thus generates different perspectives on him. One of these perspectives emphasizes the diaconical dimensions. As John Dominic Crossan¹⁰ and others put it, Jesus saw the basic needs of human beings, i.e., nourishment, health and mutual acceptance. His practice of love and forgiveness, table-fellowship and an egalitarian ethos actually characterizes his *kingly office*. This king, who is also a brother and friend, even a poor person and an outcast, shapes the constant movement towards radical democracy characterized by love and care, mutual acceptance, recognition and respect. In the power of the Spirit, the

10 Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991); idem, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

discipleship of Christ, consciously and unconsciously, gives shape to a reign of God-movement, which has a gigantic impact on the political, social and cultural life across the earth.¹¹

The constant striving for mandatory education and health-care in many societies today has to be seen in this light. By the power of the Spirit this office of Christ involves people across the globe and across the centuries. It constitutes one of the three shapes (drei Gestalten) of his reign. However, this orientation alone is not sufficient. It can even lead to Christological and theological distortions. The prophetic office and the priestly office are of equal importance – indeed, the three offices have to be respected in their perichoretic union.

How do we have to conceive of the *prophetic office* and its relation to the cross? The cross of Christ witnesses to a most dramatic situation of the human condition. We are not only bound to finitude, fragility and the unavoidable brutality of life, all of which lead to the groaning of creation and to the search for God's guidance and God's goals with the world, with the human species and its fellow creatures. The deeper and much more dramatic message of the cross is that the good orders and institutions which should support human life, societies and cultures, that even religion and even the church can be misused, can be distorted and transformed into powers of sin, powers of the self-jeopardy of humankind and their disconnection from God.

¹¹ Cf. *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood Press, 1995).

In his important book *The Crucified God* Jürgen Moltmann differentiated the message of the cross of Christ by saying that Jesus died in conflict with the Jewish religion as a blasphemer, in conflict with the Roman Empire as an insurgent, and in tension with God in God-forsakenness.¹² I think that this differentiation is most helpful, although it does not cover all the dimensions witnessed to in the biblical message of the cross. Jesus indeed dies in conflict with the Jewish religion, he dies in conflict with the world power Rome, but he also dies in conflict with two types of law – the Jewish and the Roman law –, and he dies in conflict with public opinion: “And they cried out again: ‘Crucify him’ [...] and they shouted all the more: ‘Crucify him’” (Mark 15:13ff.; Matthew 27:22f.; Luke 23:21f.; John 19:6.15). Jews and gentiles, friends and foes, indeed the whole world conspires in its resistance against the saving presence of God.

Despite this dramatic message, however, the cross of Christ is a revelatory and salvific event in more than one way. In light of the resurrection and of the work of the pre-Easterly Jesus it is an event which marks a turning-point in the world and in the salvation of humanity and all creation. It is not without reason that the cross of Christ stands at the center of the church and stands for the center of Christian faith. Christian piety loses its gravity, its weight and its orientation when faith no longer comes from the cross and from the crucified Christ. The cross of Christ reveals the situation of global hopelessness with no escape from it. It is a situation in which the so-called enemies, the

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), chapter IV.

relative global public and even the resistance fighters—i.e., the disciples—conspire and are implicated.¹³ The situation of God-forsakenness here is not only one of individual and collective disorientation. Rather, this situation of God-forsakenness displays itself in global public anomie, in global public chaos and in a triumph of sin, all of which pervert the good forces of life. Religion, law, politics, and public opinion work together and bring about this situation. The cross reveals the abysmal situation that in the name of justice and the good, in the name of truth and salvation innocent people can be ostracized, tortured and killed. The cross reveals the law in all its dimensions under the power of sin. It thus reveals the radical difference between God and humanity. The cross does not reveal the absolute “death of God,” but indeed the serious possibility that from this point on God is dead to human beings.

In the light and darkness of the cross of Christ, the *prophetic office* gains its shape and its depth. A constant critical and self-critical search for truth and justice is generated, and a public proclamation and education is connected with it. This prophetic office is not limited to the realms of the church. In partly or fully secularized forms it captures truth- and justice-seeking communities in the academy, in the legal system, in education and in civil societies.¹⁴ The prophetic office can even turn against religious communities and churches. It can become executed in most dramatic forms up to the level of non-violent resistance and suffering. The unfolding of the message given by both offices of

13 Cf. Michael Welker and Dirk Smit, footnote 1.

14 Michael Welker and John Polkinghorne, *Faith in the Living God. A Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2001).

Christ, the kingly and the prophetic ones, opens new perspectives for a biblically oriented and realistic christology and ecclesiology. It also offers a great challenge and task for a global public theology – a theology that many of our colleagues are in search of today.

Finally, we have to focus on the *priestly office* of Christ, the priestly shape of the reign of God. This office has all too often been limited to the topics of sacrifice and atonement. I propose to seek and to unfold its orienting power in the light of the resurrection witnesses. The fragmentary and almost modest character of the witnesses to the resurrection is striking. That may be the reason why the arts have had such difficulty in depicting the event of the resurrection. The biblical witnesses contradict the few attempts in the fine arts, such as the Isenheim Altar, to represent Jesus the *victor* as an icon of the resurrection. Rather, the biblical texts speak of testimonies which on the one hand are characterized by personal authenticity and certainty of the experience and on the other hand by its fragmentary, fleeting and perspectival character which easily invites doubts and necessitates the search for truth.

Francis Fiorenza has emphasized that this character of testimony, fragmented and perspectival, is indispensable to the resurrection witnesses. He assumes that these necessarily multiple testimonies push towards metaphorical speech when they refer to each other and seek to thematize the complex reality which they present perspectively. Above all he has called attention to the fact that these testimonies seek to be

anchored in actual and symbolic actions which become basic ritual forms of the early church.¹⁵

The testimonies to the resurrection are expressed in address, in the breaking of the bread, in the greeting of peace, in the opening of the scriptures and in other ritualizable actions and signs, which form the basic life of the early church. This somehow fragile theophany, mediated through proclamation, the opening of the *messiah*-secret in the scriptures and the celebration of Holy Communion, the sending of the disciples and the command to baptize – this is what is witnessed to by the resurrection accounts of the biblical traditions. This view paves the way towards an understanding of the reign of God and of the reign of the resurrected Christ as an emergent reality. Out of a structured and definite multiplicity of witnesses the resurrected Lord edifies and shapes his church. Powerful monohierarchical forms in the history of the church with its splendid feasts and great cathedrals should not tempt us to overlook the fact that the power of Christ's Spirit is operative in a different way. Emergent processes with a polyphony of witnesses to the triune God's creative presence constitute the reign of Christ in his evolving church.

With the breaking of the bread and the disclosure of the *messiah*-secret the resurrection witnesses clearly relate to the second dimension, the cross of Christ and its deep conflict with what scripture often calls "the

¹⁵ Francis Fiorenza, "The Resurrection of Jesus in Roman Catholic Fundamental Theology," in *Resurrection – An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 213ff.

world.” In each celebration of Holy Communion a deeply distressing memory of this dimension of Christ’s life and suffering is re-enacted. Jesus celebrates communion with Peter who repeatedly denies him, with the disciples who fall asleep although he has asked them to stay awake with him and who finally forsake him and flee. He even celebrates communion with Judas, although he speaks the words of woe against him. The breaking of the bread indicates Jesus’ and God’s deepest merciful care for those who disconnect themselves from the presence of God. It shows the depth of the divine forgiveness of sins.¹⁶

Here we encounter the sacrificial love of God, who continues to forgive us and save us despite the victimization of Jesus Christ by the humans.¹⁷ The priestly office clearly relates to the kingly office. It witnesses to God’s will that the humans constitute not only symbolic table-fellowship but also a community of mutual acceptance, mutual care, of justice and peace. But the priestly office reveals and conveys even more than that. It reveals a God who shows his mercy not only by healing and restituting human life, but rather by elevating and ennobling it. In this way the priestly office serves the cognition, adoration and glorification of the true and living God, who shows his mercy by elevating creation to divine glory. With the priestly office the definitely ecclesial responsibilities and loyalties of a christologically oriented theology come into view. In this dimension we stand in continuity with CA VII and the reformation catechisms.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, chapters 2 and 10.

¹⁷ Sigrud Brandt, *Opfer als Gedächtnis. Auf dem Weg zu einer befreienden theologischen Rede von Opfer* (Münster/Hamburg/Berlin: LIT, 2001).

This does not mean that the main task of a theology which focuses on the priestly office would be to strengthen a specific institutionalized form of the church for its own sake. The main task of the priestly office and the priestly shape of the reign is to witness in proclamation, liturgy, teaching and mission to the sustaining, saving and ennobling God. This God is also present in the loving kingly office and in the truth- and justice-seeking prophetic office and shape of the divine reign. With respect to the threefold shape of the reign of Christ we can affirm Christ's divinity without mere metaphysical speculations. The resurrected and elevated Christ reveals that God seeks nothing less than winning his creatures for a share in his own life and glory. The priestly office conveys this salvific message and revelation. At the latest we have to notice at this point that theology has to rise to the challenge to understand itself not only as a contextual theology, not only as a public theology, not only as a theology concerned with *contemporary* world Christianity. In the light of the priestly office of Christ theology should try to become a truly ecumenical and eschatological theology – without losing its concrete moral, political and global responsibilities and virtues.¹⁸

¹⁸ The book edited by M. Douglas Meeks, *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, Books (Nashville: Abingdon/ Kingswood Press, 2000), seeks a similar approach in a Trinitarian orientation.