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Hermeneutical theology*

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Abstract

As in modernity appropriation has become more important than dedication and communication, the modern Narcissus, captured in self-relation, sees only his own projections. A change of the polarity of our attention is therefore necessary: from the human who appropriates to the God who communicates, who is *himself* a hermeneut. This means that neither Schleiermacher's nor Bultmann's hermeneutic of regression should be followed; both are shy of talking about the God who is not only already in us, but who *comes* to us – and this advent is mediated through creaturely means. God the creator is – in accordance with the Nicene Creed – the 'Poet', the one who does what he says, and says what he does. This communication needs a space of hearing and reading; its text vindicates the relative autonomy over the author as well as over the reader. The human being in its modern subjectivity ignores this and either transcends the text (Hegel and Barth) or goes behind the text (Schleiermacher and Bultmann). Instead, the aim should be to have a relationship, an engagement with the text, to have, quite frankly, 'intercourse' with it, as Luther translates 'meditatio'. The crucial question is therefore not: 'How do I understand the given biblical text?', but 'How does the given biblical text give itself to me to understand it – so that *I* am understood?'

I. Changing the polarity of our attention: from the human who appropriates to the God who communicates

I.1 God as hermeneut

Christian theology is *hermeneutical* theology. The adjective can only be understood analytically: it simply unpacks what Christian theology is in its essence, if its core, referring to the resurrected, crucified one, can be summed up as a German hymn does: 'God becomes man – O man, for your sake' [EG 36.2].

In such self-communication God himself is *a hermeneut*, an interpreter: he himself accomplishes the hard work of translation, from his heavenly language into our earthly human language. He does not shy away from giving himself completely to the world, becoming so fully human that he dies on the cross.

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For 200 years it has become customary to speak of God's self-communication as his 'revelation'; the use of this concept has long become inflated and unspecific. It is far more appropriate, precise and telling to speak not of 'revelation theology' but of 'hermeneutical theology'. This highlights the *linguistic* character of God's self-communication, and at the same time its character as a *process* and as *temporal*: God takes time for his work of translation.

Furthermore, the word 'hermeneutic' is an appropriate designation of Christian theology for another reason, relating to the history of the concept of hermeneutics. As Gadamer states, hermeneutics 'is related to the sacred sphere, in which an authoritative will discloses to the listener an orientation he can follow'.[1] At any rate this word aptly characterises the cascade from the speaking God to the receptive human being: the asymmetry of receiving and passing on, hearing and speaking, reading and writing, in short of authority and critique.[2]

We in the present day need to be reminded of this point – since it is no longer vivid in the academic theoretical consciousness – 'although the principle forms in which hermeneutics was developed, the juristic interpretation of law and the theological or philosophical interpretation of sacred or classical texts, still imply the original normative sense'.[3]

I.2 The modern Narcissus

Instead of emphasising the authoritative gift given in advance, which empowers us to understand and think, modernity emphasises the task of interpreting and understanding what is given. *Appropriation has become more important than dedication and communication*. For the modern Narcissus[4] even hermeneutical 'reason only has insight into what it itself has produced corresponding to its own projections'.[5] So it becomes the 'highest task of education' 'to appropriate one's transcendental Self, and at the same time to become the Self of my Self'.[6] In this understanding of education, what is heard and read only exists by the grace of the human interpreter and

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Hermeneutik', HWP 3 (Darmstadt, 1974) (Sp. 1061–1073), 1062.

[2] Cf. Oswald Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik. Zu Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Tübingen, 1991), summarising pp. 1–8.

[3] Gadamer, 'Hermeneutik'.

[4] Cf. Oswald Bayer, 'The Modern Narcissus', in *Gott als Autor. Zu einer poietologischen Theologie* (Tübingen, 1999), pp. 73–85 (= 'The Modern Narcissus', *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 [1995], pp. 301–13).

[5] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B XIII (2nd edn, p. 13).

[6] Novalis, *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (of Friedrich Schlegel), not fundamentally altered, under the title 'Blüthenstaub', printed in the first piece of the journal *Athenaeum* (1798), ed. A. W. and F. Schlegel, in *Schriften*, the works of Friedrich von Hardenberg, ed.

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his interpretative activity, by the grace of the human heart – a heart that in effect *writes* the fiction that it claims to interpret, and in this way constructs meaning.

1.3 The hermeneutic of regression

In the face of this narcissistic self-relation, indeed self-grounding, asserted by his contemporaries, it was the philosophical and theological achievement of a man in revolt against his time to argue that the fundamental human situation is 'the feeling of absolute dependence'.[7] It was Schleiermacher who accomplished this – but at the price of seeing 'God' as where this feeling comes from, which is necessarily entailed[8] – perhaps imprisoned? – in this feeling. The fundamental form of all propositions of a Christian doctrine of faith exist in relation to the immediate religious self-consciousness.[9]

Subjectivity for Schleiermacher is not titanic, self-made, but rather experienced as something given and thus passive. The 'God' concealed in this passivity, however, is locked up within it[10] as the 'Where-From' of this feeling of absolute dependence. So one can only speak of God's immanence. Schleiermacher can no longer say that God speaks to me and in this way comes to me. Because God is always already there, imprisoned in my immediate religious self-consciousness, he cannot *come* to me.

True, Schleiermacher will have nothing to do with 'taking possession of one's transcendental self',[11] with a self-grounding which he rejects. But he does not hold back from asserting a self-ascertaining, which requires effects in the subject as a criterion of truth: all utterances about God must be related to the immediate religious self-consciousness. In this way Schleiermacher ventures into the modern situation – not without a clear contradiction, as we have seen. But one must ask whether he has not honoured the modern Narcissus a little too respectfully, with the principle which he believes should determine Christian doctrine: that all propositions about God and the world are to be reduced to what he calls the 'fundamental form', which for him consists in self-consciousness.

Schleiermacher's explicit hermeneutic follows in the wake of this reduction. It is unmistakably a hermeneutic of regression, or differently

P. Kluckhohn/R. Samuel, vol. 2, *The Philosophical Work I* (1960), p. 425 (numbered Fragment no. 28 by the editor). Cf. the variant: p. 424 (no. 28).

[7] F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* § 4.4.

[8] Ibid., 'mitgesetzt'.

[9] Ibid., § 30.3 ('Grundform').

[10] Ibid., § 4.4 ('The "absolute dependence" as "fundamental relation" encloses at once the consciousness of God within self-consciousness').

[11] See n. 6 above.

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put, a *hermeneutic of expression*.[12] This is repeated in Bultmann's hermeneutic, although his concept of kerygma claims to take up Luther's theology of the word.[13] The fundamental trait which Schleiermacher and Bultmann have in common lies in their shyness about talking directly about God who speaks, and not in the reflecting mirror of the human being who receives God's word. If for Schleiermacher the 'fundamental form' of all propositions of Christian doctrine are in relation to the immediate religious self-consciousness, Bultmann too speaks up for such indirect speech of God, thus joining in the anthropological turn of modernity: 'We can only say of God what he does to us.'[14]

I.4 The human person as a being which strives for something

In what sense Bultmann joins in this anthropological turn is shown clearly from the formula of his programme: 'belief and understanding'. 'Understanding', as in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, is an existential,[15] in other words a fundamental, anthropological concept. Bultmann deploys it in his portrayal of Paul, which is paradigmatic for his own theology, by dealing with the 'formal structures' of human being in general[16] *before* the thematisation of the material-ontic opposition of sin and faith: the basic formal-ontological anthropological concepts – without realising that he is following the layout of Schleiermacher's famous book *The Christian Faith*.[17]

According to this concept of understanding, the human being is the being that understands itself as striving for something – whether, in sin, towards him- or herself, in pure self-relation, or in faith, striving towards God. Both the ancient philosophy of striving and desire and the modern

[12] Cf. O. Bayer, 'Doctrine of the Word or Doctrine of Faith? Towards the Constitution of Theological Systematics in the Conflict between Schleiermacher and Luther', in *idem*, *Autorität und Kritik*, pp. 156–68. See further Bayer, *Theologie* (HST 1; Gütersloh, 1994), pp. 463–74.

[13] See below, n. 24.

[14] R. Bultmann, *What does it mean to speak of God?* (1925); *Glauben und Verstehen [Faith and Understanding]* 1 (Tübingen, 1961), pp. 26–37; cited is W. Hermann, *The Reality of God* (1914) in Hermann, *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie* 2, ed. P. Fischer-Appelt (Munich, 1967), pp. 290–317, at 314.

[15] M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit [Being and Time]* (Tübingen, [1927] 1960), p. 87 and §§ 31f.

[16] R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, German edn (Tübingen, 1958), §§ 17–20, quote p. 193.

[17] Cf. Bayer, *Theologie*, pp. 481f. However, is the exhibition of the formal-ontological anthropological fundamental concepts in Schleiermacher and Bultmann then not essentially identical with Luther's explanation of the first commandment in the Great Catechism, according to which 'trust and faith of the heart only give to God or an idol' (BSLK 560.16f)? On this point see Bayer, *Theologie*, pp. 471f.

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interpretation of Luther's famous formula of the correlation of God and faith, which characterises neo-Protestantism, are taken up in this fundamental anthropological characterisation of human being as striving for something. This view concentrates primarily on the striving of the human heart as such – whether in its formal structure or in its material-ontic qualification – and only secondarily, in regression and inference, on its ground and object. Theology is then the 'conceptual explication of the existence of faith'.[18]

1.5 What the human being can rely on

In contrast to this hermeneutic of understanding as striving for something, a hermeneutical theology which concentrates its attention on God as hermeneut asks first and last about *what* I am striving for, and *what* I can rely on, *from whom* I can expect the good, yes the very best, and *whom* I can call on in every need for rescue, because vouchsafing mercy and goodness that grant being are *promised* to me: 'I, I will give you enough and will help you out of all need, just let your heart neither hang nor rest on any other.'[19]

Thus it is necessary to take our starting point as the word, understood as the promise which encounters us, and not as the self-understanding of faith; it is necessary to define the human being who receives according to God who speaks and not proceed the other way around.[20] Then the

[18] R. Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, ed. E. Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen, 1984), p. 163.

[19] M. Luther, *Great Catechism*, Explanation of the first commandment, BSLK 560.40–42 (text modernised).

[20] Luther's polemical remarks (WA TR 3.669–674 [No. 3868; on 10 May 1538], esp. 670.18f.) on the visionaries: 'definiunt verbum non secundum dicentem Deum, sed secundem recipientem hominem' ('Define and regard the word therefore not according to God who speaks it, but according to the human person who receives it': 673.3f.), can indeed be directed against a principle of epistemology that is not only modern but ancient: 'receptum est in recipiente per modum recipientis' (Thomas Aquinas, ST I, q. 84, a. 1; cf. ST II/2, q.1, a. 2). This principle's reversal does not mean that the person in faith is not involved through the *deus dicens*, but is empowered by faith in confession of God to attribute what is his and in this way to become a 'creatrix divinitatis', albeit only 'in nobis': 'Fides est creatrix divinitatis, non in person, sed in nobis' (WA 40 I, 360.5f: on Gal 3:6; 1531). Luther's polemic against visionaries shows that the polarity of our attention from the word to faith, and with it the displacement of the foundation of theology onto psychology, was not first rejected by theologians of the twentieth century as heretical. *Pace* E. Herms, 'Die Bedeutung der "Psychologie" für die Konzeption des Wissenschaftssystems beim späten Schleiermacher', in *Schleiermacher und die wissenschaftliche Kultur des Christentums*, ed. G. Meckenstock and J. Ringleben (TBT 51; Berlin/New York, 1991), pp. 369–401, at 401.

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task of theology is different to Bultmann's task in his reference to the 'hermeneutic of Dasein',[21] of existence, as Heidegger develops in *Being and Time*. If in Heidegger, philosophy anchors the end of the thread of all philosophical questioning at the point from which it arises and to which it returns in the analysis of existence,[22] and if the corresponding proposition in late Wittgenstein is that philosophy anchors the end of the thread of all philosophical questioning at the point from which it arises and to which it returns in the analysis of *language*, then the answer to the question of the task of theology could be formulated programmatically: *theology anchors the end of the thread of all theological questioning at the point from which it arises and to which it returns in the analysis of the language of the promise of God*.

This, however, indicates that the object of theology can be found neither in surmounting the word in knowledge (Hegel) and action (Kant and Marx), nor in undermining the word for something more original which allegedly lies at its foundation, which therefore can be discovered in a hermeneutic of regression (Schleiermacher[23]).[24]

II. God and Word, not primarily religion and faith

In contrast to Bultmann's existential interpretation,[25] anyone who thinks dedication and communication are more important than appropriation in the search for the form of theology as hermeneutical theology, who takes a critical stance to the modern conception of religion and faith as it has developed with the anthropological turn of modernity, will rehabilitate the concept of 'theology'[26] and focus on 'God' and 'Word' instead of 'religion' and 'faith'.

This rehabilitation of the concept of 'theology' claims to be nothing less than a rival enterprise to Schleiermacher's concept of religion and

[21] See below, n. 22.

[22] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 38 ('Philosophy is the universal phenomenological ontology, starting from the hermeneutic of dasein, which . . . as the analytic of *existence* . . . anchors the end of the thread of all philosophical questioning at the point from which it arises and to which it returns').

[23] On the corresponding typology of three as a way of grasping the situation of theology for the last 200 years, see Bayer, *Theologie*, pp. 453–87 ('Umformungen; das Problem der Säkularisierung').

[24] As I have expressly pointed out in my critical portrayal of Bultmann's theology (Bayer, *Theologie*). E. Jüngel, *Glauben und Verstehen. Zum Theologiebegriff Rudolf Bultmanns* (Heidelberg, 1985), offers a different assessment of the importance of the encountering word in Bultmann and its relation to Luther.

[25] Cf. Bayer, *Theologie*, pp. 475–84.

[26] On the history of the concept, see O. Bayer and A. Peters, 'Theologie', *HWP* 10 (1998), 1080–1095.

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faith. It can be argued that this proposed concept of theology is not only different to Schleiermacher's concept of religion and faith, but further is more comprehensive and at the same time more specific; it has greater breadth and at the same time greater precision.

So we should rethink the concept of 'theology' in a critical relation to the modern conception of religion and faith, because it contains and can reclaim and revalidate both those elements that in the modern conception of religion and faith threaten to sink and disappear, indeed, have already sunk and disappeared. These two elements are contained in the word 'theo-logy' itself: 'God' and 'Word'.

God in Schleiermacher's conception of religion and faith is no longer seen as objective and personal, and neither is the 'Word', which is understood as a secondary expression of an 'immediate existential relation'[27] and correspondingly is mastered through a hermeneutic of regression. Bultmann shares this hermeneutic of regression.

Nevertheless it can easily be understood how this de-objectification happened; how it was downright forced upon them as a life-and-death solution to a literally deadly conflict. They sought to avoid the suffering caused by the confessions fighting in bloody wars of religion and civil wars, by trying to go back behind the confessional forms of Christendom to an essence of Christianity and behind the 'positive', that is, concrete, actual religions to an essence of religion, its 'nature'. In short: out of political necessity, religion became a private matter.

The price was high: the objectivity and personality of God as well as the constitutive linguistic modes – oral as well as written – of encountering God, his meeting us in the word, were no longer taken seriously. But this precisely is what it is important for us to reclaim – albeit, as the Augsburg Confession says (CA 28),[28] 'without human power, but by the word alone', no longer bound up with political power claims.

From its etymology the word 'theology' can call our attention to the fact that God and Word belong together. Because God himself is a hermeneut, theology must be hermeneutical theology. Its meaning we must now unpack further.

III. Hermeneutical theology as characterised by creation theology

Theology as hermeneutical theology will realise its breadth and depth only in meditation on creation theology – presupposing that the doctrine of creation is developed as a theology of the

[27] F. Schleiermacher, first letter to Lücke, SW I/2 (Berlin, 1836), p. 586.
[28] Luther, BSLK 124.9.

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word and reflected in the philosophy of language.[29] In developing this thesis I will limit myself to only two, albeit decisive, dimensions of the doctrine of creation: first the dimension concerning the doctrine of God itself (III.1); and then I will briefly consider creation as temporal and spatial communication (III.2).

III.1 God as 'poet', language and being

> As he speaks, so it happens. (Ps 33.9)

God does what he says, and says what he does; his speech works, and his work speaks – his work is not anonymous. The title of poet is most appropriate to characterise explicitly this linguistic nature of God's omnipotence, his creativity. The Greek word *poietes* means one who not only speaks and writes, but also makes things. This title was used in the Nicene Creed: 'I believe in God, . . . the Poet'.[30] Even if this was hardly the intention of the fathers of the council of 325, this title best expresses the fact that God's speaking and God's acting are one and the same: in his works that speak and his speech that works, God is a 'poet'. At the same time, this title also describes the scriptural mode of encounter with his speaking and acting: God speaks and acts as a 'writer', an 'author'. God is an 'author' and 'poet' in a specific way: as the Lord and protector of the reliable Word, in giving himself with his name, with his promise, his self-introduction: 'I am the Lord, your God!'

By 'word' I mean more precisely the true universal community of communication, the community of the justified sinner, amongst their fellow creatures – as well as the authority that creates this community.

God's own 'being' is 'Word' (John 1) – if it makes sense or indeed if it is necessary, to ascribe 'being' to God analogously to the being that is created by him. God's own 'being' as Word is the power of communication and empowers us to communicate. As 'Lord' and 'creator' he, the triune God, institutes and preserves community.

In his debate with Jacobi, Hamann wrote: 'Original Being is truth; imparted [being] is grace.'[31] Original being, truth, is nothing other than God's name. A different Archimedean point: 'I do not know other than His word, his oath, and his "I am" and "will be", in which the whole majesty of his old and new name consists.'[32]

[29] For a doctrine of creation worked out systematically as a theology of word, see O. Bayer, 'Schöpfer/Schöpfung' VIII. Systematisch-theologisch, *TRE* 30 (1999), pp. 326–48.

[30] BSLK 26.25.

[31] J. G. Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 5, ed. A. Henkel (Wiesbaden, 1965), p. 271, lines 28f. (to Jacobi, 1784).

[32] Ibid., p. 333, lines 18–20 (to Jacobi, 1785).

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By power of his name God the author imparts himself to the human person and all creatures, and in such sharing he himself accomplishes the hard work of translation, in which he does not shy away from giving himself wholly to the world, becoming human and dying on the cross. In his pride the author is humble. In his omnipotence he accommodates himself in love to our weakness, and addresses the creature through the creature. God is the poet who speaks in the *genus humile*, in the humble genre.

At this point the problem of the doctrine of God arises, and this excursus will briefly go into the doctrine of *God's attributes* implicit in the hermeneutical theology that I am proposing.

If God, his mystery notwithstanding, completely expresses and imparts himself in his trinitarian proper names, then the apparent plurality of divine attributes that are found in the biblical text in the form of nouns, adjectives and participles cannot be relativised into an unnameable divine essence which we must honour in silence; and secondly, the attributes cannot only describe the human ways and means 'of relating to the feeling of absolute dependence' (Schleiermacher, §50). Rather, God interprets himself in his incarnation (John 1:18), and thereby welcomes anthropomorphisms; he lets himself be named and narrated in human language. Because he imparts himself in the word, in faith we have a share in his attributes – in all of them. We should give up the idea of a difference between those than can be imparted and those that cannot; if it is true that God 'has given himself to all of us completely with everything that he is and has' (WA 26, 505, 38f.)

In the sense of John 1:14, God's attributes express a communicative identity, closely connected to the temporal, spatial and scriptural event before Pontius Pilate, between God and humanity, time and eternity, infinite and finite, omnipotence and impotence. God's eternal being, in which he keeps faith with himself and his promise in fidelity, and his temporal coming, with which he suffers himself to enter into the creation corrupted by sin, even unto death on a cross, are unconfused, untransmuted, unseparated, undivided. Correspondingly the theology that reflects on God's attributes moves between mythology and metaphysics – albeit critically.

With metaphysics, theology speaks of God's unity, truth, goodness and beauty – and thereby of the 'transcendentals': one, true, good, beautiful; but in the sharpest contrast to metaphysics, it understands these in the sense of the *communicatio idiomatum*, the crossover of attributes found in the christological doctrine of the two natures, and explicates everything further in terms of trinitarian theology.

With mythology, theology speaks of God's coming, his acting, his moving, even his changing (Hos 11:8). But in critique of mythology all thoughts of metamorphosis are rejected: as if 'divinity could be transformed into

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humanity' (BSLK 30.3f.) and God in his death on the cross ceased to be God.

The communicative identity of God and humanity is the ultimate of what can be said of God. 'God is love' (1 John 4:8–16). This last sentence of the doctrine of God's attributes does not rule as a timeless principle – thus, we cannot conceive of some theoretical demonstration that would force it into agreement with the other attributes with it now, as long as we are not, as Paul says, living by the sight [of God] but by faith (2 Cor 5:7). Rather, the doctrine of the attributes also must accommodate itself to that interweaving of times in which we live: God's new creation makes the old world pass away, and recreates the original creation, while the salvation which communicates itself in the present guarantees the consummation of the world that is to come. Salvation which imparts itself in the present – the word from the cross – vouches for the future fulfilment of the world and leads us to the painful experience of the contradiction between the suffering and sighing creature of the old world, and the promised creation, the original world. Corresponding to this rupture in time, God befalls us in his wrath, in which he convicts us of sin, differently than he meets us in forgiving love, different again than his forbearance, in which he preserves the old world towards his future, all the more different is he however when we encounter his terrifying hiddenness, in which he – impenetrably to us – brings about life and death, all in all. Theology slays the enthusiastic impatience, which tempts us to make sense of the wrath and forbearance, above all that terrifying hiddenness, as a form of love. God's unity as love and thereby the unity of time as eternity in the salvation of the ruptures of time cannot be rendered coherent by us and for us; otherwise complaint and petition would be superfluous. His unity in love is rather only a matter of doxology: the ground and object of professing faith and the hope that lies within it.

Wrath, forbearance and hiddenness are essential and not accidental properties of God, insofar as we are dealing with God himself in experiencing them, and not only with some action that is different from his being. Yet in his incomprehensible, terrifying hiddenness, precisely there where we have nothing to do with him, we are still dealing with 'God' and not with some human fiction – albeit not in a certain, grounded and reliable manner; otherwise we couldn't flee from the *deus absconditus* to the God who became man, the revealed God, who is love through and through.

When God is acknowledged as one and all and glorified in doxology, despite the wrath and love, forbearance and hiddenness, or something else – all of which, for us, are irreducibly different – then one cannot speak univocally of the omnipotence that is implicit in all his attributes. The omnipotence of his love is different for us from that of his incomprehensible,

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terrifying hiddenness, different yet again from the omnipotence of his wrath or of his forbearance. So 'omnipotence' can only function as an *ambiguous metapredicate*. As such, however, it is inescapable. Not only because 'omnipotence' as a single property is found in the creed, but because it is more appropriate and revealing perhaps than 'absolute causality' (Schleiermacher) or 'infinity' (Pannenberg appealing to Gregory of Nyssa), which for reasons internal to theology makes it possible to engage with the study of religions and philosophy of religion; and might make concrete a provisional paraphrase of the word 'God' understood as a *nomen appellativum*, not least as it is used in the term 'all-determining reality'.

If, like Karl Barth in his battle against every form of natural theology, you abolish the distinction between *nomen appellativum* and *nomen proprium*, and treat the doctrine of attributes exclusively as an explication of the proper name of God (*CD* II/1), you must necessarily make the doctrine of the trinity which interprets God's proper name into a general doctrine of God. In this case you will follow the post-Christian natural theology that has developed since Lessing and Kant, and reached its completed form in Hegel. With this monism, metaphysics, in its will to monarchic unity, subdues even the doctrine of the trinity and compels it to a final justification.

This irreducible difference between wrath and love, forbearance and hiddenness, clearly demands a renunciation of the temptation to abolish this difference in principle in favour of love, as a kind of theoretical monism. This renunciation does not lead to Manichaeism, but rather perhaps to an 'Orthotomy' (2 Tim 2:15) (teaching the truth correctly), in the real-life perception of our situation between gospel and law, between the God definitively revealed in the Word and his terrifying hiddenness; between living by faith and by sight in the rupture of the times, between the old and the new man, who must still relate to the old man until his death. This does not mean constant oscillation between the two. For God's last and definitive word and work is love. This God whom we must experience in ambiguous omnipotence, as long as we are still en route, we can already call on as a kind and merciful father; and what perhaps is only possible in the light of the world and the certainty that overcomes the ruptures of times, is that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:31–9).

III.2 Temporal and spatial communication; a space of hearing and reading

The *linguistic* character of God's self-communication earlier described as characteristic of a hermeneutical theology, as already emphasised at the outset, is at the same time its *character as process* and as *temporal*. What understanding of time and space is entailed by this thesis?

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If you start with the notion of a singular abstract concept of time and space, with the notion of a 'pure' time and a 'pure' space, you will not gain an understanding of times and spaces – in the plural – as God's *creations*. The transcendental aesthetic of singular time and space with its purism requires a metacritical turn. This can be seen in that basic event of communication, in which different times and spaces to live in are given to me undeservedly along with all creatures, as rooms to dwell in are prepared in the house of the world, and, interwoven with the times, rest in the hand of the creator (Ps 31:16). This occurs by power of the kind and merciful creator's word, that does not only create, promise and share times and spaces, but also addresses us through them and in them: God creates the world not in a single moment, but rather takes time and space for his creation; the world is made *cum* tempore et spatio *in* tempore et spatio (*with* time and space, *in* time and space) (contra Augustine, *City of God* 11.6).

As the experience of time created through the world has its physiological basis and matrix, so too does the experience of space created through the world; our receptive reason is bodily bound. If time has its bodily measure in the rhythm of the heartbeat and breath as well as other basic rhythms, so too by feeling and seeing we gain the economy of space; corresponding to the eye that sees is the hand that draws and writes. The *homo pictor* who articulates and figures his world acts synaesthetically with the *homo loquens*; one's speaking acts synaesthetically with one's writing, the sound with the letter, language with script. The perception of space and time rests essentially on this synaesthesia; neither can be perceived on its own, but rather can concretely only be perceived in a reciprocal and mutual interpenetration.

From this insight of creation theology we find: *the human being, as a 'language-being'* (as we would say in German), *lives in a space of hearing and reading, outlined by letters and sounds*. Now in proper English: *the human being, who is essentially shaped by language, lives in a space of hearing and reading, outlined by letters and sounds.*

If the human language-being is perceived in his or her time and space as hearing and reading, writing and speaking, singing and telling, then we can develop an aesthetic that concerns not only a segment of reality, not for instance only a religious territory, but rather concerns reality and the world as a whole. The whole world and reality is a word that gives itself to me to hear, which I may answer, or which I as a sinner misrecognise, which I as a sinner do not hear, indeed do not want to hear, do not want to read; the deception, the lies of life spring from this.

The true transcendental aesthetic concerns the linguistic time and space of the human person and his world. We can infer the decisive structuring elements of this aesthetic if we take the Greek word *akoe* in all its dimensions. It has a fourfold meaning: *akoe* means firstly what you hear with, the

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capacity of hearing, theologically, the receptive ability to hear, to which I am empowered; secondly, the act and the mode of hearing, that and how I hear; third, that which is heard, what I receive; and fourth, that which is said, what is brought to hearing.

These four elements determine the linguistic time and space of the human person and its world as a space of hearers. Correspondingly the field of vision is a space for readers. Wherein does the riddle of the book lie – the riddle of the world as a book, that is written, and can be read, disclosed through the bible? Does the riddle lie in the intention of the author? Or in the mind of the reader?

These questions set in play a game in which we can work out this proposed hermeneutic. It concerns nature as much as history, and is at the same time ontology. How does the 'content', communicated by 'language', the substance, relate to the subject that appropriates it? Should we emphasise and think about language – understood as speech, as speech-act – more as substance in its positivity, or more related to the freedom of the subject who hears? Or does 'language', the communication process as such, decide the question, so that the question of the *mens auctoris*, the intention of the author, and the mind of the interpreter, the reader, is a non-question and the alternatives dissolve, because 'we are a dialogue'?[33]

IV. The relative autonomy of the text

What has been expounded up to now corresponds to a specific theory of the text. *It vindicates the relative autonomy of the text over against the author as well as over against the reader.*

Last year I expanded this in the context of two major figures in the theology and church history of the twentieth century: Barth and Bultmann, critically related to Paul Ricoeur.

Ricoeur sets out a hermeneutic which, differently from existential interpretation, is freed from the monarchy of subjectivity. Self-understanding arises only on the 'detour' through 'signs', 'symbols' and 'texts'[34] – precisely through the fact that they are written, through their resistance and relative autonomy.[35] For Ricoeur, to understand oneself means to understand oneself 'before the text' and be understood by the text. According to him, one takes

[33] F. Hölderlin, 'Versöhnender, der du nimmer geglaubt . . . ', 3rd version (in *Groß Stuttgarter Ausg.*, ed. F. Beissner, vol. 2, 1st half, 1951), 137, 50.

[34] P. Ricoeur, 'Erzählung, Metapher und Interpretationstheorie', *ZThK* 84 (1987), pp. 232–53.

[35] P. Ricoeur, *Philosophische und theologische Hermeneutik*, in P. Ricoeur and E. Jüngel, *Metapher. Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache* [Supplement of *EvTh*] (1974), pp. 24–45.

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from the text the conditions of a self that is different from the self as it was before reading and being read, as it were. The self cannot mediate itself with itself directly; it lives off the text that gives itself for reflection.

IV.1 Transcending the text (Hegel and Barth)

Whoever understands oneself 'before' the text and lets oneself be detained by it, no longer seeks, as Karl Barth does, to uncover 'the connection of the words to the one Word in the words', to whittle down the difference between the biblical text and its reader and interpreter so far that I 'almost forget that I am not the author' and 'have almost understood the text so well, that I can let it speak in my own name'.[36]

We see here that modern subjectivity even dominates the theology of Barth. This subjectivity assimilates to itself all otherness, all differance, everything over against me – however, in Barth as in Hegel, with the presupposition that the object of knowledge is also the subject, and is the Lord that assimilates me to himself. For Hegel, when I am conceiving God, it is God that is conceiving me: the object of my thought is in reality the subject who is conceiving me. Nevertheless the reflection that follows the self-movement of the object produced by the subject has cut itself loose from the writing, from the text in its resistance and autonomy. Such Hegelian thinking as sublation into the concept does not remain before the text, but rather moves into it, trying to go behind it – impatiently anticipating its eschatological fulfilment.

IV.2 Going behind the text (Schleiermacher and Bultmann)

Bultmann and Schleiermacher go behind the text in a fashion different to Barth and Hegel. The romantic hermeneutic embodied in modern philosophical and theological awareness takes the text as an objectivation of an immediate existential relation seeking expression. They seek the meaning of the text by reaching behind the text to an experience which lies at its ground. Often the meaning of the text is identified with the intention of the author, which one realises as one's own possibilities for existence.

So we see a twofold impatience to get from the text to the self-understanding of the author and to the self-understanding of his readers, and both as quickly as possible, directly, and without any detours. Ricoeur has sharply criticised Bultmann's demythologising programme as existential interpretation: 'There is no exegesis without a "content and substance of meaning"; this lies in the text and is not grounded in the author of

[36] Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (1922), p. xii (Preface).

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the text.'[37] Concerning the second aspect, the attempt to appropriate the meaning of the text, he objects: 'A theory of interpretation that steers straight for the moment of decision proceeds too quickly; it leaps over the moment of meaning, that stands for the level of the objective.'[38]

IV.3 Intercourse with the text

In his insistence on the text and its relative autonomy over against the author and the reader, Ricoeur can help to rehabilitate Luther's concept of 'meditatio', and thereby his whole concept of theology, in a way that is philosophically reflective and related to the conflict of modern interpretations. By 'meditatio' Luther means: 'always engaging with the oral speech and literal word in the book, reading and re-reading, with diligent attention and deliberation what the Holy Spirit means by it, and all this not only with the heart, but also', as exercised in the liberal arts, with one's hands in writing and working, one's mouth in speaking and teaching.[39] The Jewish and Christian valuation of the written word stands in sharp contrast to the Platonic tradition which greatly privileges the oral dialogue over the written: 'The nature of the writing does not signify'.

If, on the other hand, the Holy Spirit binds itself so much to the sound *and* the letter, speech *and* writing, it should be self-evident to any doctrine of the Holy Spirit to employ the methods of structuralism and linguistic analysis. If such an approach is not set in stone, nor kept clear of the conflict of interpretations, then it will take care that the text preserves its own weight; and not to go over its head or use it up. Only then can one have a relationship with the text at all – have 'intercourse' with it, as Luther translates 'meditatio'. Then it will no longer be pushed aside as a rather disagreeable block on the way to the proper meaning; then one gladly allows oneself to be detained by the text – one dwells before it and close to it, takes pleasure in it; 'his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night' (Ps 1:2).

The scriptures are the breathing space of the Holy Spirit.[40] The word – the written as well as the spoken word – can be understood throughout as

[37] Paul Ricoeur, Foreword to the French edition of Bultmann's *Jesus* (1926) and *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1951), repr. in Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Structuralism: The Conflict of Interpretations I* (1973).

[38] Ibid.

[39] Martin Luther, Preface to the first volume of the German writings, 1539; WA 50 (657–661) 659.22–25; text modernised. Cf. Bayer, *Theologie*, pp. 83–95. In sharp contrast to the Jewish and Christian value placed on the 'literal' word, see Plato, *Phaedrus* 257b 7–278 b.

[40] Cf. Martin Tetz, 'Athanasius und die Einheit der Kirche. Zur ökumenischen Bedeutung eines Kirchenvaters', *ZThK* 81 (1984), pp. 196–219.

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'space'. 'See to it', says Luther, 'that you attend to God's word and stay within it like a child in the cradle.'[41] The scriptures are a space, a land, that supports us, in which I can freely move, go on voyages of discovery, have experiences. In the letter of dedication of his *Loci communes* of 1521 Melanchthon articulated this in his expectation 'that – whenever possible – all Christians may move freely in the Scriptures, and be transformed in their power and being. For there in the Scriptures divinity is brought into expression in its most perfect picture, and elsewhere it cannot be seen more certainly or more closely.'[42]

IV.4 Self-interpretation of the text

With his philosophical work on a theory of the text, which he considers as the connection between speech and writing, as a structured work, as a projection of a world and as the condition and mediation of every self-understanding, Ricoeur gives theology a decisive impulse towards reflection on its basis, its subject matter and its methods. He shows how inappropriate it is to ask: 'How do I understand the given biblical text?' – and why it is more fitting to prioritise the reverse question: 'How does the given biblical text give itself to me to understand it – so that I am understood?'

This would grant us a new ability to understand the genuine meaning of Luther's famous thesis, often misunderstood as merely an argument for internal interpretation in the sense of a concordance method, namely that 'the Holy Scripture interprets itself (*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*)'.[43] It is not interpreted by me. Rather, it is capable of interpreting itself, in that it interprets me, inscribes and judges my life history, so that the God who is identical with the author of the holy scriptures is the author of my life history.[44]

Ricoeur stresses: 'The subject does not constitute understanding, rather . . . the self is constituted by the "subject-matter" of the text.'[45] Such a sentence encourages us to understand the ontological argument in a linguistic and objective way, and to reflect on it hermeneutically: as self-proof of the author and poet that creates me and also gives himself to me to be reflected on, in his speaking work and his working speech.

[41] WA 19.498, 11f.

[42] P. Melanchthon, *Loci communes* (1521) (Latin–German), trans. and with commentary and notes by H. G. Pöhlmann (Gütersloh, 1993), p. 14: 'christianos omnes in solis divinis litteris liberrime versari et in illarum indolem plane transformari. Nam cum in illis absolutissmam sui imaginem expresserit divinitas, non poterit aliunde neque certius neque proprius cognosci.'

[43] WA 7.97.32. See Bayer, *Theologie*, pp. 101f.

[44] Bayer, *Gott als Autor*.

[45] Ricoeur, *Philosophische und theologische Hermeneutik*, p. 33.

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This does not give theology a compelling ultimate foundation for its propositions. Theology rather remains before the text and does not try to transcend it, and in doing so it has in the holy scriptures the 'divine Aeneid', as Luther called it in his last note:[46] an inexhaustible epic which theology never finishes, just as it never begins; so that the theologian would have an overview and an X-ray vision. What theology realises as something new, it realises before the text, to which it can only return, through resistance and temptation, but beyond which and behind which it can never go.

In contrast to the existential interpretation and the hermeneutic of regression associated with it, theology has its place 'before' the text in its strangeness and resistance. It cannot desire an 'immediate existential relation', but rather sees human existence not merely as secondary, but primarily conceived as linguistic – in concrete sounds and letters and thereby in space and time. Theology is then the 'grammar of the language of the Scriptures'.

V. Concluding remarks

With this understanding of theology as constitutively and essentially hermeneutical theology, theology is a doctrine of the word, not primarily a doctrine of faith.

The decisive feature of this hermeneutical theology is derived from creation theology. A hermeneutical ontology or an ontological hermeneutics can only be treated as a creation theology – more precisely, as a Christian creation theology, as it is constituted above all in the prologue of John's Gospel. If theology wants to characterise itself positively as a hermeneutical theology, in a critical relation both to mythology on the one side and metaphysics on the other,[47] then it will articulate its understanding of God and word – of God *as* word: as power of communication and the empowerment to communicate – in the space of this very text, the prologue of John. This word made flesh in the history of Jesus – this bodily word – is the mediator of creation as the definitive exegete and hermeneut of God. 'No-one has ever seen God; the only son, who is God and in the bosom of the Father, has made him known to us – interpreted him, narrated him' (John 1:18).

[46] WA TR 5.168, No. 5468 (quoting Statius). Cf. Bayer, *Gott als Autor*, pp. 279–300.

[47] Cf. ibid., pp. 21–7, 475–84, on the point that Bultmann is neither sufficiently metaphysically critical nor mythologically aware.

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