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Relational theism and Divine free will

Klaus von Stosch (Paderborn)

For Christianity the most important attribute of God is her love. God is love (1 Joh 4,8) and love is the reason for creation, most Christian theologians would say. Hence God invites us to love her, and she tries to persuade us with the means of love to join in her good will of love. God will never stop loving us and God will never use other means than the means of love to show her love because she is love. This is what God promises to us in Jesus Christ when she reacts with patience to the tortures of the cross. And this explains why God does not stop a killer by killing him because such a deed would be self-contradictory for a being who is pure love. God is not a free agent who sometimes decides to love and who has to reflect whether she wants to love somebody or whether this person is not worth being loved. God is unconditional love and always acts as love.

Among human agents one important precondition of love is free will. A love which is not grounded in free will is difficult to understand as something good. If someone gives signs of appreciation because of pure custom, we will usually not call this love. If someone loves because of a need, we will not appreciate this love as generous and perfect. Love cannot be the result of force, and it loses its worth if it is the result of manipulation. Hence if God is love and wants love, then humans have to be set free and it makes sense to reflect whether there is a way to conceive free will within God's very essence.

If God is conceived as pure love, some sort of free will has to be associated with God. If God wants to show her love to us, she needs to do this through concrete actions. As Keith Ward puts it:

„A love which is purely general, and exactly the same for everyone, is not real love, since it neglects precisely that uniqueness and particularity of the person which is the place of love to celebrate. As Vernon White says, 'If God's purposive activity for the world is uniform and undifferentiated ... then it is liable to be impersonal, amoral, and relatively impotent'. Real love is always active, responsive and particular.”¹

If we call God's love responsive, it becomes clear that God has a true relationship to humans and that she is able to care for their needs and sorrows in a concrete way. If we say that her love is particular, this wants to make clear that her love is shown to humans through certain experiences and that not all experiences are in the same way the expression of God's love.

What I tried to summarize so far are the basic assumptions of what I call relational theism. It understands the relationship of God and humankind as a give-and-take-relationship² and as a

¹ Ward 1990, 137f., with reference to White 1985, 69.

² Cf. Sanders 1998, 282.

relationship of lovers and of loving unity which respects differences and individuality. In this chapter I want to discuss two challenges for this idea and I hope to be able to show that a Trinitarian framework can be useful to meet those challenges and to defend a modified version of relational theism.

1. The challenge of arbitrariness: Learning from Karl Rahner

The first challenge that I would like to discuss is often associated with the challenge of anthropomorphism. It is usually said that the concept of God as a free and responsive agent who shows her love through special Divine action is an anthropomorphic idea. Classical theism argues with God's immutability and simplicity against this concept. Open theists like Greg Boyd and John Sanders in this volume, but also European theologians like Keith Ward and Gisbert Greshake³ have given convincing defenses for the coherence of this concept. Moreover I agree with Eberhard Jüngel that for humans there is no way at all to avoid anthropomorphism in their talk of God.⁴ Nonetheless the challenge has to be addressed because it has a much more serious nucleus. Let me try to reconstruct it.

The idea of particularity and responsiveness in God's actions brings up the problem why God does not act universally and constantly. Why are some agents aware of special divine actions and others are not? Classical theism would argue here that it is only the problem of our perception that we do not always see God's presence. But if relational theism really wants to say that God acts in different ways it becomes difficult to understand which are the criteria of discernment to designate something as divine action. It simply becomes unclear how long it is appropriate to talk of God in relation to my experiences.

Imagine the following situation: Mary is a pastor and she believes in relational theism. Peter comes to her because he is working in the production of Harley Davidson motorbikes and since President Trump's customs policy he is afraid of losing his job. He also feels sometimes that it might be against his Christian convictions to build motorbikes because he thinks that we have to protect our environment. On the other hand, his whole family is dependent on his job which is why is afraid of losing it. In this moment an old friend comes to him and invites him to join a start-up enterprise for solar energy. Peter has the technical education to be extremely helpful in the enterprise but it is very risky to give up his job and to start the new one. In this situation Peter has a dream which shows him how great the new enterprise will flourish and he has a strong inner feeling that he should change his job. He thinks that the dream and the feeling

³Cf. Greshake 1978, 32-53. Even my own habilitation can be understood as defense of the coherence of relational theism. Cf. Stosch 2006.

⁴ Cf. Jüngel 1986, 353: „Insofern ist jede sprachliche Äußerung des Menschen in dem Sinne anthropomorph, daß der Mensch, was immer er sagt, sich selber ausgesprochenermaßen oder unausgesprochenermaßen mitaussagt.“

might be a sign of God and that God wants to encourage him on his new way. But he also knows that this might be wrong. That is why he comes to Mary and asks her for advice.

Mary as a relational theist will think that special divine actions through dreams or inner clarity are possibly signs of God. Hence she has no reason to rule out the metaphysical possibility that God really wants Peter to change the job. Also the criteria for theodicy-sensitive talk of God do not rule out this possibility.⁵ Nonetheless it is clear for relational theism that not all dreams are coming from God and that feelings of clarity can also be misleading. Hence we need more criteria to know what can be accepted as divine action and where we have to be careful. If we cannot provide such criteria, it becomes arbitrary whether we see Divine actions in our daily life or not.

Let us see whether we can find some possible help for the problem of arbitrariness in the tradition of transcendental Thomism, especially in the theology of Karl Rahner. Usually this theology is understood as an attempt to rule out the metaphysical possibility of special and unmediated divine actions.⁶ But I will try to show how it addresses the question of arbitrariness and not the question of the metaphysical consistency of the idea of special divine actions.

Rahner's main argument goes as follows: Free will in its formal nature is something unconditional.⁷ If free will exists it is not caused by finite conditions and it cannot be understood as one finite being among others. It is not an empirical thing or fact that you can discover somewhere. The fact that persons are responsible and free agents cannot be proven by observation. If free will exists, it is not something which can be seen in human actions, but it has to be conceived as the condition of their possibility. Hence it is part of every human action as a transcendental a priori experience⁸, i.e. it enables human action as its condition of possibility. It cannot be proven by pointing to alternate possibilities. But it has to be postulated if we want to take human dignity seriously. Thus, we cannot prove free will, but we can transcendently understand that free will is within the very heart of every human action.

In Rahner's anthropology humans are characterized as self-transcending beings. As humans can doubt everything, they can also go beyond everything. Their subjectivity implies that they can distance everything from themselves and that they always have to redefine and to remake themselves. At the same time humans cannot avoid that everything, their whole existence is handed over to them and this very fact constitutes a human as a person. It is the person who acts, knows, and desires – yet these actions are always done in the context of circumstances, education, and culture which the individual did not choose, but which do not determine the person's actions entirely.⁹ If a person tries to explain his/ her existence and to examine his/ her

⁵ Cf. Stosch 2015, 187-206.

⁶ Cf. Weissmahr 1973, and my critique in Stosch 2006, 106-115.

⁷ In the German speaking discourse this way of putting things is usually associated with Thomas Pröpper, but we can find it already in Karl Rahner's thinking. Cf. Rahner 1984, 47f.

⁸ Cf. Rahner 1984, 47.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 41.

needs and desires, he/ she is at the same time the subject who is prior to any of these examinations.¹⁰

To sum up, human beings can transcend and go beyond every horizon, they can put into question everything. Hence the human is the infinite possibility, the inevitable question.¹¹ Humans can try to ignore this situation. They can also resign themselves and say skeptically that there is no answer for it. But this again only proves the inevitability of the question.¹² What does this question for the whole show to us? Rahner insists that humans have an unthematic and inevitable knowledge of the infinity of reality and the wholeness of being.¹³ That is why he calls the human the being of transcendence, i.e. the being who is permanently confronted with the inaccessible infinity of reality as a secret.¹⁴

We can see now how Rahner is defining the relationship between God and humans. Humans cannot avoid grasping for more and longing for the infinity of reality. This infinity is the secret which we call God in our Western tradition. Hence for Rahner God is not a free agent who is acting on us, but God is the origin and the horizon of our free will. Humans cannot use their free will to relate to God directly, but in each act of free will God is “unthematically present as its carrying ground and as its last aim”¹⁵. Thus, for Rahner, God cannot be isolated as a particular entity which needs to get in relationship with us. God is not simply conceived as another free agent seeking for a relationship with finite agents. But God is the ultimate horizon of freedom who is “unthematically known in the experience of subjective transcendence”¹⁶.

But there is not only unthematic knowledge of God in Rahner and there is not only transcendental freedom. It is true that there is the unthematic relationship to God which consists in realizing the transcendental nature of free will. The self-transcendent nature of humanity implies that transcendental freedom cannot be realized by certain actions, but has to be done by realizing your being as self-transcendence. Although free will is a priori and transcendental in its very nature, it has to be mediated through our body language to be real. The original infinite freedom, the self-enacting free will needs mediation and a categorical objectification. Transcendental and categorical freedom are two sides of the same coin of freedom.¹⁷

And as there is the categorical side of freedom, there is also the categorical side of our understanding of God. But again it is a misunderstanding for Rahner if we think that we can understand God as a finite entity which can be found somewhere. If God exists, she is not a contingent free agent who is dependent on certain conditions. But she is the origin and horizon

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 42.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 42f.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 43.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, 44. Kant calls this the *omnitudo realitatis*.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵ Rahner 1965, 217.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cf. Rahner 1984, 48.

of any free will. Hence relating to God does not function as relating to an agent or an entity but as relating to the very essence of free will itself, i.e. to its origin and horizon of your life. As God has to be conceived as ground and destination of human free will a negation of free will is at the same time a negation of God. Or as Rahner puts it: "Free will is originally not the capacity to choose an object ..., but the capacity of the self to say 'yes' or 'no' to oneself."¹⁸ It is also not the capacity to choose a certain option, but "the capacity to decide upon oneself and to realize yourself."¹⁹

To realize or to perform yourself is something unique which cannot be repeated if we keep in mind how contingent, vulnerable and finite life is. For Rahner humans are called by God to realize their lives in a way that they affirm the self-transcendence of their subjectivity. Somebody who says "Yes" to this self-transcendence also affirms the ground and aim of all human desires and hopes which is God. If a free agent wants to affirm God who is love, she has to affirm love by loving her neighbor and by loving herself. Only in your loving surrender to your neighbor, your free will can be realized and God can be affirmed.²⁰ Hatred of the person who needs you is always at the same time self-hatred and hatred of God. The reason for this attitude is that for Rahner, human nature is self-transcendence and self-transcendence enables people to care for each other.

Let me try to summarize Rahner's point of view and see which kind of implications follow from his approach: Rahner recommends to us not to understand God as a person or free agent, but to understand her as the ground, horizon and aim of personhood and human free will. God wants us to flourish and to develop our self-transcending powers. God wants us to realize ourselves and to transcend our horizons. We affirm God by affirming our own self-transcendence. Affirming our self-transcendence implies the affirmation of the infinity of reality and the wholeness of being. It means affirming its hiddenness and secret. It means grasping for the sense of life by developing our forces and capacities in the direction of our self-transcendence. In the end we transcend ourselves and respond to God's love by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

How does this reflection help us to get rid of the problem of arbitrariness? We can see now that divine action will always serve human self-transcendence which means it will always help people to flourish and to develop a loving relationship to their neighbors and to themselves. Every single event within the world can be seen as a specific presence of God. Not because she would cause the event in the meaning of effective causation but because she is its inner principle (formal causation) and its purpose (final causation). Each moment can become the moment when God's perspective becomes clear to me. Each moment is a particular invitation to me to discern how God shapes my life. Hence the basic idea of relational theism that God's

¹⁸ Rahner 1965, 223.

¹⁹ Rahner 1984, 49.

²⁰ Cf. Rahner 1965, 277-298.

actions are responsive and particular can be justified also with the help of Karl Rahner. However, the responsiveness is not a response which is only sometimes given, but a finalizing power which tries to give orientation to me in every moment. And the particularity is not the particularity which addresses certain situations and not others. It is more the universality of particularity. In any moment of history God is present in her healing and encouraging power. I can experience her in any moment of history.

Hence Peter's feeling of clarity and his dream can be means by which God helps him to get a new and better orientation for his life. But the criterion for this judgment is not that those occurrences cannot be explained otherwise. God does not destroy the natural order and the secondary causes to show her good will but she is using them. She is the finalizing power which gives orientation to everything and that is why her good will can be discerned everywhere. However not all moments are equally helpful to understand God's will. Through the sin of humans our life is also fulfilled with energies which are counter-productive because they are against human self-transcendence. Peter has to ask himself whether his new job will help him to transform his life more in the direction of self-transcendence and love. Or to borrow some terms of Eleonore Stump: he will have to see whether his decision will lead to flourishing and sanctification.²¹ If yes, he should understand every encouraging sign as a means of God to help him to find his way.

Some people may worry whether such a suggestion is sufficient for the needs of relational theism. Does the way I describe divine action here neglect the possibility of unmediated special divine action? With Aquinas I agree with the possibility of unmediated special divine action.²² It might be that Peter's dream is caused directly by God as Joseph's dream seems to have been if we take the Bible literally here (cf. Mt 2,13). It might be that this dream is a direct message from God to him. It might be that the dream is an objective intervention in the natural order of things. It might be that God sometimes causes miracles in the sense of interventionism. I do not see how this can be ruled out with the means of metaphysics, exegetical scholarship or dogmatic theology.

But if we try to use this possibility for apologetics we have at least two problems. The first problem is that we can never prove that an event is caused without secondary mediation because the transcendental structure of our freedom will never stop finding other explanations. If we are not able to understand something, our reason will never be satisfied to accept it as not understandable, but we can only accept that we do not have an explanation yet. Going beyond every empirical datum will not stop at an event which claims to be a miracle. Hence epistemologically an interventionist concept of divine action does not work for apologetic

²¹ Cf. Stump 2018, 23.

²² If Aquinas ruled out this possibility, I would not understand statements like the following: „So ist auch die Begegnung zweier Diener zufällig, von ihnen aus gesehen; vom Herrn jedoch, der sie wissentlich so an denselben Ort schickt, daß keiner vom anderen weiß, ist sie vorgesehen.“ (Thomas von Aquin, Summa theologica I-III. Deutsche Thomas-Ausgabe. Lat.-dt., Salzburg-Leipzig 1934 ff. STh I, 22,1, ad 1).

purposes – at least not within the framework of transcendental free will philosophy which is proposed here.

The second problem for an apologetic use of unmediated divine actions is the problem of arbitrariness. How can we defend that God heals one person by breaking natural law and not another? How can we understand that she makes the virgin Mary pregnant but no other women who desperately wait for children? How can we understand that Lazarus is rescued from death but not the child of another parent who is completely desperate because of her loss? I do not say that it is metaphysically impossible that God causes Mary's conception or Lazarus' reanimation. But it causes more problems for apologetics than it solves – especially if we think of the problem of evil.

Thus I suggest using Rahner's framework for divine action also as criterion for unmediated special divine action, i.e. even an unmediated special divine action has to be something which is coherent with the power of God's formal and final causation. Hence the question for Peter is not how he receives his message – via an inspiration, a dream or simply the advice of a friend. But the question is whether it helps him, his family and his neighbors on the way of self-transcendence. If this interpretation can be defended with good reasons, Mary should encourage him to change his job. As regards miracles in the Bible the same is true. We should not concentrate on the question whether they are truly breaking natural order. This might be true, but it is not particularly helpful because such a claim can always be disputed and it leaves us alone with the question why God is not helping more people in this way. Instead we should learn to see how the biblical miracles help people to flourish and to go beyond their borders and limitations. They have to be made understandable as signs of the self-transcending power of God within humanity.

2. The challenge of non-availability: Learning from Jürgen Werbick

There is a second challenge in our common picture of relational theism. Usually we tend to think that it is up to us to decide whether we want to accept God's love or not. However, if we remember that God is not a particular agent offering love to us, but the origin and horizon of our life, love and free will, we will see how the whole story becomes complicated. Can I really say that I have decided to trust in love and that I could have done otherwise? Isn't it more convincing to admit that I was loved by my parents and other relatives and good friends and that this is how I learned to trust in love? Maybe this trust was challenged later when I had my first big lover's grief. But again was it me who succeeded overcoming this grief autonomously? Or do I have to admit that my capacity to love and to trust is highly dependent on other people who love me first?

For Rahner those categorical circumstances in which I learn to love are the way God's grace is mediated. And as a good Thomist, Rahner insists that humans cannot affirm their own self-transcendence without the help of God. Without God's grace, i.e. without parents and friends who love me, I cannot love. Hence the salvific affirmation of your neighbor, yourself and God which is all done in the very same act of affirmation of yourself as a self-transcending being is only possible through God's grace. God enables us to open ourselves for this kind of affirmation. Hence God has always already started to open our hearts through final and formal causation but without determining us through efficient causation.²³ She has already sent people to me who love me before I start to reflect and to be a person. And when I am a person, there are continuously non-available circumstances which enable me to love. Humans obviously stay invited to affirm the horizon of their free will as its aim and be set free by God's grace.²⁴ But we do not know whether this invitation will be accepted by us. Even for myself I cannot be sure. As the decisive question is not what I affirm thematically, but which kind of unthematic affirmation structures my whole life, I can never be absolutely sure about my own destiny. My own visible decisions are only categorical decisions and we do not know definitely which kind of transcendental nature lies behind them.²⁵ But what I know is that I depend on others – theologically speaking I depend on God's love – if I want to be able to trust in life and to develop my own self-transcendence.

Hence Rahner is very helpful if we want to see how much we are dependent on others if we want to be able to affirm love and life. But what about our denial of love and life? Rahner seems to say that we can only enter into a free relationship with God with the help of God's grace. On the other hand, it seems to be our free will alone which we can use to destroy ourselves. Hence for Rahner saying "no" to God which implies destroying ourselves is the only thing which we can do autonomously. But is this really true? Is it really me who has to be blamed if I am not able to gain trust in love?

It makes sense to look at Luther's skeptical intuition towards free will and at his defense of God's grace if we want to have a more sophisticated picture here. And it is the Catholic theologian Jürgen Werbick who helps me most to make sense of Luther's investigations on free will. That is why I use him now to address the second challenge of relational theism.

Werbick tries to bring two insights together. On the one hand he insists that God's grace cannot reach me without me letting it happen that I am reached. On the other hand he admits that I cannot be reached by God's grace without God's grace disclosing the promising perspective of fulfilled humanity through itself.²⁶ Hence there is at the same time a moment of an unavailable disclosure which precedes our free will and a moment of acceptance (or at least

²³ Cf. Rahner 1965, 233.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 235f.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 231.

²⁶ Cf. Werbick 2013, 93.

of no non-acceptance) which makes the efficiency of the disclosure possible. On the one hand Werbick does not understand humans as string puppets who blindly follow what God says. On the other hand grace has to be understood as a promising challenge for life which cannot leave humans in an indifferent attitude if it has been understood.²⁷ It seems to be like this: The more we open ourselves to the promising perspective of hope and love for our life, the more we are set free. In the personalizing “impact of grace as vocation free will gives us the independence to be driven by more and other powers than by the individual or collective dynamics of self-assertion.”²⁸

For Werbick God’s Holy Spirit is at work when people cease to feel coerced²⁹, controlled by circumstances³⁰, and begin to choose their way for themselves. It is God’s Spirit who allows ourselves not to be controlled by borders and compulsions and who helps us to stand up against the exploitation of people for whatever means.³¹ One could therefore say that the Spirit’s action cannot be realized without the concrete performance of freedom – already enabled by that same Spirit – which is what positions one in a dialogical and free relationship. What is meant here, can, in a limited way, already be experienced in love. Lovers, by performing acts of love and commitment and by living through and for the other person, experience freedom and a new form of being oneself. Love makes the requirements of everyday life seem less important. Habits and circumstances lose the power to shape one’s life and all of life’s performances are influenced by the image of the other person. In this way new opportunities for life and new beginnings emerge. In this way “lovers are, at least a little bit and maybe only for a certain time, endowed with independence from other requirements and from the ‘obsessions’ of everyday life, as a future is opened up to them which offers much brighter prospects than those which could be provided and secured through cunning calculation.”³² It is exactly this experience of liberation through love that shows how close the connection is between the freedom worked by the Spirit and the experience of love. Just as freedom is the condition of possibility of love, freedom is actually carried and made possible by love. Thus, there is dialectic in human’s experiences of love and free will. We are set free by love without controlling this power, and at the same time we are not absent as free agents when we are performing love and fighting for justice.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104 (my own translation).

²⁹ Cf. Werbick 2004, 176.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 189: “The inability to act differently is often enough caused by a person’s will to let her- or himself be controlled by circumstance, and by surrendering his or her self-determination to other things and other people – by letting him or herself become unfree and incapable of acting otherwise” (my own translation).

³¹ For: “Life becomes deeply unfree, if it is put from the beginning under the omen of statements such as “You shall” and “You must”; if it is actually nothing more than a means toward the end of wanting to please an overly powerful other being (or, respectively, to simply have to)” (*ibid.*, 191, my own translation).

³² *Ibid.*, 194 (my own translation).

We can also find the double dynamic within love/ grace and free will in the common declaration on justification which has been published more than 20 years ago.³³ On the one hand the declaration makes clear that humans can deny the impact of grace.³⁴ On the other hand it acknowledges that the affirmation of grace is not an act of alternate possibilities, but it is dependent on the most intimate willingness to be able to let God's good will happen.³⁵ "God has to awaken this intimate willingness of the sinner, and he is doing this with his unconditionally given pre-empting grace."³⁶ What does this mean for the human possibility of affirmation and of denial of grace and love?

If somebody rejects God's unconditional love, he is not only rejecting God, but also the idea of love. Hence he is also rejecting his fellow human and even himself. Following Rahner's insights above it can be said that you cannot reject God's love directly. Rather you reject God by rejecting yourself and your neighbor. This possibility is real, but it is not a realization of free will but its self-destruction. In theological perspective this self-destruction or the rejection of love is always sin. As sinner the human identifies with wrong priorities and he becomes insensitive for the attractions of the good and beautiful sides of life. Hence the sinner does not say autonomously „No“ to God's grace. Rather he prevents himself from being reached by it.³⁷ Thus, saying „No“ to God means keeping away God's healing presence from oneself and staying entrapped by the obsessions of your daily life.

Grace sets humans free from those obsessions and leaks new healing possibilities to them. Grace wants to heal people from being governed by someone else. It wants to bring people back to freedom and to the possibility to rule their own house and life.³⁸ That is why there is neither a free affirmation of grace nor its free denial. Rather it is God's love which enables our affirmation of him.

After this enablement, i.e. after becoming free, there is no good reason any more to reject this love. If a person encounters God's healing presence of love, this person is confronted with the disclosure of something which no greater can be conceived to come about.³⁹ This greatest encounter ever, this event which no greater can be conceived will become clear as my own personal and healing reality. How and why should I reject it? Werbick puts it like this: „A passion takes hold on me – a passion that revives my will and that invites me to appropriation. The invitation is inspired by the rational promise of a good, fulfilled life and it challenges us to a

³³ Cf.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_ge.html (website checked on August 1, 2018).

³⁴ Cf. Werbick 2013, 89.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* (my own translation).

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 90.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 92.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 107.

voluntary self-identification.⁴⁰ Again how could we rationally want to miss this self-identification?

For Werbick it is clear: The affirmation of God's love is not a free affirmation which follows an act of self-alienation. Rather it is an affirmation which invites us to a free self-identification. This "liberating passion is at the same time mine and not mine: it is mine because I identify with this passion in faith and self-affirmation, it is not mine because I was not able to produce this passion with the means of my free will. I have to be moved and touched to be able to be carried it this decision."⁴¹

When Christ and his spirit have touched somebody and liberated him from slavery, then he has not any more the power to do otherwise. At least he has no good reasons any more to stay a slave. If he wants to be rational he is obliged to act according to his inner voice, he will exercise what fulfills his heart – this is what Werbick learns from Luther.⁴² It is only through God's saving grace that humans have been liberated to be free.⁴³ In this perspective free will is not understood as free choice, but as a new constitution of humanity. The standard argument against this point of view is the question why God is not liberating everybody. Why is God's grace so selective? If it is so irresistible, it seems to be God's blameworthy decision not to liberate everybody.

However, there are obviously some people who do not want to accept God's love and grace. But why should they decide against God if they really understand how rich her love is? "It is very hard to understand how anybody could reject the good if it was presented as good and promising to him."⁴⁴ Especially if we take into account that free will should not be confused with arbitrariness, it becomes a mystery why people would deny God's invitation to love. Which good reasons could convince a person to reject what is absolutely good, true and beautiful? It is never rational to distance or to alienate something which is absolutely true, good and beautiful.

On the other hand, it remains true that we do not have immediately the absolute truth, goodness and beauty of God. As finite beings we are confronted with finite signs of God's powerful love. This fact causes distance and insecurity and it enables free choice. Human libertarian free will towards God very much results from this necessary mediation of God's presence. We can always find reasons to mistrust our feelings and experiences.

To sum up: For Werbick the free affirmation of God is always the result of grace and it cannot be done by the autonomy of free will. It is God's Holy Spirit who sets people free to make happen this kind of free affirmation which is the core of faith. But humans have the possibility to avoid being confronted with God's presence by eluding it at the very beginning. As God is

⁴⁰ Ibid., 109 (my own translation).

⁴¹ Ibid., 110 (my own translation).

⁴² Cf. Werbick 2006, 47.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Werbick 2013, 91.

only present through finite signs, every single sign of love could be rejected at the very beginning to destroy God's chance to set me free. However, this complete destruction is not a free rejection of God, but it is the self-destructive rejection of freedom itself. Although people can deny "God" with good reasons because theologians say a lot of stupid things and believers are not always the best witnesses of God, God cannot be denied rationally in a free decision because God is the origin and the horizon of any free decision. Hence in some sense Luther is right to say that there is no freedom vis-à-vis God. A rejection of God would be arbitrary, an affirmation cannot be done without the help of God.

On the other hand, it remains true that humans have – formally speaking – the capacity to block God's influence in their life right before its beginning. The only problem for our context here is that it seems to be impossible to conceive good reasons for such a decision. The formally and transcendentally given possibility of self-alienation or recovery of reflection can actually lose any attraction when I get to know something which no greater can be conceived to happen. Hence the moment of alternate possibilities cannot be conceived in the moment of decision when I am confronted with God's grace directly. It has to be located before this moment, in the moment of ignorance of the attraction of God's love and grace. It has to be conceived in those many situations when I train my character through self-forming decisions.⁴⁵ These self-forming willings are the moment of choice and they are the very foundation of the formal unconditionality of free decisions.

Thus, our liberation for freedom will usually not be accompanied by immediate alternative possibilities, at least not by phenomenologically experienceable ones. But nonetheless they are formally or transcendentally dependent on free choices. At least without this assumption of alternate possibilities at the ground of faith it would be very difficult to understand why not everybody believes in God. Hence the possibility of rejecting God's love has to be left open though it is clear that this rejection is at the same time the rejection of love itself and of myself as a free subject. Freedom can be used to destroy freedom. However, this is no realization of freedom, but its negation. But because of the symbolic nature of the realization of freedom such a negation can always seem to be rational.

So far we defended a modified version of libertarian free will for human beings also in the relationship towards God. In the preceding section we were challenging the idea of God as a free agent. Let us come back to this point. Is it possible to conceive God as being free in a libertarian sense? Or can we say that God is free will as she is love?

3. Prospects and limits of the concept of free will in God

⁴⁵ Cf. Kane 1996, 124f.; Kane 2011, 383f.

The basic assumption of relational theism seems to be that God is love and that free will has to be included in that idea of love because love can only be appreciated if it is the result of free will. At the same time, we pointed out for the context of human love how love is also the ground of free will. Hence love and freedom seem to be interwoven. If it is true that free will takes part in the inner dynamic of God's love and that God creates human beings to include them in this dynamic as free agents, there seems to be some freely chosen contingency in God. If God is love and only uses love to fulfil her purposes, God does not get everything she wants. However, she can always try to realize her intention; she might for instance try to win the free individual by acting through other human beings, or by pointing to new possibilities for life.⁴⁶

“Thus, God influences history through his word and his spirit, but with very flexible plans which always respect the freedom of the individual. Human's free decision to use his abilities and to take control obviously seems to be meaningful to God himself; he does not ignore or force this decision; he tries to win humans over for and to ask for it.”⁴⁷

In the light of relational theism, there seem to be two aspects in defining the relationship between divine and human action. According to the first, there seems to be a strict identity between divine and human action. When God's will is done through the autonomous decisions of human beings, God's will happens through human actions. In some sense it is the human action where Divine action takes place. When parents love their children, their love is the place where Divine love becomes concrete. In this case God is acting through human actors. Humans represent God through doing her good will.

However, God is not only present externally in the actions of other people. God is also the power within people which enables them to make God's word present in the world. Rather than being identical, human and divine action seem to be dialogically related in this perspective. The idea is that human action can be understood as response to the divine presentation of different opportunities for life. God's action enables freedom by pointing out to us new opportunities for living and new alternatives for behaving. Since men and women are not forced to choose the new alternative, God's action preserves his or her complete autonomy. The choice is completely left to her or him. Yet God can try to woo humans, to call upon them, and to attract them, by offering and granting new life opportunities. Precisely in her perpetual enabling of different perspectives and possibilities of rescue from impasses, God can therefore realize her freedom without reducing human freedom but rather increasing it. From this perspective, God's calling to us can be discovered in all conditions of life offering to integrate us into her plan in a way appropriate to us.

⁴⁶ Cf. Sanders 1998, 207: “In the relational model God is wise, proficient, resourceful, loving and responsive, even though God does not get everything he desires.”

⁴⁷ Greshake 1997, 302, (my own translation). In this regard, Greshake's position is broadly similar to Sanders' position or the position of other supporters of *open theism*.

We might also appeal to Trinitarian theology to try to define and to substantiate both aspects of God's action more precisely. In the sense of strict identity, we might conceive of God's action through human actors as mediated through God's self-manifestation in the logos. Moreover, we might conceive of God's dialogical action in offering new opportunities for life as mediated through God's self-manifestation in the Spirit. Hence God wants to act as a personal Thou and she is doing it through the means of humans Thous. And at the same time God seems to be an energy which fulfils our hearts and opens up new possibilities for us. As we shall never separate the actions of the Trinity within history (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*)⁴⁸, it is clear that we should not isolate both aspects from each other. When God attracts me with the power of her spirit this is not done without the help of external means which can be conceived as God's word. And when God is talking to me through my parents I can only understand this word as the word of God with the help of the Holy Spirit. Thus, both aspects are interwoven as God's love and freedom are interwoven. But they give space for us as free agents who are invited to cooperate with God in performing her love.

Does all of this mean that God is free in a libertarian sense? I hesitate to say this. As we have already seen there are some good arguments from scholars like Karl Rahner who prefer talking of God as origin and horizon of free agency and not of her as a free agent herself – at least not univocally in the sense how we talk of human agents.⁴⁹ On the other hand it is not very convincing to eliminate freedom from the source of freedom. Without being able to give a comprehensive response to all problems which are related with the question of the talk of God's free will, I would simply try to point out in which sense it makes sense to talk of God's freedom, and in which sense not. As the analogical talk of God always claims similarities with greater dissimilarities this overview is also an attempt to defend an analogical concept of Divine free will and Divine action.⁵⁰

If freedom is understood as original activity in the sense of Fichte⁵¹, i.e. as highest form of spontaneity and creativity, this seems to match very well the notion of God. Even rational and intentional self-determination or "election of myself" in Kierkegaard's sense can be conceived in a coherent idea of God. Finally, the idea of being affected which is very important for the idea of human free will and also for the notion of God in relational theism is something which can and should be defended in my point of view. This passive and sympathetic understanding of God seems to me very important for a coherent and convincing response to the problem of evil and it helps to understand God's patience with evildoers.⁵²

⁴⁸ Cf. Thomas von Aquin, *Summa Theologiae* I,32,1c.

⁴⁹ Cf. also the critical comments on too much anthropomorphism in Muhammad Legenhausen's essay in this volume.

⁵⁰ For my understanding of analogy cf. von Stosch 2006, 39-43.

⁵¹ In German Fichte talks of „ursprüngliche Tathandlung“. Cf. Fichte 1797, 465.

⁵² Cf. Stosch 2018, 96-111.

On the other hand, it seems to me to be incoherent to think of God in a way as if she still has to form her character or as someone who needs a process to find out her true self or her intentions. In so far as libertarian free will is very much an open process of self-determination with alternate possibilities I do not see how this can be applied to God. It seems incoherent to me to conceive God as self-transcendence and as asking for meaning for her life. It also seems to me to be weird to conceive God in a way that she is torn between different alternatives. I have to admit that some Biblical passages such as Hos 11,8 or Ex 32,10 give another impression. But it seems to me to be against God's perfection if she does not know what to do. The language of the Bible often is very anthropomorphic, but the task of Systematic theology in my understanding is to interpret those passages in a way that they are coherent with the notion of God as the being no greater can be conceived. And I accept the idea that it can be part of perfection to be compassionate and merciful and to be truly affected by creatures. But I do not see how this can end up in the notion of a God who does not know what to do and being literally torn between different alternatives. Hence I would say that there is no univocal way to conceive human and divine free will.

Nonetheless the dissimilarities between divine und human free will do not erase the similarities which I mentioned before. As all talk of God is analogical, the dissimilarities are always greater than the similarities. To keep the talk of God coherent it is sufficient to make clear what exactly are the dissimilarities and what might be the similarities when we use a certain concept. That is exactly what I tried to do very briefly in this chapter and it is clear that this has to be deepened and clarified more.⁵³ The leading thought of such an attempt of deepening the talk of God's free will might be the insight that freedom is not an attribute of God but the principle of all attributes of God. But this thought has to be explained elsewhere.

⁵³ Cf. von Stosch 2019.

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