

## Editorial: German Theology in Contemporary Society

In October 2005 the Standing Committee of the Modern Churchpeople's Union was invited to Lambeth Palace for discussions with the Archbishop of Canterbury about the MCU's contribution to Christianity in modern Britain. One of the suggestions Dr. Williams made was to encourage an awareness of trends in theology in Europe and particularly in Germany. In response to the Archbishop's suggestion Professor Badham invited me, as a theologian from Tübingen now teaching at Lampeter, to edit an issue of *Modern Believing* which would be devoted to trends in modern German theology. I did not hesitate to accept this invitation since it was based on one or two questions I was repeatedly asked by my colleagues after arriving in Britain: What has become of German theology after the generation of the great German theologians of the 20th century, such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg? And why do we no longer hear about the trends among the younger generation of German theologians?

Against this background I approached six established representatives of the younger generation of German theologians and invited them to write for this issue. The selection of essays I've received may be read as a response to both of the above questions. It not only reveals recent trends in German theology; it also demonstrates why the cutting edges of German and Anglo-Saxon theologies are moving in different, if not opposite directions. I will try to explain this latter point in a little more detail.

In 2005 Rupert Shortt, religion editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement*, published a volume of interviews with christian thinkers, entitled *God's Advocates*, which may be read as a representative display of the cutting edge of contemporary Anglo Saxon theology. With a few exceptions and despite significant differences in orientation (black protestant, radical orthodox, feminist etc.) most of the contributors to this volume participate in the idea of a post-liberal 'turn to the sources'. In accordance with this trend the opening chapter of the volume provides an illuminating introduction, since it includes an interview with one of best-known intellectual mentors of the new theological generation, the above-mentioned Archbishop of Canter-

bury. In his interview Rowan Williams recalls a date which may be interpreted as the point of departure for the Anglo-American post-liberal turn:

When *The Myth of God Incarnate* appeared in 1977, I think many people felt that this was about as far as a particular kind of rational revisionism could go. So it was one of those moments when people did begin to turn towards other sources . . . . We shared a sense that we need to get ourselves out of this rather narrow and oddly cosy liberal environment into a slightly intellectually more rigorous, spiritually more challenging – and even alarming – world.<sup>1</sup>

Connecting up with Rupert Shortt's preface, the point of this statement may be summarised as follows: Facing the extreme liberalism of John Hick, the Anglophone theology of the last twenty or thirty years has 'recovered its nerve' following a line of research which may be traced back to the *ressourcement* tradition of the Oxford Movement.

In terms of the topic of this issue, this is remarkable since nothing comparable happened in continental Europe, let alone in Germany. The radical liberalism of the 1970s and 1980s of the last century was never influential in German theology, neither was the pluralist theology of John Hick, and it may be argued that already Hick's superficial use of Kantian theory-fragments prevented him from becoming significant, since his Kantianism was barely compatible with the rigorous Kantian education German theologians frequently receive.

The last point is anything but marginal, given that the tradition of Kantian enlightenment is still to be considered as an intellectual platform of German culture, a common point of reference shared by representatives of most heterogeneous traditions like German Protestantism and Catholicism, the Jewish community and even leading agnostic and atheist intellectuals (people like Jürgen Habermas or Dieter Henrich). The impact of this modern tradition explains to some extent, why a simple-minded atheism in the manner of Richard Dawkins would be still improbable in Germany, just as it explains why sweeping attacks on the legacy of the Kantian enlightenment still run the risk of becoming the target of sarcastic academic counter-attacks – even if they are undertaken by the Pope.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, this does not at all mean that there is an intellectual consent about the Kantian revolution. Disputed since the first generation of German Kantianism (Maimon, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schleiermacher etc.), the impact of Kant is rather to be located on the level of the *questions* he dared to ask than on the level of the *responses* he provided to the challenges of modernity.<sup>3</sup> His philosophy provides, as it were, the yardstick every philosophical or theological blueprint is to be measured by given that it proposes to cope with the problems Kant was not able to solve on his

own. And it would be easy to demonstrate that this yardstick exerted formidable power even in the case of attempts to cut the Gordian knot of German Kantianism, as in the case of Karl Barth.

To some extent the shadow of this powerful tradition explains at the same time the strengths and the weaknesses of contemporary German theology: Undisputed even in the catholic tradition since Karl Rahner at the latest, the legacy of Kant seems to prevent German theology from connecting up with the recent Anglo-American *ressourcement* movement, just like it formerly prevented German theology from running into the trap of an exaggerated liberalism or postmodernism. German theologians may be inclined to explain this phenomenon by arguing that there is no need to recover the nerve of christian doctrine – it was already recovered in the 19th century. However, reassessed in the light of the challenges of globalised societies, this explanation leaves many questions open. Seen from an Anglo-American point of view, the more or less freely admitted Kantianism of modern theology (from Schleiermacher and Hegel up to Rahner, Pannenberg and Moltmann) looks more like a defensive overwintering strategy, provoked by the secularism of classical modernity – something to be overcome by the ‘the full-blooded account of belief desiderated by Barth, but without thereby blowing up the bridges to the wider world’ (Shortt p.x).

I will leave this question open in confining myself to the observation that the above-sketched divergence between German and Anglo-American trends sheds some light on Rowan Williams’ advice, worthy of Solomon, to pay more attention to the similarities between the liberal traditions of British Christianity and the still liberal trends of German theology. For the following selection of essays displays not only a quite heterogeneous spectrum of German attempts to read the ‘signs of the times’. It may even support the conviction that, in accordance with the best tradition of German Kantianism, the quest for a theology for the future is still more open than it may appear from an Anglo-American point of view. In any case it demonstrates at least that there is a notable connection between British liberalism and what is going on in Germany now.

The first essay may be read as an introduction to one of the most significant differences between the Anglo-American and German academic cultures – a difference already reflected in the German use of language: Theology is to be considered as *Wissenschaft*, which means both scholarship and science. As Helmut Hoping, Professor of Dogmatics and Liturgy at the University of Freiburg, points out, this has significant consequences since theology is forced to justify itself as part of the *universitas scientiarum* in the sense of the modern idea of a nationally funded autonomous place of universal knowledge. However, theology, in the proper sense of this word,

does not consider itself as a subdiscipline of religious studies. As Hoving emphasises, its 'scientific' character is not based on the methods of cultural sciences or historical research. As a 'science of faith' it is rather based on the distinctive truth claims of the Church. Nevertheless Professor Hoving holds that these truth claims are to be justified in the light of the universal rules of secular reason in the Kantian sense of this word. And thus his essay illuminates at once the political *and* epistemological constraints which shape German theology: Faced with the challenge to justify itself as 'science' it is (despite the legacy of Barth) still less at risk of running into the trap of fideism or cultural positivism than Anglo-Saxon theology; but under the economical constraints of a globalised society theology departments are increasingly under pressure, and it is, as Hoving soberly points out, an open question if its universalistic self-interpretation is politically to be upheld in the future. Seen from an Anglo-American point of view this might suggest the conclusion that German theology is fighting a battle which can only be lost.<sup>3</sup> However, as long as the battle remains undecided, it explains to a significant extent why leading representatives of this tradition tend to conceive theology as an integrative discipline which forms a piece of a puzzle that corresponds to the totality of human knowledge: Instead of acting competitively with regard to secular sciences, German theologians are still inspired by the modern idea of an intersubjective research community, and this is especially important politically in terms of public disputes about ethical issues.

This is precisely the topic of the second essay by Hille Haker, Professor of Moral Theology and Social Ethics at the University of Frankfurt. According to Professor Haker, the recent history of moral theology in Germany is crystallised in the so-called 'Autonome Moral' which was founded in the 1970s of the last century by the Tübingen scholar Alfons Auer. As distinct from the minority position of an ethics of faith, this leading stream of moral theology is based on the Kantian assumption that the justification of ethical norms is to be based primarily on autonomous reasons which are compatible with secular sciences and, at least in principle, also acceptable to non-christian, agnostic or atheist dialogue partners. Seen from an Anglo-Saxon neo-orthodox point of view this may look like a recovery of the 'two level' doctrine of neo-scholasticism, which distinguished between a universal level of natural reason and a supernatural level of reflection based on revelation. But this would be misleading, since the concept of autonomous reasoning is not based on 'neutral' standards of rationality nor on a secular humanist tradition. Rather, it is based on a hermeneutic strategy of norm-finding under the conditions of historical contingency, which receives its inspiration and motivational power from the narrative tradition of faith from the outset. Though faith-indifferent in

terms of rational argumentation, it adopts a critical attitude with regard to the minimalism of secular ethics, and tries to deepen the achievements of secular sciences with regard to the dignity of human beings as *imago dei*, the overall goodness of the world as God's creation, and the motivational power of its final destination.

Whereas Professor Haker's liberal concept of autonomous morals is rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition, the next essay summarises the liberal turn of recent protestant theology. As Ulrich Körtner, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Vienna, emphasises, the younger generation of German protestant theologians is more attracted to Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch and the Culture Protestantism of the 19th and early 20th century, than to the neo-orthodox word of God theology and the dialectical theology of Barth. Given that the post-war generation of German theologians was (due to the catastrophes of World Wars I and II) concerned to distinguish itself from the partially national-religious infected Cultural Protestant synthesis of religion and culture, this new movement again supports an integrative perspective. Focused on the concept of religion, the attempt to mediate between faith and culture is based on the theological hermeneutics of contemporary lifeworlds, and the achievements of recent cultural and religious studies. However, the readiness to take seriously the plurality of human cultures, and even the 'invisible religion' of the postmodern culture of quasi-religious events, need not necessarily lead to a break with the tradition of the word of God theology, as some leading representatives of this younger generation suggest. Professor Körtner rather argues that theology has to keep the dialectical tension between the 'inner perspective' of its own tradition and the 'outer perspective' of cultural studies. Comparable with Helmut Hoping, he defends an integrative concept of theology which considers the witness of faith as a constitutive element of the academic self-interpretation of this discipline.

The phenomenon of hidden or 'invisible religion' as part of a liberal theological hermeneutics of culture marks the point of departure of the next essay. However, Gregor Maria Hoff, Professor of Fundamental Theology at the University of Salzburg (Austria), moves a significant step further in the direction of the recent liberal turn in order to develop a concept of revelation which mediates between the external and internal poles of religion and culture *from the outset*. Professor Hoff argues, that theology cannot confine itself to the inner realm of the Church; it is equally to be located in the hermeneutics of revelational-theological motifs and codes in postmodern culture as they are to be discovered in literature, film, politics or advertising. Following the traces of postmodern cultural studies, he nevertheless tries to cope with Hansjürgen Verweyen's criticism of postmodern

relativism. This is not a marginal point, since Verweyen represents an influential strand of the German post-Kantian Catholic theology. Following Karl Rahner and the transcendental idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), he developed in the 1970s a concept of 'final justification' (*Letztbegründung*) of christian faith based on a philosophical a priori concept of 'ultimate meaning' (*letztgültiger Sinn*) which is at once aimed at distinguishing critically between justified and unjustified claims of revelation.<sup>4</sup> Hoff does not simply reject this anti-relativist criterion. But he holds that it cannot be assured as an unquestionable principle. Rather, the demand for critical justification is to be met case by case based on context-sensitive criteria. Against this background, the appreciation of relativity is eventually justified *hermeneutically*, departing from a characteristic German reading of the 'paradigm shift' of the Second Vatican Council, namely a reading which (following Karl Rahner as distinct from, for example, Josef Ratzinger) focuses on the cultural optimism of the pastoral constitution *Lumen Gentium*.

The last two essays need a more extensive introduction. Other than in the two foregoing texts, the subsequent attempt to balance the 'inner perspective' of tradition and the 'outer perspective' of secular culture moves closer to the mystic tradition of pre-modern orthodoxy, since it tries to circumvent the anthropocentrism of post-Kantian theology. Nevertheless its approach to the 'grammar of faith' is more deeply rooted in the pluralised rationality of postmodern cultural studies. Johann Evangelist Hafner, Professor for Religious Studies and Christianity at the University of Potsdam, follows the footsteps of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann in providing a functional analysis of Christianity as 'social system', thereby using cybernetic categories like 'code' and 'program'. In order to do justice to the free floating, heterodox religious 'codes' of postmodern culture without losing sight of the interpretational 'programs' developed by christian orthodoxy, he elaborates Luhmann's distinction between two levels of transcendence. The first level of transcendence is based on a primitive binary code which may be exemplified by the popular phenomenon of angels – 'heavenly beings' which are, as everyone knows who is familiar with the codes of postmodern advertising industry, not only a significant element of the christian tradition but also a characteristic ingredient of the 'invisible religiosity' of contemporary societies. Considered in terms of simple binary codes the symbolism of angels is nothing more than a boundary mark: It allows us to distinguish between our determined earthly reality (*immanence*) and something 'beyond' (*transcendence*). But what does it mean to symbolize something 'beyond'? We may say, 'beyond' means 'in heaven'. But this immediately rises the question 'Where?' Given this question, the concept of 'heaven' can designate at least two different things. It can designate a determined place – in this case the heaven is admittedly a place 'beyond', but we can (at least

theoretically) travel to this place, and then it is no longer beyond. The second case is more interesting. The concept of heaven can also designate something *essentially indeterminate*. An illuminating example for this type of 'heaven' may be found in Franz Schubert's Lied *Der Wanderer* composed for voice and piano in October 1816 (D. 439). This Lied, taken from a German poem by Georg Philipp Schmitt, ends with a 'ghostly breath' answering the question of the quietly sighing wanderer 'Where?' with the dazzling response: *Dort wo Du nicht bist, dort ist das Glück* ('There, where you are not, there is happiness'). We may say this poem is speaking about something 'beyond', something which may be called 'the heaven'. But it would not be possible to wander to this place. As soon as the wanderer would arrive at his 'heaven' he would discover that heaven is still 'there, where he is not' ('I am a stranger everywhere'). Seen from this viewpoint the word 'heaven' does not designate a determinate place. Rather it symbolizes the glamour of indeterminacy. Something always escapes our attempts to determine our paths through the complexity of the world. And exactly this explains the fact that every social system needs at least some elementary codes to deal with the phenomenon of transcendence. For the difference of immanence and transcendence indicates on this most elementary level simply this – the difference between a determined ('earthly') structure and its indeterminate or (as Luhmann prefers to say) contingent ('otherworldly') borderlines. According to Professor Hafner this distinction is significant even if we do not really believe in heavenly 'parallel worlds': Whether or not we believe in angels, in both cases the primitive symbolism of transcendence codes the phenomenon of indeterminacy, or – to put it in the sociological language of Luhmann – it codes the 'contingency' of 'social systems' like economy, law, or science.<sup>5</sup> The symbolism of angels provides, as it were, a code which allows us to express the disturbing discovery that our economy is based on a fragile edifice of illusions, that our judges are potential torturers, that the explanatory power of modern sciences is ecologically alarmingly limited, etc. Now it is important to notice that the codes of this 'first-order transcendence' are quite a free-floating thing. Since they are attached to the 'undetermined' they themselves cannot be strictly determined. Rather they tend to proliferate in an uncontrolled manner, thereby becoming increasingly arbitrary and banal. Exactly this explains the necessity of a second-order transcendence. The absolute is not to be considered as something undetermined. God is not an angel (not simply 'beyond'). Rather he transcends the distinction between immanence and transcendence. He transcends the binary codes of primitive symbolisms in confronting us with a paradox, something 'indefinable determined'. We may recall at this point the exemplary case of the christian creed: Christians do not believe in a 'heavenly creator' but the 'creator of heaven *and* earth'. God is neither 'in

heaven' (i.e. completely undetermined) nor a 'big thing' (i.e. something definable without restraint, like the God of Richard Swinburne or, *ex negativo*, Richard Dawkins). God is transcendent and at the same time most intimate to our determined earthly reality. Given this distinction between two levels of transcendence, Hafner argues that theology has to cultivate both, the undetermined and the determined mode of transcendence. Comparable with the liberal strategy to read the 'signs of the times', it has to take seriously the free-floating symbolisms of primitive transcendence; and, comparable with the contemplative attitude of orthodox theologians like Barth, it has to delimitate the ways one might interpret these codes in the light of the 'high transcendence' of the creed.

The last essay leads us, as it were, back to roots of German post-Kantian theology, since it represents an uncompromised account of the foundations of christian theology in the wake of Kant and Schleiermacher, thereby connecting up with the Fichteanism of Hansjürgen Verweyen. Saskia Wendel, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Cologne, sketches the outlines of a rational justification of faith which claims to evade both the pitfalls of fideism and rationalism. Starting from the problem of religious experience in William James and William Alston, Professor Wendel asks for rational criteria which allow us to distinguish between true and delusive experiences. In order to clarify this problem, she first enhances the Kantian observation that every positive experience becomes inevitably infected by the dualism of subject and object, and that it is furthermore inevitably mediated through the grammar of culturally contingent habits. On the other hand God is not an empirical object, and subjective experiences are not immune to the delusions of culturally habitualised 'great fictions'. Consequently empiricist or subjectivist experiential accounts of God, as in Alston and James, fail to provide a reliable justification of his existence. They rather exemplify the typical flaw of Anglo-Saxon fideism: No empirical evidence, and no narrative account of the 'power of faith' can dispel the nagging doubt of Nietzsche that this may be nothing more than the 'gigantic illusion of a seduced herd of idiots'. Against this background, Wendel connects up with the German philosophers Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank, both of whom recovered the Kantian and Fichtean quest for the *conditions of possibility* for finite experiences.<sup>6</sup> The crunch question of this problem is focused on a special case of finite experience, namely the experience of myself: What are the conditions of possibility for subjective self-awareness? To answer this question it is important to distinguish between two dimensions of self-awareness which are not reducible to each other: I am aware of myself as a finite being in the world, which may be observed as an empirical object; and I am aware of myself as an acting subject, which is to be considered as the 'I' which observes finite objects

from a subjective perspective. However, this subject-object duality does not explain how I can speak in both cases of 'myself'. How do I know, for example, that the person I am observing every morning in the mirror is 'myself' – i.e. the same self as the subject which is looking around the bathroom. Frank and Henrich argue that this knowledge is only explainable if I presuppose an immediate familiarity of the self with itself – a pre-reflexive mode of knowledge which transcends the dualism of subject and object. I am, as it were, a threefold being: (1) the subject of an individual world which is governed by intuitions, (2) a finite dust particle in the universe which is an object of subjective reflection and empirical observation, and (3) a pre-reflexive unity which is immediately familiar with itself. At the same time it is decisive to realize that (3) is not simply an *additional* mode of self awareness: The phenomenon of immediate self-awareness marks not something distinct but the *unifying core* of subjective and objective experiences; it is to be considered as the condition of possibility for the unity of myself. However, even if I am familiar with myself as something which precedes the split of the mind (subject) and its world (object), I am a finite being nevertheless, and exactly this connects the phenomenon of self-awareness with the problem of religious experience. Why? Simply because the 'self' I am immediately familiar with is at the same time myself and *more* than myself. It is the finite (or conditioned) unity of my mind and its world; and it reveals something 'unconditioned' which manifests itself in the core of myself without being reducible to a finite self. My awareness of myself is intrinsically connected with the idea of something which is at once *nothing other* than me (neither object nor subject but the unity of both) and *other* than me (the ground of myself). And thus the modern conundrum of self-awareness leads us back to one of the most fundamental insights of Augustine and the mystical tradition: The insight that religious experience is based on the encounter with something inconceivable which is at the same time most intimate to myself and superior to myself. Theologians may object that this conclusion is delusive nevertheless: Is it not achieved by a *mere* philosophical consideration, thereby exemplifying the typical flaw of Continental rationalism? Professor Wendel tries to escape this objection in arguing that (other than in Henrich) the 'unconditioned' is not *included* in the certainty of immediate self-consciousness. Philosophical considerations may provide us with an account of the conundrum of the self and an abstract idea of something 'unconditioned'. But only the feeling of trust can provide us with a path to cope with this conundrum and empower us to assert the *reality* of an 'unconditioned being'. God is not known to us by an immediate, reflexive, or empirical certainty, but only by the sense of hope for something whose existence cannot be known but can only be postulated as a requirement of 'practical faith' (in the Kantian sense of this term). Consequently philo-

sophical rationality leaves space to interpret what transcends the limits of pure reason in christian terms as a gift of grace which cannot be reduced to a philosophically necessary occurrence.

Anglo-Saxon fideists may object that this formal account of christian faith (like Hille Haker's Kantian account of christian ethics) still remains caught in the trap of rationalism. And likewise, Anglo-Saxon neo-orthodoxians may argue that the less Kantian blueprints, outlined above, still remain caught in the defensive logic of modern liberalism. However, even if it is true that the cutting edge of German theology is currently heading in the opposite direction from its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, there are significant points of contact, which are worth being explored in depth – and perhaps even possibilities to overcome the modern gap between Continentals and Anglo-Saxons.<sup>7</sup>

### Notes:

1. Rupert Shortt, *God's advocates. Christian thinkers in conversation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 17.
2. See, for example, Kurt Flasch's sarcastic criticism of the Kant citations in Benedict XVI's infamous Regensburg lecture (*Die Vernunft ist keine Jacke*, Berliner Zeitung 22 September 2006, see (<http://www.berlinonline.de/berlinerzeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fcgi/2006/0922/feuilleton/0001/index.html>)). Kurt Flasch is one of the leading German historians of Late Antique and Medieval philosophy. Another example is the delayed reception of French post-structuralism in the last century, which was due to the fact that this philosophical movement was initially viewed as an assault on the Kantian tradition by intellectuals like Jürgen Habermas.
3. For an introduction into this tradition in terms of its relation to the problem of modernisation see: Robert B. Pippin, *Idealism as modernism. Hegelian variations*, Modern European Philosophy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
4. For an alternative account of the idea of a university, connecting up with the pre-modern model of a society, guild, corporation or community, and based on a sobering recapitulation of the reality of contemporary American academic culture, see: David Pan, 'The Crisis of the Humanities and the End of the University Era'. In: Telos 11 (1998), pp. 69-106.
5. See Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Gottes letztes Wort. Grundriß der Fundamentaltheologie*. Dritte, vollständig überarbeitete Auflage, (Regensburg: 2000 (1991)).
6. See: Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1988); Luhmann, *Law as a social system*. Transl. Klaus A. Ziegert; edited by Fatima Kastner, Oxford socio-legal studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Luhmann, *Ecological communication*. Transl. and introduced by John Bednarz Jnr (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, ed. by A. Kieserling (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000).
7. See Manfred Frank, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis. Essays zur analytischen Philosophie der Subjektivität* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991).
8. For an attempt to perform this task departing from the last pre-modern attempt to evade the misleading dualisms of modernity: Johannes Hoff, *Kontingenz, Berührung, Überschreitung. Zur philosophischen Propädeutik christlicher Mystik nach Nikolaus von Kues* (Freiburg/Br.: Alber, 2007).