

# Theo-Politics?

Conversing with Barth in Western  
and Asian Contexts

Edited by  
Markus Höfner

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## Civil Societies and Biblical Value Systems in the West

Michael Welker

The towering theologians in the 1930s and 1940s in Germany were, at least from our perspective today, Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). For both great theologians the strong concentration on God's revelation in Jesus Christ is formative.<sup>1</sup> A strong Christological orientation of faith is directed against aggressive nationalism, political ideology, and the glorification of racist hegemony and war, against tyrannical suppression and persecution of countless fellow human beings. The Barmen Declaration and its strong political emanations stand for this exemplary move in "theopolitics"—if one wants to use this term for political resistance in the name of the living God and the resurrected Christ. Are there any theo-political challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century that require moving beyond these central theological positions and the figures of thought and orientation connected with them?

The twentieth century brought a growing ecumenical consciousness to the Christian churches, a differentiated sensitivity to liberation theologies and the striving for social justice and protection of human dignity, and finally strong ecological concerns, locally and globally. It generated a continuously intensified search for a pneumatological grounding of Christian theology<sup>2</sup> and sensitivity to global developmental processes and global interdependencies. The last decades brought nothing less than a revolutionary development in the digital exploration of the world and in highly accelerated and intensified global communication. All these developments have strong repercussions on moral moods and also on many forms of human faith and piety.

We do not only face, like Barth and Bonhoeffer, dominant and dangerous ideological powers, centralized political forces with enormous impacts of brutality, endangerment, and suppression. We do not only have to ask with both of them for more convincing spiritual orientations than a subjectivist

faith traditions, which have and still shape civil societal motivations, calling for action.

### WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

It is not easy to define the contours and texture of so-called civil societies. Since they are also often called the "third sector," it might be tempting to approach them with the so-called three-sector theory. The economic three-sector hypothesis has been developed by the British and Australian economist Colin Clark and the French economist Jean Fourastié.<sup>4</sup> It says that in societies with low per capita income the primary sector deals with the extraction of raw materials and has 70 percent of the workforce. The secondary sector with 20 percent of the workforce deals with manufacturing, and the tertiary sector with 10 percent of the workforce deals with services. Countries in a more advanced phase of development with a median national income shift to a ratio of 40 percent primary, 40 percent secondary, and 20 percent tertiary sector. In countries with a high national income, the sector of services dominates the output of the economy. With only 10 percent of the workforce in the primary sector, 20 percent manufacturing, and 70 percent of services, we see a reversal of the ratios.

It is very likely that the transformation of a society into one dominated by the services workforce is favorable for the emergence and development of a civil society. Therefore, the three-sector theory should not be ignored in reflections on the emergence of civil societies. The term "third sector," however, indicates here the differentiation of this sector of public life from the state and from the market. In addition, it is differentiated from the family, which is particularly important to take into account when the family is very large, rich and influential, functioning as a social network.

A civil society operates in a multitude of associations in which people come together and cooperate voluntarily, as a rule unpaid and without interests in economic profit and achievement of public careers (thus the difference from the market and politics). Although some civil societal associations follow local or regional interests, the active respect or rather the promotion of central societal values and the "common good" should be visible. An association under the motto "Get rid of foreigners!" cannot claim to be a civil societal association; neither can a group of friends that builds swimming pools for each other. I would even argue that bowling, stamp-collecting, and canary bird-breeding clubs should not be called civil societal associations. The mere differentiation from state and market and the "advancement of shared interests"<sup>5</sup> are not enough.

faith or a theism of "absolute dependence" could offer. We are also aware that dualized and dualizing forms of theological and political orientations seem to be too weak to grasp and represent our contemporary political, religious, and moral situation.

Today, we see ourselves surrounded by a very dense network of constant media signals from all over the world, witnessing countless contexts of violence and terror, suffering and distress; the constant self-alarming of the global community surrounds us in many voices. For many people, this situation brings into question any belief in and talk of faith in a mighty and merciful God. Bonhoeffer's message in his famous letters from prison was: "only the suffering God can help!" Following the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Moltmann spoke of the "crucified God." But how can the suffering and crucified God help in a world full of violence and unequal distribution of suffering and pain among human beings?

It belongs to the great challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century to recognize the saving and ennobling power of God at work in the Holy Spirit and in the inconspicuous reign of Christ. At the same time, we have to see that the powers of the cosmos and of nature are not salvific. The creation, called "good" in the first chapter of the Bible, is indeed TOB, life-furthering, but it is not paradise, and it is not divine. Earthly life is not salvific—it lives at the expense of other life and at the same time it is frail and finite. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead was right in stating: "life is robbery."<sup>3</sup> Nature shows an abundance of order and beauty, but it is also full of powers of self-endangerment and self-destruction. And human beings can use the freedom and capacities given to them to intensify and accelerate these powers of self-destruction and self-endangerment in irresponsible and deeply frightening ways. The biblical traditions call this abuse sin.

If we do not want to encourage illusionary or cynical attitudes toward this real constitution of nature and world, we have to strive for an honest creation theology and faith, and we have to focus on the powers of God, which does not transport us into a dream world, but wants to orient, sustain, save, and ennoble us in a world of frailty, finitude, endangerment, and self-endangerment under the power of sin.

At the same time, we should focus on real societal, social, cultural, and political conditions in our environments if we do not want to deal with illusions of "theo-politics" and all sorts of moral wishful thinking. In the following, we will therefore start with a concentration on forms of societal organization in the Western world, called "civil society." A sketch follows of some basic features of civil society in Germany and its connection to religious and ecclesial impulses in social and societal life. We will finally ask for formative symbolisms and normative configurations in biblical and Christian

On the other hand, the civil society should not only be associated with the so-called "new social movements" that have gained enormous national and international visibility since the 1970s and are very often connected with political protest: the associations and movements for human rights, for equality, the rights of women, minority rights, against racism, the environmental movements and groups, again local and global, and the movements for the protection of animals gain a clear visibility and clear contrast over against injustice and careless politics and ecologically brutal economic interests. But the concerns of the civil societies go beyond those conventionally considered to revolve around human rights, social justice, and development of a concept of improving people's lives.

It is therefore quite clear that organized activities concerning nonprofit sports, nonprofit activities to improve fellow citizens' health and education, and nonprofit work for schools and kindergartens fall in the realm of civil society activities. Nonprofit work for the conservation of the arts and architectural treasures, for the development and presentation of musical skills, unpaid work in public libraries and museums—all this belongs to the spectrum of civil societal engagements. A whole cluster of values emerges as guiding all these activities: a mutual respect and the banning of coercive force against fellow human beings, affirmation of the state of law, respect for human rights and for the rights of freedom, public openness to the activities and rules of democratic participation, this search for justice and truth and the engagement for an open society that accepts a plurality of interests and tolerance for different styles of life, worldviews, and traditions of faith.

### CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGION IN GERMANY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM AS A CONCRETE MODEL AND EXAMPLE

To a great extent German civil society is organized in associations and unions called "Vereine." About 600,000 registered *Vereine* exist in Germany today, six times more than fifty years ago. In addition, the country has 16,000 foundations, many of them with capital below 500,000 EUR. About one-third of the population is seen to be active in all sorts of engagement in civil society. With these figures Germany holds a middle rank compared to other European countries.

Ranked in terms of the quantity of participating members, the key areas seem to be:

- sports and social activities
- health and healthcare

- church and religion
- culture, music, and education
- engagement for the elderly
- engagement for children and youth
- political, environmental, and social interest groups
- local civic engagements, fire departments and emergency services, and so

on

In terms of political and media influences as well as international interconnectedness, the ranking, of course, looks very different. A few searches on the internet can provide a strong impression of the many German civil societal associations, globally connected, active in human-rights issues, anti-discrimination and equality concerns, working for ecological issues and the protection of specific environments. The German union for the protection of animals, to give just one example, has 750 local unions with 500 homes for animals and has more than 800,000 members.

The third largest area of civil societal engagement in Germany comprises churches and religious communities. This is partly due to the presence of six welfare associations (*Wohlfahrtsverbände*), five of which are very large, one Protestant and one Roman Catholic; only the Association of the Jews is a small one. The Roman Catholic *Caritas* has 560,000 employees and an equal number of volunteer workers, and it covers an enormous number of social societal activities. Of a similar size is the Protestant *Diakonie* with 450,000 employees and 700,000 voluntary and unpaid coworkers involved. The large secular welfare associations are also most impressive as civil societal powers. They have half a million employees altogether and many, many volunteers: The German Red Cross, Arbeiterwohlfahrt and Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband, with many big associations such as the German AIDS Society, German Cancer Society, German Lifesaving Society, German Youth Hostel Organization, German Homes for Children, SOS Children's Villages, Pro Familia, and so on. As can be seen, there are loose boundaries between civil societal organizations and the organizations of the large welfare associations with employed and paid members, partly supported by state funds and tax privileges.

The strong connection of ecclesial and diaconal organizations is not only quantitatively most impressive, but is also an important breeding ground for civil societal value systems and forms of organization. Even about twenty years ago, the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow stated "that the role of religion has been a central aspect of the civil-society debate, if for no other reason than the fact that churches, synagogues, and other places of worship have played a vital role in efforts to rebuild and maintain voluntary bases of self-government."<sup>6</sup> "In Russia, for example, new converts to the Orthodox



Church have been struggling to rebuild civil society on a parish basis from the bottom up, and, if the efforts are proving successful, then the statistics are at least heartening because 30 percent of Russians age 18 to 25 have become Christians since 1988 and the number of churches in Moscow alone has quadrupled in this period.<sup>77</sup> Today we hear of an impressive 60 percent belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church in a formerly oppressively secularized country. But have they built up a civil society? If so, what are the forms and textures and the political and societal concerns? If not, what distinguishes the development in Russia from emergent civil societies in other countries?

Wuthnow acknowledges that many religious leaders, in many countries, "Protestants and Catholic alike, are hopeful that Christianity can be a spiritual and ethical force in the formation of a new civilization that will be more democratic and economically vibrant."<sup>78</sup> But he also rightly asks whether genuinely Christian and biblical values promoted the evolution of civil societies as opposed to secular democratic ideals, which we associate more with philosophers of the Enlightenment. "To insist that Christianity always has a healthy influence on civil society because it is true or good or humanitarian, therefore, is to ride roughshod over the difficult terrain of social reality, and the contemporary debate is no exception."<sup>79</sup>

It is therefore important to identify clear modes of interdependence between religious value orientation and institutionalized practiced social action, which is undoubtedly for the individual and common good. The connection of a genuinely Christian and biblical orientation and diaconal work can provide such an orientation. With respect to institutionalized diaconal work, it is the connection of justice and mercy as early as in the biblical law traditions that has been formative for the Occidental ethos.

#### LAW AND SPIRIT: BIBLICAL VALUE SYSTEMS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The connection of justice and mercy already in the biblical law traditions has become one of the most important impulses in shaping civil societies. The power of mercy in biblical law is tremendous.<sup>10</sup> I have proposed defining mercy as "the free, creative self-withdrawal in favor of the other or in favor of others." Many people try to assert that mercy is a natural tendency in life. This, however, is highly questionable, at least without strong further qualifications. Natural life lives at the cost and expense of other life. Even if we are vegetarians we have to destroy an enormous amount of life to sustain ourselves. Mercy, however, is not just self-limitation in the midst of this natural tendency of life to sustain itself at the expense of others. Mercy is a

creative, supporting, and freeing activity in favor of the frail, the weak, the poor, and the person in need.

The activity of mercy is essential for family life. No baby, no child could be raised without massive free and creative self-withdrawal in its favor. The solidarity between the generations is expressed in mercy for the sick, the frail, the old and the dying. In family life and close friendships, mercy is often blessed by love and turns into a *joyful* free and creative self-withdrawal in favor of others. The experience of receiving and giving mercy and love and the acknowledgment that we all are in need of mercy at least in specific phases of our life lead to a subtle self-experience. The biblical traditions very often cultivate such a self-experience with dualities. One of the most famous dualities is the double identity of the slave in Egypt and the free person living in the blessed land. The "motive clause" of the Old Testament traditions argues for the practice of mercy with the poor and the stranger "because you know how it feels to be a stranger and because you are grateful to God who has freed you from slavery in Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm" (cf. Ex 22:20; 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19; 23:8; 26:5). Basic human experiences rooted in family life are thus moved into the broad social realm and gain moral, political, even legal and religious importance. The mercy laws in favor of the widows and orphans, the poor and the weak, not only in one's own family, but in one's whole social environment, gain an enormous normative shaping power. The normativity of the law reaches beyond the capacity of conflict solution into the capacity of social transformation. This is particularly clear in the so-called slave laws, which require the freeing of slaves, at least of Hebrew slaves, after six years of slavery (Ex 21:2ff.). The legal routinizing of almsgiving and tithing in favor of the poor and needy points in the same direction. Mercy becomes an instrument for social stabilization and transformation.

The mercy laws not only learn from family ethos but also recursively strengthen this ethos and the radiating power of family life and love. They even strengthen the legal culture and religious symbolisms and practices. With respect to the juridical law, laws of mercy strengthen and challenge its competence. On the one hand, no case can fall outside the purview of the law; no person, however weak, poor and miserable, can fall beyond the reach of the law. On the other hand, the systematic orientation of the law toward compassion demands the continual refinement of the legal culture and its progression toward humanization and universalization.

The mercy code of the law enables us to deal with the strange paradox that plagues all moral and legal evolution. Many human societies have the desire to improve the juridical law and develop their moral matrices. However, how can this be done without destroying the binding force of law and morals, their capacity to provide "security of expectations"? The mercy code of the law



allows for transformation without relativization. It allows for the balancing of normative stability and creative innovation.

Mercy laws finally connect the moral and legal attempts to strive for justice and to care for the weak with religious orientation. In the religious perspective on the just and merciful God, the biblical traditions open broad historical horizons. They extend memories and expectations over vast historical time spans. The just and righteous God will deal with human beings in time spans that reach far beyond the imagination of human courts or of individual and communal moral memory.

Again we see a recursive strengthening of the religious imagination and communication. The "fatherly" mercy, the care for justice and love, provides an understanding of the powers of the divine that can deal with the very sobering insight that natural life has to live at the expense of other life, that robbery and death are essential parts of natural existence. Enormous counterforces are discovered and unleashed that shape a diaconal, mutually supportive, and humane culture. Sensitivities for distortions on the one hand (the whole area of sin, trespasses, temptations, and evil) and for moral refinement (the whole area of love, forgiveness, and ennoblement in many forms) are cultivated, can become taught and practiced.

The teaching and practice of justice, mercy, and love can become self-referential; the teaching of teaching, the teaching of healing, the teaching of good legal and religious practices can become essential for the whole society and its culture. The cultivation of memories and expectations becomes part of the value system. Communities seeking truth and justice and salvation are established in institutionalized and in fluid forms.

Another biblical symbol and value system of growing importance for the development of civil societies can be seen in the Spirit narratives and traditions. These narratives and traditions support a contemporary interest in the so-called "plurality and diversity" of social life and organizations. The figure of the "pouring of the spirit" on male and female, old and young, masters and slaves (Joel 2) and on people from different traditions, cultures, and languages (Acts 2), the power of the Spirit to endow people with very different gifts and to establish communities with different "members" for mutual strengthening and support, can offer helpful orientation against monistic, monohierarchical, dualistic political and religious forms of thought and organization.

The biblical insight that these more complicated forms of social organization can be crucial in dealing with normative distortions, with limits of moral, legal, political and religious regulations and steering, can provide an orienting power in shaping pluralistic civil societies without plunging into social chaos and relativism. We do not yet have a long history and routines of praxis in dealing with these more demanding symbolisms and forms of thought. For the benefit of sound civil societies it will be important to rise

to the theological, academic, and educational challenges connected with the biblical insights into the power of the Spirit. This Spirit is not just a mental and intellectual phenomenon, but also a normative and freeing energy that constitutes complex interactive social associations that treasure the values of justice and mercy. When Germany, after the horrors of Nazi dictatorship and two World Wars, tried to regain trust and recognition among the peoples, it established itself as a "Rechtsstaat" and "Sozialstaat," a state of law and a welfare state. This was a good choice, deeply rooted in the biblical law traditions and their basic normative dynamics.

## NOTES

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke 8* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1998); Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik, III / 1-3* (Zurich: TVZ); cf. Michael Welker, *Theologische Profile. Schleiermacher—Barth—Bonhoeffer—Moltmann* (Frankfurt: Hansisches Verlagshaus, 2009).
2. For the German context, see: Jürgen Moltmann, *Der Geist des Lebens: Eine ganzheitliche Pneumatologie* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1991, new edition 2010); Michael Welker, *Gottes Geist: Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993, 6th ed. 2015), for Pentecostal pneumatology; Frank D. Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Young-hoon Lee, *The Holy Spirit Movement in Korea: Its Historical and Theological Development* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2009); Michael Welker (ed.), *The Work of the Spirit: Pneumatology and Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology, Gifford Lectures 1927-28*, corrected ed. (New York: Free Press, 1978), 105.
4. Jean Fourastié, *Die große Hoffnung des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne: Bund Verlag, 1954).
5. Cf. the programmatic statements of CIVICUS, The World Alliance for Citizen Participation ([civicus.org](http://civicus.org)).
6. Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity and Civil Society: The Contemporary Debate* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 4.
7. Cf. Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003).
8. Wuthnow, *Christianity*, 4.
9. Wuthnow, *Christianity*, 6.
10. Cf. Michael Welker, "The Power of Mercy in Biblical Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 225-235 (in the following, I refer to some ideas of this text).