

The Timeliness of Speaking of God

Freedom and Communion as Basic Concepts of Theology

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I am happy to be once again in the United States and to have once again the opportunity to exercise my very own craftsmanship, that is, to give lectures at universities, as I had done for almost thirty years, for some time also in this wonderful country. I express my heartfelt gratitude for the invitation to come to this renowned and distinguished university, which I consider an honour, and I thank you for the warm welcome you have given to me.

Coming here I was warned: Do not try to speak in the US about God. The reason was not that this could be dangerous, but rather that in the US this would be totally useless, and not because Americans are hopelessly godless but because they are so hopelessly godly, and thus doubts about God they gladly leave to godforsaken secularised Europeans. In the US you have to speak, so I was told, on the real problems, not on the mystery of God but on the mysteries of the Vatican.

But there is no shortage of speakers on such kinds of problems, and I do not want to carry coals to Newcastle. So I have chosen another issue, which I think is the most central and fundamental question of theology and perhaps also the most challenging problem for theology today: the God question. For the modern Church and the modern world are in a situation where the future does not depend on whether or not one shares more conservative or more progressive convictions on this or any other question, or indeed whether one shares them at all. The situation is

much more serious. I am convinced that the time is now right to speak of God and to decide how to speak of God.

I. A CHANGING SITUATION

“God” – as Martin Buber wrote – “the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated. ... Human beings with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their finger marks and their blood. ... They draw caricatures and write ‘God’ underneath; they murder one another and say ‘in God’s name’ ”.¹ These lines were written more than fifty years ago, but today they are more acute as perhaps never before. The critical prophetic message of God and Jesus’ freeing and healing message of the kingdom of God are of primary importance today.

This is true even though the religious situation over the last years has changed, and one now speaks of a new religiosity and new search for spirituality. Practical and theoretical atheism alike were for a long time regarded as the keynote of the age;² the Second Vatican Council, too, considered atheism to be among the most serious phenomena of our time (*Guadium et spes [GS]* 19). Then in the 70s and 80s the secularisation thesis was able to gain a firm foothold, claiming that the inexorable march of modernisation processes would by its very nature virtually inevitably result in progressive secularisation. Faith in God seemed to be a lost cause. Today atheism is by no means dead, it has reappeared not so much in the guise of philosophy as in the guise of science, and with nothing short of missionary zeal. Books such as Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, in particular, rank on the

¹ M. Buber, *Begegnung. Autobiographische Fragmente*. 2. ed. Stuttgart 1961, 43.

² Individual references in: W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (1982), reprint Freiburg i. Br. 2008, 50 f.

bestseller lists.³ We can of course question whether this kind of atheism is not itself a lost cause. It can hardly be maintained that it represents the summit of contemporary thought. It reiterates in a heavy-handed and distorted manner 19th century positions which have long been considered a thing of the past; it is essentially an atheistic fundamentalism.

In serious publications the secularisation thesis, which enjoyed a boom in the 70s and 80s, has since been largely abandoned. In the meantime we have gained a renewed awareness that, from the perspective of universal cultural history, the secularisation process of the past three centuries represents a specifically European development. Not only in Asia and Africa but also in a thoroughly modern and developed country like the United States, Western European secularisation is being observed with a measure of anxiety.⁴ Moreover, in the wake of global migration patterns, the question of God has entered into public consciousness and debate once more even here. The other religions, Islam above all, are attentively observed and discussed with interest, although also with apprehension and often even with fear.

Within Western Europe these developments are interwoven with self-critique, in the form of a “dialectic of the Enlightenment” (T. W. Adorno), which has also led to a dialectic of secularisation.⁵ The internal ambivalence of modern progress has been recognised; it has become evident that it cannot be had without a cost, that in fact each gain has to be paid for with a loss. That is most clearly manifest in the serious ecological problems we face and which are the price we pay for technological progress. It is also doubtful whether the development from the

³ This is true above all of R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2007. For analysis and critique see: A. McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, Oxford 2004; and McGrath *Der Atheismuswahn. Eine Antwort auf Richard Dawkins und den atheistischen Fundamentalismus*, Asslar 2007.

⁴ Cf. P. L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularisation of the World*, Washington 1999; on North American reservations regarding the European development see P. Jenkins, *God's Continent. Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis*, Oxford 2007.

⁵ J. Habermas – J. Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg i. Br. 2005. *The Dialectic of Secularization*, San Francisco 2006

slingshot to the atom bomb can be defined as human progress. One-sided rationalism causes the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of humanity to atrophy, and cannot answer the existential quest for meaning, which constitutively belongs to the human existence and makes it precisely human.

Because the 19th and early 20th century promises of salvation in this world – the Western ideology of progress and the Marxist utopia of a classless society – have both proved deceptive, the so-called “meta-narratives” are no longer trusted, neither the idealistic nor the materialistic over-arching interpretations of reality (J.–F. Lyotard). Instead, we find the “weak thought” (G. Vattimo) of post-modernism,⁶ which admits defeat in the face of mankind’s great questions, including the question of God, declaring itself to be incompetent or indifferent. *The* truth no longer exists, only truths. So the self-assuredness of militant atheism has turned into a resigned defeatism, scepticism, agnosticism, often even nihilism. That also means bidding farewell to the great ideals of the Enlightenment, to universally valid truths and human rights. So we have arrived at post- or late-modern relativism, which considers any reference to the one universal truth as presumptuous Western mindedness or even Western ideology, and accepts the recognition of a pluralism of truths and religions alike as the new paradigm.

On the other hand, the collapse of the meta-narratives has left behind an inner spiritual void. There are very few people who want to live in a purely rational, technologically functional world. So the dimensions of the emotions and aesthetics are sought once more, extending as far as a renewed interest in myth. Furthermore, rapid change in practically all spheres of life gives rise once more to the question of what is permanent, what we can hold on to.

⁶ On Postmodernism: W. Kasper, “Die Kirche angesichts der Herausforderungen der Postmoderne”, in: *Theologie und Kirche*. Bd. 2, Mainz 1999, 249–264; “Die Kirche und der Pluralismus der Gegenwart”, in: *Wege der Einheit*, Freiburg i. Br. 2004, 227–251.

So the primordial religious questions of meaning and security have once more become burning new questions for many. Religious and spiritual questioning and seeking are on the increase. There are many people, more than we think, who can be described as seekers and ‘pilgrims’. God has, as it were, become socially acceptable once more. Religion and the religions have to a large extent not declined as envisaged by the Enlightenment critique of religion, but have been shown to be virtually anthropological constants. That is a theological and pastoral opportunity which we must grasp by offering compelling theology and proclamation.

This new situation is of course ambivalent. It has given theology and the churches some breathing space, but it does not by any means signify that we are out of the woods. Habitual tacit atheism and the prejudice that only a secular state of mind can be modern while religion is old-fashioned and out of date, still prove as stubborn as they have always been. As we have seen, we are witnessing not only the return of religion but also the return of atheism and atheistic propaganda. Therefore, it is debatable whether we are speaking of a post-secular situation,⁷ or a so-called return of religion or even a mega-trend towards religion.⁸

In any case, the so-called return of religion does not simply lead back to Christian faith in God, and it does not on any account fill the empty church pews. Often it leads to an individualistic invisible religion which discovers traces of the divine in everyday life.⁹ In many instances one gains the impression of a cosmotheism which discovers God in nature and the cosmos; thus theology can often become theiology.

⁷ See J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, especially 116–118; also, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001. Cf. P. Walter (ed.) *Gottesrede in postsäkularer Kultur* (QD 224), Freiburg i. Br. 2007.

⁸ A critical view: U. Körtner, *Wiederkehr der Religion?* Gütersloh 2006; H. Joas–K. Wiegand, *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen*, Frankfurt a. M. 2007.

⁹ Cf. Th. Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Frankfurt a. M. 1991; P. L. Berger, *Auf den Spuren der Engel*, Freiburg i. Br. 2001.

Sometimes what is termed a return to religion is a religiosity without God, a religion-like atheism (J. B. Metz). It can lead to a vague, diffuse, free-floating religiosity, a syncretistic do-it-yourself, what-you-will religiosity which narcissistically seeks the divine not above us but in us.

To some extent also the so-called third wave of Christianity belongs in this post-modern context, i.e., the charismatic and Pentecostal churches, the proliferation of independent churches and similar phenomena, which are growing very fast and nowadays can be found all over the world. They too represent, even if practised in so-called mega-churches, an individualistic religiosity of people who feel lost and lonely in a society where former solid social and religious institutions and sense of belonging are breaking down.

Finally, God can be and is often politically used as cement and sanction of a given society, of a culture or a nation and even of wars, which then become ideological crusades against the evil in the world. Or we find under the banner of a return to religion the phenomenon which is rightly observed by many with great fear and anxiety: a fundamentalist religion which out of hate commits violence and distorts religion into its demonic opposite because violence is an offence to God and to human dignity.

So it is right to question: Is it really always and in every case God who is returning, are we not in many instances dealing instead with the return of old and new gods? Max Weber wrote: “The old gods ascend from their graves, they are disenchanting and thus take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.”¹⁰

¹⁰ M. Weber, “Wissenschaft als Beruf”, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 4. Auflage Tübingen 1973, 605..

In this situation theology has a chance; there is a new openness. But theology faces also a new challenge. Theology cannot become involved uncritically in the so-called religious mega-trend. In this situation theology must be aware of its own hermeneutical principles and only in this way it can have a critical standpoint of its own and open itself in a responsible way to other faiths. This implies – among others – two main principles.

First: It does not suffice to speak of vague personal experiences of the divine. Theology is founded neither in ourselves, nor in the depth of our hearts, nor in any myth or ideology but in historical revelation; theology has to speak of the God to whom the Bible bears witness, to be precise, of the “God of Jesus Christ”. Second: Theology means rational responsibility for speaking of God. Indeed, theology means nothing other than *logos* of *theos*. Augustine defines it as “*de divinitate ratio sive sermo*” (De civ. Dei VIII,1). Terms such as *logos* and *ratio* tell us that theology is not rhetorically dynamic or charismatically ecstatic speech about God; and it is certainly not *theolalia*, babbling about God. It is theo-logy, that is logical rational speech (*logos*) about God (*theos*). Faith is, as St Paul tells us, intellectual worship (*logike latreia; rationale obsequium*) (Rom 12:1), faith should give account (*apologia*) of the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3:15). Theology therefore – according to Augustine (*Sermo* 43,7,9) and Anselm of Canterbury (*Proslogion, Prooem*) – is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Both these principles are today, as we will see, of far-reaching importance.

II. THE LIBERATING GOD OF JESUS CHRIST

We can speak of God in many different ways. Piety has often tamed and made God innocuous. God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:6–14) is barely recognisable in the “dear God” of pious parlance. The God of the Bible is no *deus otiosus*, no idle God who sits enthroned unmoved and immovable over the world,

allowing it to run its course according to immutable laws without concerning himself with human beings and their fates. He is not an intuitive intimation of a divine being which remains vague and indeterminate, no pale idea of a divinity as an ultimate but ultimately incomprehensible horizon in or beyond all things, no irrational remnant in the face of the ineluctable contingency of existence.

The God of the Bible is the living God (Deut 5:26; Jos 3:10; Jer 10:10; Dan 6:26; Mt 16:16), the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a God of the living and not the dead (Ex 3:6; Mk 12:26 f; Acts 3:13; 7:32). He appears in storm and fire, but even more in the whispering of the wind and the stillness of the heart (1 Kings 19:12f).

In Jesus Christ he entered into our history, becoming frail human flesh (John 1:14), like us in all things except our sin; he can feel with us (Heb 4:15) and can even suffer the experience of being forsaken by God (Mk 15:34). He has shone as a benevolent and merciful God upon the countenance of Christ, who has made God manifest to us as his father and ours.¹¹ With this Jesus does not proclaim the harmless “dear God”, he takes rather up the prophetic message of God and the coming of the kingdom of God as kingdom of justice, peace and freedom. The God he proclaims scandalises those who considered themselves as pious. He proclaims the God who steps down, who is for and with the sinners, who goes out to seek the lost sheep and takes it upon his shoulder (Mt 18:12–14), the God who goes to the cross and thus establishes paradoxically through death on the cross a new beginning and the hope for new life. It is of this God of Jesus Christ that we as Christian theologians have to speak.

But immediately a grave objection is raised against this historical premise. The question is: in focusing on the Judeo–Christian tradition, do we not banish

¹¹ This thesis in *Jesus der Christus* (reprint 2007) and in *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (reprint 2008) is also the basic thesis presented engagingly by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI in his book *Jesus von Nazareth* (Freiburg i. Br. 2007).

ourselves into a Judeo–Christian ghetto where we are no longer able to perceive the many other diverse ways of speaking of God, barricading ourselves into an arrogant exclusive claim to be absolute, and then running the risk of behaving fanatically, if not violently, against others? Violent absolutism, particularly in an era of globalisation when religions co–exist in such close proximity, would be highly dangerous. Today the monotheistic religions have come under suspicion of being violent, a charge which is also directed against Christianity. The theme of “God and violence” or “religion and violence” has become topical particularly since 11 September 2001.¹² Again and again reference is made to a “clash of civilisations” (S. Huntington) which would also be a clash of religions. Hans Küng’s thesis that no universal peace is possible without religious peace is apt and insightful in this situation.¹³

One way out is offered by proponents of a pluralistic religious theology (J. Hick, P. Knitter, P. Schmitt–Leukel and others). Their thesis that there are multiple approaches to the divine, which all in principle have equal rights and must abandon any claim to be absolute because the divine remains transcendent in the face of all cognitive comprehension, seems at first glance to be plausible.¹⁴ But one must of course be aware that all conflict–avoidance of this kind is only possible at the price of the preceding suicide of the monotheistic religions. Confessing the one and only

¹² Cf. R. Girard, *Das Heilige und die Gewalt*, Zürich 1987; *Der Sündenbock*, Zürich 1988; J. Asmann, *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur*, München 1998; *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder Der Preis des Monotheismus*, München 2003. From a theological perspective: P. Walter (Hg.), *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der dreieine Gott* (QD 216), Freiburg i. Br. 2007.

¹³ H. Küng, *Projekt Weltethos*, München 1990, 102.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Augustin, *Gott eint – trennt Christus? Die Einmaligkeit und Universalität Jesu Christi als Grundlage einer christlichen Theologie der Religionen*, Paderborn 1993; M. von der Brück and J. Werbick (ed.), *Der einzige Weg zum Heil?* (QD 143), Freiburg i. Br. 1993; B. Stubenrauch, *Dialogisches Dogma. Der christliche Auftrag zur interreligiösen Begegnung* (QD 158), Freiburg i. Br. 1995; H. Bürkle, *Der Mensch auf der Suche nach Gott. Die Frage der Religionen*, Paderborn 1996; R. Schwager (Hg.), *Relativierung der Wahrheit? Die Herausforderung des christlichen Absolutheitsanspruchs durch pluralistische Religionstheologien* (QD 170), Freiburg i. Br. 1998; G. Müller – M. Serretti (ed.), *Einzigkeit und Universalität Jesu Christi*, Einsiedeln 2001; J. Ratzinger; *Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen*, Freiburg i. Br. 2003. Fundamental: J. Dupuis, *La rencontre du Christianisme et des religions*, Paris 2002.

God is constitutive for both the Old and the New Testaments (Deut 6:4f; Mk 12:29), and the primary commandment, to love this one God with all our heart and all our strength (Mk 12:30), excludes all polytheism or theoretical religious pluralism. Thus an irrevocable claim to absolute and universal validity is a defining characteristic of Judeo-Christian and Islamic monotheism alike. To abandon it would not serve dialogue, but would instead rob dialogue of all substance; before commencing dialogue, the monotheistic dialogue partner would have been abolished.

The biblical testimony to God directs us along another path. On the first page of the Bible we already find a viewpoint, which is in no way particularist but rather universal. There the God of Israel is introduced as the creator of heaven and earth; according to the creation narrative he has created mankind, that is all human beings, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or national adherence, in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:27). Thus in the whole of reality, traces of his wisdom are to be found (Prov 8:22–31; Sir 24:3–12). In the religions of all peoples, seeds and fragments of the one *logos* are found, as the Church Fathers later asserted (Justin, 1 Apol 46; 2 Apol 7; 10; 13). In Jesus Christ this *logos*, in which all things were created, became man (John 1:3f, 14; Col 1:15). So he is the light of the world (John 1:4f, 9; 8:12). He is the key to the interpretation of reality. Expressed in abstract terms: Jesus Christ does not found an exclusivist theology; he is the *concretum universale*, and as such the a-priori of theology.

In this wisdom Christology we find today the foundation for interreligious dialogue. This dialogue does not start from the presupposition that all religions are equal; on the contrary, it starts from wisdom Christology, which maintains at the same time the uniqueness of Christ and his universality. Thus it is possible to maintain that only in Jesus Christ and in no one else is salvation (Acts 4:11) and to

say at the same time, that in him and through him there is the possibility for salvation for all who seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience (*Lumen gentium [LG] 16*).

The wisdom theology and –Christology is the foundation for giving a rational account of the biblical understanding of God. Already the Church Fathers did so when they identified the name of the God Yahweh, who was revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:14), with the understanding of God of Hellenistic philosophy. For them the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of the philosophers could ultimately only be one and the same. The Greek translation (Septuagint) of the Old Testament name of God served as a bridge towards this identification. According to Hebrew understanding Yahweh means “I am the one who is here”, that is, who is with you and among you; the Septuagint translated “I am the one who is”. With this translation a step was taken which was foundational for the entire future course of theology. J. Ratzinger retraced this path in his Bonn University inaugural lecture “The God of Faith and the God of the Philosophers”. In his well-known Regensburg lecture (2006) he returned to this point once more, thereby directing attention to a constant task of theology – timely again today in a totally new way – the reconciliation of faith and reason.¹⁵

In my Tübingen farewell lecture in 1989 entitled *Assent to Thinking*, I insisted on the indispensability for theology of metaphysics, that is, of thinking which asks after the totality of being.¹⁶ But I pursued this question not within the horizon of the philosophy of being of the ancient world, but within the horizon of the modern philosophy of freedom, and I made an attempt to define the essence of God within

¹⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Theologie naturalis*, 3. Aufl. Trier 2006; Ratzinger, *Glaube und Vernunft*, Freiburg i. Br. 2007.

¹⁶ “Zustimmung zum Denken. Von der Unerlässlichkeit der Metaphysik für die Sache der Theologie”, in: *ThQ* 169 (1989) 257–271.

the horizon of the modern philosophy of freedom, not as absolute being but as all-determining absolute freedom.¹⁷ This definition of the essence of God approaches substantially more closely the original meaning of the revelation of the name of God in the burning bush. It does not proceed from an identification of the God of the philosophers with the God of faith, but asserts a more precise definition, intensification and surpassing of the philosophical understanding of God through biblical revelation.¹⁸ This definition takes seriously the fact that the biblical God, unlike the god of the philosophers, is a living, speaking and self-bestowing God who can be called upon and addressed.

That raises the question: how can this understanding of God be elevated into thought? That was the thrilling subject of Schelling's later philosophy. Schelling made many repeated attempts to think the absolute; in his late work it occurred to him that he would thereby of necessity have to think something that he could not think.¹⁹ That places him in the tradition of the negative theology which begins as early as the Socratic knowledge of not knowing (Plato, *Apol.* 23b), which was also given expression by Anselm of Canterbury when he said that we by reason comprehend that we cannot comprehend the absolute (*Monologion* 64). Nikolaus Cusanus' *Docta ignorantia* also belongs in this sequence. This insight drove Schelling to deep despair, anticipating on the one hand Kierkegaard and on the other Nietzsche, who took idealism to its logical conclusion in conceptualising its conclusion in nihilism.²⁰

¹⁷ T. Pröpper and his followers have pursued this approach independently. Cf. T. Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte*, München 1991; "Freiheit als philosophisches Prinzip der Dogmatik", in: E. Schockenhoff and P. Walter, *Dogma und Glaube* (FS Walter Kasper), Mainz 1993, 165–192; *Evangelium und freie Vernunft. Konturen einer theologischen Hermeneutik*, Freiburg i. Br. 2001.

¹⁸ J. E. Kuhn, *Einleitung in die katholische Dogmatik*, 2. Aufl., Tübingen 1859, 233 f; 258; 268; 290.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Kasper, *Das Absolute in der Geschichte. Philosophie und Theologie der Geschichte in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, Mainz, 114–124.

²⁰ W. Schulz, *Die Vollendung des deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, Stuttgart 1955.

Schelling rebelled against this nihilistic rigour, although in his old age he lacked the strength to arrive at a new synthesis. Kierkegaard, who heard him lecture in Berlin, noted in his diary that he was too old to listen to lectures but that Schelling was too old to give lectures. Nevertheless, one brilliant idea of genius illuminates Schelling's late philosophy. He no longer strove to conceptualise the absolute by ascending to it from below, but hoped to think and understand reality as if from above, from the logically necessary but unthinkable absolute. He wanted to show the power of the God-idea to reveal and illuminate reality, and thus demonstrate the truth of God in the sense of a self-manifestation of God in and through reality – an attempt which corresponds with the biblical understanding of the truth as the self-manifesting fidelity-truth of God.²¹

As a theologian one must seriously question the way in which Schelling conducted this project, by asking for example whether he did not overstep the dividing line between theology and philosophy. Nevertheless, even though it must be approached critically, I see in his late philosophy a brilliant attempt to interpret reality, proceeding from and in the light of the revelation of the God concealed in his own revelation, and thus to elevate belief in God into understanding, without at the same time rationalistically annulling that belief. At this point the debate about God becomes a debate about reality, or more precisely, a debate about whether belief or unbelief is better able to lead to an understanding of reality. *Cum grano salis*: the task is then to prove that God's message is the true enlightenment of mankind and the world about itself.

Thinking of God as absolute freedom means understanding God as a liberating God and the world as a place of freedom. Following the trauma of the wars of religion, theology underwent a process of purification through a process of self-criticism

²¹ Cf. W. Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes*, Mainz 1965. Similarly W. Pannenberg, "Was ist Wahrheit?" in: *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie*, Göttingen 1967, 202–222.

and constructive confrontation with the modern Enlightenment. Today all Christian churches profess freedom of religion, avoidance of violence, tolerance, and respect towards other religions; while maintaining their own identity they seek not conflict but dialogue (cf. *Nostra aetate*; *Dignitatis humanae*). They have overcome former integralisms and recognise the distinction between church and state and the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs and of all spheres of secular culture (art, science, economy, politics, technique etc.) (GS 36; 41; 56; 76).

Therefore the main Christian churches today no longer have difficulty in reconciling creation and evolution. This does not mean that Darwin becomes a new Father of the Church and evolution a new dogma. Evolution is and remains a scientific theory or hypothesis and not a matter of faith. So those who believe they have the evidence can deny evolution, but they cannot do it in the name of Christian faith. In this sense theologians of all the main churches now leave it to the fundamentalist Christians, as well as the fundamentalist atheistic movements discussed above, to see belief in creation and the theory of evolution as mutually exclusive alternatives, and to counter the theory of evolution with creationism – a literal understanding of the biblical creation narrative. Theology which deserves to be taken seriously knows how to distinguish the assertion of belief *that* God created the world from the scientific question of *how* the origin and development of the world came about.

It would be misplaced to read into the dialogic self–understanding of theology and the churches an expression of weakness or to even suppose a cheap compromise. On the contrary, the God of the Bible is, as absolute all–determining freedom, a dialogic God who addresses humanity in absolute freedom and invites it into communion with himself. That opens up the possibility of thinking of the world as

a place of freedom, to acknowledge freedom, to grant freedom to others and to commit oneself to a social order based on freedom.

The distinction between religion and politics therefore does not mean limiting religion to the private sphere, as laicism would like to have it. The new political theology rightly reclaims the public relevance of speaking of God.²² By this it does not want to be a politicising theology or to derive a political program from God's message, but it does indeed wish to locate politics within the over-arching horizon of freedom and promotion of freedom, justice and solidarity, and to resist a one-sided orientation of politics determined by economics and private interest. In the same way, speaking of God resists the naturalistic, deterministic, purely economic understanding of mankind.

In understanding mankind as the image and likeness of God, who reveals himself in his revelation as a mystery, it safeguards at the same time the mystery of humanity itself, of its 'unavailability' understood as its not being at anyone's disposal (Gen 1:27). Conversely, in binding himself unconditionally to God alone, man becomes free in the face of all other reality. Proceeding from this perspective, one of the most influential recent philosophers, and one who does not come from a Christian tradition, Jürgen Habermas, has in more recent publications acknowledged that theology has a potential for language and interpretation of reality which should not be dispensed within public discourse.²³ Speaking of God can be the "salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13), "light and power" (GS 42) for the construction of a new humanism and a civilisation of life and love.²⁴

²² J. B. Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Mainz 1977; *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie*. 1967–1997, Mainz 1997.

²³ J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001. Cf. footnotes 6 and 8 above.

²⁴ W. Kasper, "Die weltverändernde Kraft christlicher Liebe. Grundsatzüberlegungen zum Verhältnis von Christentum und Gesellschaft", in: K. Hemmerle (ed.), *Liebe verwandelt die Welt*, Mainz 1980, 25–52; Kasper, *The Christian Understanding of Freedom and the History of Freedom in the Modern Era*, Milwaukee (Wisc.) 1988;

III. THE TRIUNE GOD – A SYMPATHETIC GOD

Let me now come to a further point. In their commitment to human rights, justice, solidarity and sustaining creation, Christians can and should work together with representatives of other religions and with all people of good will. They also owe it to others to testify to the God of Jesus Christ, that is, the Trinitarian God who is love. This brings us to an aspect of discourse about God which has been neglected for a long time. After a period resembling the sleep of Sleeping Beauty, the doctrine of the Trinity in Catholic and in Protestant theology as well has regained actuality once more, in regard to historical research and systematic analysis alike.²⁵ Furthermore, on this point Catholic and Protestant theology are very much indebted to the dialogue with Orthodox theology and its rich tradition.

Self-evidently the doctrine of the Trinity is not a matter of a numerical problem or a kind of higher mathematics attempting to show how one and the same reality can be one and three at the same time. The Trinity can only be made comprehensible – as among others Augustine and Bonaventure saw and great idealistic thinkers like Hegel have shown again – on the basis of the nature of love.²⁶ Love wants to be one with the other without dissolving into the other. Love does not absorb the other; it means being one while maintaining its own identity as well as the identity of the other and finding its ultimate fulfilment. Love means being one while acknowledging the otherness of the other. But it does not stop at intimate duality but instead progresses beyond its own boundaries into a shared third entity in which

J. Ratzinger, *Kirche, Ökumene und Politik*, Einsiedeln 1987; J. Ratzinger, *Salz der Erde. Christentum und katholische Kirche an der Jahrtausendwende*, Stuttgart 1996.

²⁵ For an historical view I would like to refer to R. Kany, *Augustins Trinitätsdenken*, Tübingen 2007. In the past, following T. de Régnon, a fundamental distinction has often been drawn between the Greek and the Latin doctrine of the Trinity, more precisely between the Greek fathers who take the Father as their starting point, and Augustine and the Western tradition, with the approach of the one nature of God. R. Kany has shown that this in most instances generalised distinction cannot be upheld. Western Trinity theology also, like the NT, maintained that when we speak of God we mean the Father. Thus the Creed begins not with “I believe in God”, but with “I believe in God the Father almighty”. It starts with the Father as the “origin and source” of the Trinity. From this premise the doctrine of the Trinity can be understood anew as concrete monotheism (J. E. Kuhn).

²⁶ See W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, 31–33; 469–473.

it represents and fully realises itself. In this sense the doctrine of the Trinity is a precise explication of the sentence “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). God is not a solitary God, he is in himself communion (*koinonia, communio*), and only thus can he bring us into his communion. In a Trinitarian perspective, freedom and communion are inseparably linked. Freedom exists in communion and communion is the realm of freedom.

Before I come back to this point I want try to show that the doctrine of the Trinity enables a new approach to the most difficult existential question of the doctrine of God, the problem of theodicy.²⁷ I mean the question: Why is there so much innocent suffering? How can God, if he is omnipotent and loving, permit such suffering? Why does he not intervene? If he is loving but not almighty, then he is not God; if he is almighty but not loving, then he is an evil demon. Such questions have become a burning issue again with such tragic experiences as the Shoah; they also arise when we are confronted with natural disasters, such as tsunamis and other catastrophes.

Obviously the doctrine of the Trinity cannot solve these questions. Nobody can answer them. Faith too must bear up under the darkness of God’s unfathomable mystery, as the book of Job tells us in its final chapters (40:4–5; 42:1–6). But faith can shine a light in the darkness, and it can help us to survive the darkness of suffering and dying. It can show – as great literature has always known – that love and renunciation, love and death belong together. That is also true of Trinitarian love. The divine persons are, like everything in God, infinite; they must therefore make room for one another; they must as it were relinquish themselves to make space for the other person. This kenotic, self–relinquishing mode of existence enables God on the cross to identify himself with that which is most alien to him,

²⁷ On the theodicy question: T. Pröpper – M. Striet, “Theodizee”, in: *LThK* IX (2000) 1396–98; G. Neuhaus, *Frömmigkeit der Theologie. Zur Logik der offenen Theodizeefrage* (QD 202), Freiburg i. Br. 2003. On the actuality of this question for the problem of monotheism: M. Striet, “Monotheismus und Kreuz”, in *IkaZ Communio* 32 (2003) 273–284.

the sinner who has deserved death, and to enter into his opposite, into the night of death. God can take this death upon himself without being conquered by it, but instead thereby vanquish it and establish the foundation of a new life. Thus the cross is the utmost that is possible to God in his self-relinquishing love, it is the *id quo maius cogitari nequit*.²⁸

The doctrine of the Trinity does not thereby give a direct answer to the question of innocent suffering. How could it?! But it is able to be light in the darkness, that helps us not to despair of God in our utmost need and distress, but to know that in our extreme helplessness the crucified God stands by us, so that in all our cries and despair “*de profundis*” we are able to bear all in faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is the form of monotheism which permits existential survival in the face of the enormous extent of suffering in the world.

But can God suffer? Can he suffer with us? The mainstream of traditional theology has always denied this. It has understood suffering as a deficit and therefore excluded the possibility that God could suffer. On this point a shift has occurred in the case of a large part of more modern theology.²⁹ Self-evidently, if God suffers he does not suffer in a human but in a divine manner. For God suffering cannot be something external which befalls him. God’s suffering cannot be a passive accident, nor can it be the expression of a deficiency, but only the expression of sovereign self-determination. God is not passively affected by the suffering of his creatures, he allows himself in freedom to be affected by the suffering of his creatures, he allows himself to be moved by sympathy (Ex 34:6); indeed, as the prophet says, his heart recoils in the face of the misery of his creatures (Hos 11:8).

²⁸ Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Mysal III*, 152 f; W. Kasper, “Das Kreuz als Offenbarung der Liebe Gottes,” in: *Catholica* 61 (2007) 1–14.

²⁹ Notable examples include H. U. von Balthasar, S. P. Breton, E. Przywara, H. Küng, J. Galot, H. Mühlen. Critically: K. Rahner in his *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. 15, 1983, 211f; also: Karl Rahner im Gespräch, ed. P. Imhof and H. Biallowons, Bd.1, München 1982, 245 f.

He is not an apathetic but a sympathetic God, i.e., a God who can *sym-pathein*, who suffers with us.

God does not glorify or deify suffering, nor does he simply eliminate it, he redeems and transforms it. The cross is the passage to resurrection and transfiguration. So the theology of the cross and kenosis conceptualised in the doctrine of the Trinity becomes an Easter theology of transfiguration, it becomes a hope against hope in the living God who gives life (Rom 4:18). “*Spe salvi*”, (Rom 8:20, 24; 1 Pet 1:3) we are, so Scripture says, redeemed in hope. “Saved in hope” is the title of the second encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI.

Hope stretches out not only to engage personal fulfilment and happiness but also the fulfilment and the well-being of the whole of reality in justice and peace, what the Hebrew Bible calls *shalom*. If we take seriously the words that God is love, then their logical conclusion is that love is the all-encompassing horizon of reality and the meaning of existence. With this thesis that love is the horizon and the interpretive key for all reality.³⁰ This thesis that love is the meaning of existence is not just any harmless pious affirmation, it represents a kind of revolution in the field of metaphysical thought. This insight leads to the realisation that neither the self-subsistent substance nor the autonomous modern self-assured subject are the real and fundamental reality; the starting point and the foundation are instead to be found in that which was for Aristotle merely accidental and the weakest reality of existence, namely relation. The theology of the Trinity leads us to a relational and personal ontology.³¹

³⁰ That love is the meaning of existence I attempted to demonstrate in my habilitation thesis *Das Absolute in der Geschichte*. Subsequently my interpretation has been confirmed by the explication given by M. Heidegger of Schelling’s *Freiheitsschrift* (1809), M. Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), Tübingen 1971, 107, 154; 211; 223–225.

³¹ See also J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, München 1968, 142–150; K. Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*, Einsiedeln 1976; G. Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, Freiburg i. Br. 1997, 457–460; M. Schulz, *Sein und Trinität*, St. Ottilien 1997. Similar approaches to a Trinitarian ontology are found in more recent

Just as in God the subsistence of the Trinitarian persons is grounded in relation, so in an analogous manner (i.e., in a similarity which is at the same time more dissimilar) relations are the fundamental reality also in the created realm. The human being must from this perspective be understood as a relational and dialogic being. He does not find his fulfilment in forcible self-assertion but in respectful and loving recognition of the otherness of the other. This is the fundamental paradox and the dialectic of Christian existence: only he who loses his life will find it (cf. Mt 10:38–39; John 12:25). Only in love and in communion does freedom find its fulfilment. Communion is therefore the realm where freedom is the only possibility. This is a position which goes beyond individualism and collectivism. Some go so far as to call *communio* the new paradigm to understand all of reality.³²

This principle of *communio* stands also behind the *communio*-ecclesiology, which on the basis of Patristic and Orthodox theology in the last decades in both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology has emerged progressively as a promising ecumenically common approach.³³ But *communio*-ecclesiology cannot and should not remain a theory or become even an ideology; it must find its way into practice, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. *Ad intra* in communication on all levels of the Church, what Orthodox theology calls synodality; *ad extra* in dialogue and solidarity with the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of humanity in our times (*GS* 1). Moreover, the Church does not find her identity and her rightly understood catholicity by anxiously closing her doors and windows, but on the contrary by opening them and entering into dialogue with other faiths, never abandoning her own faith but making it inviting, convincing, lively and fruitful. This can be done in

Orthodox theology (W. Solowjew, N. Berdjajev, S. Bulgakow, J. D. Zizioulas etc.) and in the recent Anglican theological trend known as Radical Orthodoxy (R. Williams, J. Milbank etc).

³² J.C. Scannone and others, *Comunión: ¿Un nuevo Paradigma?*, San Benito 2006.

³³ Cf. W. Kasper, *Die Kirche Jesu Christi. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie I* (WKGS 11), Freiburg i. Br. 2008, 31–34; 405–425.

a trustworthy and credible way only when the internal life of the Church reflects communion and communication, solidarity and subsidiarity.

In a relational ontology identity can be understood only as an open identity combined with solidarity. This means that neither personal nor national distinction, neither ethnic affiliation nor even academic greatness, nor force, money, power and influence, nor the self-assertion “of the fittest” will be what counts in the end, but instead tolerance, respect, solidarity, forgiveness, goodness and practical love will be what remains as the definitive reality.

Thus the doctrine of God and the Trinity gives rise to perspectives which by no means have yet been taken to their logical, ontological, ecclesiological and practical conclusion. Thought on the doctrine of God and the Trinity as the sum of all theology still represents a big challenge and an unfulfilled and rewarding task.

So it is time to speak of God, to testify and think about God. If theology wishes to gain a hearing among the contemporary pluralist Babel of voices and opinions, it must firstly and above all know what it is. It can only have relevance if it steadfastly maintains its own identity, that is, as speaking of God in a distinctive and at the same time in an engaging manner. If it does not do so, theology and the church will be relegated to the role of ethical or moral institutions which in the end no-one wants to listen to. If on the other hand it speaks in a new and fresh way of the living, liberating God who is love, then it will render a service to life, freedom, justice, solidarity and love, then it can serve the dignity of humanity and the truth of reality, and open up perspectives of hope in all the aporia of the present. Therefore I reiterate the timeliness of theology: It is time, it is the right time, to speak of God.