

The Future of Theology

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Whoever asks about the future must understand the present. I am beginning therefore with theology after 1945: Where is theology in the West now? In the second part, I shall try to conceive the necessary ecological turn of modern theology today, and in the third part, the pneumatological turn of Christian theology coming from non-Constantinian churches in Asia and Africa. Then, in part 4, I shall answer the question about the future of theology with my own theology of the future, as expected.

Theology Today

Theology is always in a triangle of church, the public, and the academy. Theology takes place in the pulpit, the marketplace, and the lecture hall. Theologians live in the Christian community, the public community, and the academic community. In formerly Christian countries, this is still the theological constellation.

Church theology

In postwar Germany, theology was again close to the church.¹ The theological faculties and state universities had been corrupted by the Nazis. The Confessing Church was the only group that resisted and founded two church faculties, in Berlin and in Wuppertal. Karl Barth's theology was church dogmatics; Rudolf Bultmann's theology was kerygmatic theology. The Barmen Declaration of 1934

¹ "Theology is a function of the church." This was for the generation of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as for my generation, the starting-point for theological thinking. We joined the Catholic and Orthodox church-theology.

was a model of a confessing theology. We affirm and we reject, yes or no; there's no middle ground. The advantage: in this way theology could influence the churches and exclude cultural delusions, for example, political ideologies. The disadvantage: a Christian in-group mentality took over and theology became a preaching to the choir.

Political theology

In my generation, some of us theologians wanted to break out of this “inland traffic” of church theology.² From about 1960, a theology with a face to the world emerged, as Johann Baptist Metz proclaimed. In the Christian-Marxist dialogues, we developed a new political theology of the church. Carl Schmitt's old political theology was a theology of state sovereignty, not of the church. More effective world-wide was liberation theology, which started in 1971 in Latin America. Contextual theologies mushroomed everywhere: black theology, feminist theology, *Minjung* theology, Dalit theology, and so on. These were theological participations in political or cultural movements to bring Christians into these movements and hopefully to Christianize them. In the World Council of Churches (WCC), the anti-racism programme was controversially debated but prepared the way for the downfall of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the return of Nelson Mandela. The advantage: theology was publicly recognized, even considered dangerous in some places, in any case debated in newspapers and journals, such as the *New York Times* or in Germany *Der Spiegel*. The disadvantage: the context was becoming the text of political or public theology. The world was writing the agenda of Christian theology.

Academic theology

Strangely enough, these political theologies lost their attraction after the end of the East–West conflict around 1990 and the beginning of globalization. The last was a political theology of peace during the peace movement in divided Germany, and this was responsible for the massive demonstrations in Leipzig and other cities in 1989, beginning with peace prayers in the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig. After 1990 theologians turned to the academic community and tried to win recognition in the world of science, beginning with dialogues of theology and physics, theology and law, theology and medicine; and with this the old German liberal theology returned. The church-related theological faculties in Berlin and

² Cr. Hovey and E. Phillips, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Fl. Höhne and Fr. Van Oorschot, hrg., *Grundtexte öffentliche Theologie* (Leipzig, 2015). Cf. also the *International Journal of Public Theology* and the series *Theology in the Public Square*; Fr. Schüssler Fiorenza, Kathryn Tanner, and Michael Welker, eds., *Political Theology: contemporary Challenges and Future Directions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

Wuppertal were closed and the faculties transferred to the universities. With the Bologna accreditation process in Europe, these universities in Germany and everywhere in Europe were transformed into a cluster of professional schools – *Berufsschule* – and lost their character as “truth-seeking communities,” as my friend John Polkinghorne described an ideal vision for the university. The advantage: academic theology won recognition in the university world. The disadvantage: theological faculties and divinity schools were changed over into departments of religious studies.

At an American Academy of Religion meeting in Atlanta in November last year, M. Douglas Meeks asked the question: If academic theology today is in a crisis, and neither the church nor the world seems to need academic theology, what would be required for theology to become authentically public again?

With the loss of its relationship to the church, academic theology is also losing its character as theology. Full Christian theology must, in my understanding, hold the triangle together. As an all-embracing function of the kingdom of God, theology is a special function of the church, and a special function of the people or the public, and a special function of truth-seeking communities in the sciences.

The Ecological Turn

With this remark, I move to the ecological turn of theology today.³ We are standing today at the end of the modern age, and at the beginning of the ecological future of our world, if our world is to survive. A new paradigm is emerging in which human culture and the nature of the earth are differently bound together than in the paradigm of the modern age. The modern age was determined by the seizure of power by humans over the earth and the elements and energies of nature. As an image of God, the human being is exceptional and the *dominium terrae* – lordship over the earth – is his destiny.

The climate crisis of today shows the limits of the modern paradigm. In Paris at the end of 2015 at the UN COP21 conference, the community of nations for the first time listened to the cry of the earth. It took more than 400 years to develop the modern world.

³ Ecological theology is dealing not only with ecological questions but also with a reformation of the whole of Christian theology. A paradigm change, no less, is in process. Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015); John B. Cobb Jr. and I Castuera, eds., *for Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato si'* (Anoka: Process Century Press, 2015). My own contribution is in *Ethics of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), Part 3: Earth Ethics, 109-64; and in *idem*, “Die Hoffnung der Erde. Die ökologischewende der christlichen Theologie und der christlichen Spiritualität *EvTh* 74: 3 (2014): 216-26.

We do not have as much time to build an ecological culture. We need a new concept of the nature of the earth and a new image of the human being and human destiny and with these a new experience of God in our culture.

A new ecological theology can help; but why, after all, theology? Because the understanding of nature and the self-understanding of humans in the modern age were coined by our modern anthropocentric theology and ethics. There's an old ecological joke where two planets meet somewhere in the universe. Asks the one, "How are you, my friend?" Answers the other, "I feel very bad, I'm sick. I have *homo sapiens*." Says the first, "Oh, I'm really sorry for you, that's really bad. I've had that plague also, but don't worry, it passes."

With this the planetary perspective on humankind is opened up. We recognize ourselves with the eyes and the interests of the blue planet earth. We begin to ask ourselves, will this human sickness of the earth pass because we are doing away with ourselves? Or because humankind is becoming wise and is healing the wounds we are inflicting on the earth up till today? Behind this practical question of our survival, there awaits a deeper question: Are we a sickness on the earth? Are we a failure of the evolution of life? Are we an unfortunate creature of God, who already repented of having created us, as we read in Genesis 6:6? This is the true existential question of humankind. Are we here only by chance or by providence? What are our place and our task in the earth community?

I shall not speak here about the changes required in anthropology and the doctrine of creation but instead present my latest ideas: To change the so-called world religions into earth religions with reverence for the earth, that is, the biblical Sabbath of the land.

My argument, in three steps, is that we are moving from world politics to an earth politics. Until World War II, the world was organized into nations, and politics meant national politics. Global affairs led to international treaties. In the next step, as universal ecological or atomic dangers were growing, we had to change our national foreign politics into "world home politics," as Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker said. Out of international treaties we had to build up transnational institutions like, for example, the European community or the United Nations. In the third step, today, climate change has become universal, and we must use world home politics and transnational institutions for a common earth politics. The Paris conference of the United Nations last year was the first step in giving the earth a say in global human affairs. My question was, why don't we

transfer this way to what we call world religions?⁴ There are many religions, ideologies, and cultures of humankind but only one earth – Gaia, our poor blue planet, our mother, our home. We ask critically: What are the contributions of these world religions, with their customs and ethics, to the ecological crisis? And what can these religions contribute to a new respect for life and for the earth?

We used to understand the earth as a space for human life and a place for the encounter of human cultures and religions. Now we need to learn to respect the earth as a *subject* with reactions to humankind's actions or non-actions. The Hebrew Bible offers us a religion of the earth in the form of the Sabbath of the land. Every seventh year the people of Israel are to leave the land fallow, first for a social reason – that the poor of your people may eat – and second for a religious reason, so that the land may celebrate “the great Sabbath of the Lord,” an ecological imperative that the land may regenerate its energies and become fruitful again. The promise: If the people observe the Sabbath of the land, they will live securely. The warning: If they don't, and they exploit the land non-stop, they must leave the land, for example, for 70 years. This is an amazing early ecological interpretation of the Babylonian exile and a warning for us. If we fail to observe the earth's religions and the Sabbath of the land, the Sabbath of the water, and the Sabbath of the air, deserts will grow, the water of the oceans will be polluted, the plastics and the air in our cities will become smoke over our cities. And eventually the human race will disappear from the earth. The earth will survive, humans not.

What can we Christians do about this? Christianity may change from the traditional gnostic spirituality – we are only guests on earth, our homeland is in heaven – to seeing that the earth is our home in this world and also in the world to come. Because we expect the new earth on which righteousness dwells, we are faithful to the earth. German children learn the prayer *Lieber Gott, mach mich fromm, dass ich in den Himmel komm*, and the theologian Helmut Thielicke (1906–1986) entitled his autobiography *Zu Gast auf einem schönen Stern* – guest on a beautiful star. Was he an alien? If our home is in the beyond, in heaven, why care for the earth? If we are only guests on earth, we are not responsible for the guesthouse when the guesthouse becomes a vale of tears. Before we work on earth, we are taken from the earth and return to the earth. Spirituality develops where God's spirit is expected and experienced. If the spirit is in the human soul, a spirituality of the soul and heaven is developed. If the spirit is poured out on all flesh, a spirituality of life emerges. We need a new

⁴ *The Ecumenical Review*, March 2011, included an article of mine with this proposal. See Jürgen Moltmann, “A Common Earth Religion: World Religions from an Ecological Perspective,” *Ecumenical Review* 63:1 (2011), 16–24. See also Ryan P. McLaughlin, *Preservation and Protest: Theological Foundations for an Eco-Eschatological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

spirituality of our senses. “You awaken all my senses,” we sing at Pentecost with Rabanus Maurus. With awakened senses, we can see and taste God in all good things, as we see and taste God’s mercy in the sacrament – a sacramental spirituality of the earth, as Orthodox theologians proposed already decades ago in the WCC.

The Pneumatological Turn

There is a new Christianity emerging in Asia, Oceania, and Africa. South Korea is one of its centres. What is new in this Christianity? They are non-Constantinian churches. They were never and are not state churches – the Philippines and Ethiopia are exceptions. What is a Constantinian church? Our old Constantinian churches have had a *sacrum imperium*, a sacred empire. In the new Christianity in Asia, Oceania, and Africa, they have only the Holy Spirit.

After Constantine, the Constantinian emperors made Christianity the state religion, as is well-known, and their empire, the holy kingdom of Christ. As Christ reigns from heaven, so they are ruling on earth. The so-called Constantinian turn of affairs was apocalyptically interpreted as the turn from persecution to dominion, from martyrdom to the millennium. The Christian state church was not organized as a church but as a millennium: “They shall be priests of God and of Christ and shall reign with him a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6). This is a well-known hierarchy of the priests over the lay people. This is the parochial system, which replaced the congregational principle of the church. You belong to a church wherever you live, you are not asked to join a church. Thus, with the crowning of Charlemagne in Rome in 800, a *translatio imperii* took place from the Greek to the Germans, and the Heilige Römische Reich deutscher Nation – the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation – was born.⁵ The saint of the Christian imperial religion was St George killing the dragon, the enemy of God and of the *sacrum imperium*. After the papal revolution in the Middle Ages liberated the church from the Christian emperor, the Reformation turned to the state religion again: *cujus regio, ejus religio* – who owns the land determines the religion. In spite of the French revolution and the American revolution, we still live in the old Constantinian nations, in the structures of the *sacrum imperium* as a privileged majority religion – in Scandinavia more than in France, in Europe more than in the US.

⁵ W. Goes, *Translatio Imperii. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtesdenkens und der politischen Theorie im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen, 1958).

The non-Constantinian churches are Christian minorities in Buddhist, Shinto, Islamic, and socialist countries. Because they are not state religions, they are organized as enterprises in the free market, in management structures with church-growth programmes and global missions.⁶ The churches are centres of worship, education, and social services. They are communities of the poor and marginalized, for example, the three-fold blessing of Rev. David Yonggi Cho in Korea: salvation for the lost, healing for the sick, prosperity for the poor, in community for the lonely crowds in Asian mega-cities. Their interreligious dialogue is not focused on what they have in common with the majority religion but on what is special and unique in the Christian faith. The dialogue doesn't serve the general secular tolerance, as ours does, but the self-assurance of Christians in the mission of the gospel.⁷ And a last point is important. These churches are pre-millenarian and free churches; they are not millenarian state churches of the *sacrum imperium*, of the sacred empire.

I had not planned a book on the Holy Spirit. After my book on Christology, I discovered a missing link to eschatology, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.⁸ I was like the people who talk of the second coming of Christ and miss the present coming of Christ in the spirit. I followed the old doctrine of the three-fold coming of Christ – Christ came in the flesh, comes in the spirit, and is coming in glory. I began with the name – if one hears the name Holy Spirit one is immediately reminded of a service in a beautiful church, we think of something holy like the Christmas oratory of Johann Sebastian Bach. If we were asked, “When did you last feel the spirit of life?” then we can answer with everyday life experiences. Then the Holy Spirit is a passion for life and the vitalizing energies of life. I followed the creed and called the Holy Spirit – *dominum et vivificantem* – the life-awakening power of God.

The love of life that God's spirit creates in us has also a political side. It is creating a culture of life against the present barbarism of killing. “Your young people love life, our young people love death,” confessed the late Mullah Omar of the Taliban. The existential question, whether humankind should be or not, is answered neither by the

⁶ Bishop Sundo Kim, *A Miracle of Five Minutes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), describes the rise of Kwanglim Methodist Church in Seoul, Korea. I am an honorary pastor of that church.

⁷ See, e.g., the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, Seoul, in their “2015 Theological Statement,” at: <http://www.kukmindaily.co.kr/article/view.asp?page=&gCode=7111&arcid=0009722846&code=71111101>.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); *idem*, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

anthropic principle in the universe nor the evolution of life. It is a matter of faith, and Christians believe that God so loved the world that his son became human flesh, human life. This life-giving spirit is poured out on all flesh, and at the end the resurrection of the flesh into the life of the world to come will take place. We need this unique yes of God to encourage our small and fragile yes to life, to fight against the love of death and the worshipping of killings, and to engender hope for the survival of humankind in peace and justice on earth.⁹

My book *The Spirit of Life*, 1991, brought me surprisingly into contact with the oldest and the youngest churches, with the Orthodox theology of Dumitru Staniloae in Romania and with the Pentecostal theology of Yonggi Cho in Korea. With the Orthodox I agreed on a trinitarian doctrine of the spirit without the Western *filioque*. We had discussed this and decided this in the Klingenthal conferences of Faith and Order in 1978 and 1979.¹⁰ With the Pentecostals in Korea and Latin America I agreed on a new eschatological interpretation of the experience of the energies of the life-giving spirit. They are not only fire from heaven but powers of the world to come, as we read in Hebrews 6:5. The old eschatological interpretation of the spirit in Pentecostal circles was dispensationalist: the world is aging, and today is the last stage of the world. I convinced at least some of them of a new, dynamic hope eschatology. And with this I come to my last point.

A Theology of the Future

The future of theology is for me a theology of the coming God. You wouldn't have expected anything else from me, would you? All theological efforts of my life have been dedicated to an ecumenical Christian theology of the coming of God.¹¹ But it is completely uncertain whether coming generations of theologians will follow me. After all, we, some 50 years ago, didn't follow our teachers either. The future of theology may emerge totally differently from what we old prophets expect. The main thing is not this

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, "A Culture of Life in the Dangers of This Time," delivered as the keynote lecture at the Beijing Forum, 2010, published in J. Moltmann, T. Eberhart, MCharlton, eds., *The Economy of Salvation: Festschrift for Douglas Meeks* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2015), 136-66.

¹⁰ See Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Spirit of God – Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy*, Faith and Order Paper 103 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981).

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, transl James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); *idem*, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Do-Hoon Kim and Seoung-Gyu Park, eds., *A World-changing Theology: 50th Anniversary of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope, Commemorative Volume* (Seoul: Presbyterian University and Seminary Press, 2015).

or another tradition but to begin anew with the origin of Christian faith. I have only a few remarks on the theology of the coming of God.

The conversion to the future

The future is, for any messianic theology, not only an eschatological topic but also a broad place – *der weite Raum*– where theology can move its ideas freely and hopefully. As birds need fresh air to fly, Christian theology needs the wide space of God – *makom* in Hebrew. With *The Theology of Hope*, in 1964, I participated in a general conversion to the future that happened after World War II, prepared by philosophers who developed their ideas before World War I, such as Alfred North Whitehead and Ernst Bloch. The WCC followed with the Uppsala assembly in the important year 1968, under the banner “Behold I make all things new,” and the various liberation theologies spoke for the future of the poor and hopeless and desperate people.

Christian hope is not only a hope for eternity but also a messianic hope for our concrete future, an immanent transcendence. We seek freedom and salvation in the coming dangers and take our chances. This messianic hope is a healing power against the cynicism of the powerful and against the apathy of the powerless. “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope,” as Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed in 1963.

The God of hope is a coming God

This is the God who is and was and is to come. God is not the eternal unchangeable, not the unrelated absolute who is and was and will be the same from eternity to eternity, but the God who has made the future of the world to God’s time and who is coming to fill heaven and earth with divine life and divine truth and divine righteousness. This is the promise of Israel’s *Shekinah*/exodus story and of Christ’s incarnation/resurrection story and is even the last word in the New Testament – “Surely I come quickly. Amen, even so, come Lord Jesus.” In the end the beginning, that is the second point.

Whoever thinks about the future of our world meets with pessimistic apocalyptic speculations about the end of the world, in religion as well as in literature and movies. The end has always a certain fascination. For whom? Especially for the richer nations and upper classes who think that they have something to lose. Immanuel Kant spoke of the end of all things, Hegel about the end of history. The Protestant eschatology of the Lutheran Paul Althaus has the title, *Die letzten Dinge* – the last things; and the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthazar calls the last book in his theo-drama series *Das Endspiel* – the final match.

I started my theology with the resurrection of Christ. This is the unique eschatological event in this world of sin and death, in this history of violence and killing. The future that this eschatological event opens up has nothing to do with the end, but on the contrary with the beginning: the beginning of eternal life, the beginning of the new creation of all things, the beginning of the glory of the coming God. This eschatology is not about the last things of this world, but about the first things of the world to come. Resurrection Christianity is totally eschatological, but in the beginning of the new is included the end of the old. When the new comes, the old is passing away, and the beginning of the new is the end of the old.

Hope and thinking

What hope brings into our reason is an immanent transcending.¹² Thinking means transcending – *Denken heisst Überschreiten* – said Ernst Bloch, and this wording is on his gravestone. By the power of hope we are crossing the limits of the present into the future, without anxiety. Transcending means crossing the limits of reality into the sphere of the possible. The firm land of reality is always surrounded by an ocean of possibilities. The realized possibilities are only a small part of the possible realities. For modern metaphysics, Martin Heidegger, Whitehead, and Bloch, possibility stands above reality and the future stands above the past.

Imagination is our reason dealing with our possibilities. Imagination – *Einbildungskraft* – is the capacity for conceiving something without its being present to the senses, said Kant. If we remember, we remember not only past realities but also past possibilities, we remember unrealized possibilities for good or evil. When we anticipate our future, our productive imagination works on our possibilities. We always imagine the next step. Without our everyday imaginative power, we could not live at all. In visions, dreams and projects we go to the limits of the impossible in order to exhaust our possible. The students in the Paris uprising in 1968 cried, “Let’s be realists, we want the impossible.” If one is a realist, one believes in possible miracles and at least is open to surprising openings. Eschatological thinking is, to put it simply, thinking something through to the end. It makes a difference whether we think of death at the end of life or resurrection, whether we expect the annihilation of the world as the end of all things or the new creation of all things. The theological power of imagination sees this mortal life in the future of the eternal life which comes, and this human history in the future of the coming God’s judgment and kingdom. Eschatological thinking draws

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *Hoffen und Denken: Beiträge zur Zukunft der Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vlyun: Neukirchener Verlag, 2016).

God's future into the human present and opens the human present for God's coming. Thinking means transcending the frontiers *in* this world. Eschatological thinking means crossing the frontiers *of* this world. In this way Christian theology becomes a truly *theologia viatorum*, a theology of the wandering people of God.

This is all I have to offer to our common future of theology.