

THE REORIENTATION OF THEOLOGY IN LIGHT OF THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIOLOGY

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I. THE DEMAND FOR A "SOCIOLOGIZING" OF THEOLOGY

Dogmatics no longer seems to stand in the middle of theological interest, at least not in the form dogmatics previously has had for some time. Formerly dogmatics as "Theology of the Word" formed an epoch. Today, "practical theology," or more precisely, theology brought in line with sociology, has taken its place. The necessity which has come about in this connection — that is, that theology must not only regard sociology as an aid but must integrate it into itself — certainly allows the question as to how this theology is to be united with the essence of dogmatics and with sociology.

Theology of the Word has been replaced by the theology of hermeneutic, and one now speaks within that theology of a post-Bultmannian situation. But we see ourselves today confronted with a new trend: sociological thinking and the demand for an integration of sociology into theology. Both inside and outside theology and church one hears voices which state that the telos, aim, or end of the theology lies within sociology.

Chiefly two arguments are given for the establishment of this transformation of theology or for theology's unavoidable self-dissolution into sociology.

First: Theology, absorbed with its interest in right doctrine and the corresponding right action of the church, has overlooked the true and actual conditions of its environment, particularly the social structures, and in so doing it has overlooked what its own programs have effected within those conditions and what they have not.

Second: The consequence of this foreignness to the world and the contradiction between theology's claim and its factual appearance is that theology today is no longer asked for its contribution, for it has little or nothing to say which is useful with regard to the problems which are pressing upon us. Students and pastors have rather to look outside theology for help for answering their questions and for meeting the tasks of their vocation.

Moreover, this same reproach of foreignness to the world and practical incompetence is charged by representatives of sociology

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against the exhausted discipline of history of philosophy and its last spokesmen. One thinks for example of Adorno's essay, "What good Philosophy?" (*Wozu noch Philosophie?* 1962).

We today are therefore not only referred to orientation to the social conditions in which we find ourselves with theology and church, but also in relation to the concepts to be used and the measures to be taken we are referred to sociology as the comprehensive science of human society and its future form.

What has dogmatics to say to this requirement for, if I may use the catchword, a "sociologizing of theology?" That dogmatics is so challenged is quite right and obvious, for it is that discipline of theology whose task consists in making a normative judgment as to how there may be talk of the truth of the Christian faith, what the content of this faith is, and in this frame what the essence and the task of the Church is.

While dogmatics performs this task in service to the church — that is, as reflection of the church on its determination with regard to its tradition, its history and origin and all that which in its origin has given the church its particular shape — dogmatics stands admittedly from the first in danger of dogmatism. That is, it stands in danger of making assertions which are stated on the basis of the church's past and origin but which do not sufficiently take account of historical change, neither its own nor that of its environment. While it absolutizes particular appearances, especially those of the origin and the earliest transformations, it altogether overlooks the present situation and hence becomes plainly "dogmatic" according to a kind of taste which with good reason adheres to the expression.

One example for this dogmatism, among others, is the "theology of the Word." During the period of threat by political dictators dogmatics stood under its dominance in the middle of theological interest and was politically effective. After the overthrow of the dictators, however, it soon lost the magic sound of its "Deus dixit." Only in that time of distress was it able to rouse the idea of a "sure stronghold, a good defence and weapon." Since then, however, the question of understanding has broken into theology and in this context the "theology of the Word" has dissolved into noise and smoke. Where it does maintain itself it has led the church into a Ghetto existence tolerated and exploited by the rising society of prosperity.

What is said today in this regard from the sociological point of view as criticism of theology and church can only be acknowledged. Certainly, however, such criticisms are not really so new but were stated in another way, for example, by Albert Schweitzer in his critical works on culture and theology, by C. G. Jung in his comprehension of

the relations between psychotherapy and pastoral care, and by Martin Werner in the introduction to the second volume of "Der protestantische Weg des Glaubens" (The Protestant Way of Faith, 1962).

It is another question, however, whether the sociologizing of theology propagated today is, as before, yet a matter for dogmatics. It may be asked whether sociology, just in the moment that it pledges itself to assume wholly or essentially the tasks of theology, does not itself become dogmatics. That is to ask in such a moment if sociology does not have to raise the question about truth, and if so to ask if sociology does not need dogmatics. For a clarification preventive of such confusion some distinctions are necessary.

II. NECESSARY DEFINITIONS

As in its other disciplines, so also in dogmatics theology has to do with objects about which generally testable, and in so far valid yet always relative statements may be made. Just so also sociology makes statements in relation to its research of social reality. In distinction from theology as a discipline whose tasks belong largely to the sciences of understanding, sociology with its empirical methods of research and its statistical material clearly finds itself close to the so-called exact sciences. Dogmatics, as the church's needed consciousness of the truth of the Christian faith, has to do with history, particularly with a special history — that witnessed in the Bible — and with its significance for present society. In so far as that is the case, dogmatics will with advantage use the results of sociology, if hopefully not in the sense of market research! But if it is a matter of truth and not just of correctness, dogmatics will not only dismiss history and sociology, but these branches of science will as sciences admit their limits and renounce their own intrusion into an area for which they have no capacity.

What is sociology? Is it a science or a philosophy? Is it a science of society or a philosophy of society? The determination of the relation of sociology to theology will depend essentially on the answer to these questions. Theology, or in our case, dogmatics, must also ask itself whether it has essentially a scientific or a philosophical character.

This question requires first a definition of the concept "science" as both sociology and dogmatics use it and with which both come into difficulty with philosophy. By science we understand the discovery and holding fast of facts which once existed, now exist, or possibly will result from facts discovered and held fast in past and present. Methods of research and ways of making statements employed under this definition must always conform to the specific character of the respective objects. As consequence of this methodological propriety the results are always particular, always in relation to the particular object. On

the other hand, the results are conditioned by the subjectivity of the researcher. This particularity and subjectivity exclude every absolutizing of the results of scientific investigations. That does not, of course, mean that their general validity is likewise excluded, in so far as they may be verified within the stated presuppositions of science. Here also are differentiated those areas of research in which the greatest possible elimination of subjective factors belongs and those areas in which the subject matter may only be understood by means of subjective congeniality. In spite of this difference, however, the so-called exact sciences and the sciences of understanding are not to be unequivocally distinguished from one another, for both are characterized by relativity and openness to revision and development.

Not only this relative, always widening openness to revision and development and a certain overcoming of limitation is common to all kinds of science, but also an absolute limit. First, science is absolutely limited with regard to personal being: in so far as personal being means knowing oneself as unconditionally responsible for one's decisions, personal being is radically inaccessible for science. Second, science is absolutely limited over against the immediate and respect-requiring "Thou" of our fellow man. And thus science is absolutely limited over against the particular experience of being in knowing itself as destined to be unconditionally responsible in community. Third, science is absolutely limited as regards the general question of Being in distinction from Nonbeing. No science may grasp the area of Being and that of personal and inter-personal being, nor the relation to transcendence of both. Yet science can deny them and even disintegrate them when they falsify themselves, that is, when they absolutize themselves. But in doing that, science is also in danger of absolutizing and so falsifying itself.

Science is not able to answer why I personally pursue one science or another, nor why my personal existence depends on a certain action or non-action, nor what finally is important for me in such action, nor whether with it I come to a decision in final responsibility or whether in all I rather simply am within and have to do with a sociologically or theologically explainable causal connection. The answer to such questions comes rather in the no longer objectifiable enactment of my self-understanding, and it is this self-understanding as such which is the true area of philosophy.

Christian dogmatics is differentiated from philosophy only through the fact that Christian dogmatics for its objectification of the non-objectifiable states the self-understanding of faith, that is, the self-understanding of unconditioned responsible personal being in the frame of the traditional Christian symbol-world. By its choice of this

symbol-world as expression for its self-understanding, in its normative statements about what has to be done, dogmatics may let itself be led by no other criteria than by those of adequacy to the unconditionality of personal being. The same thing must occur in philosophy in its corresponding endeavors.

In this sense sociology as social science is related to sociology as social philosophy just as dogmatics as historical science is related to dogmatics as philosophical theology. So results the determination of the relation between dogmatics and sociology that sociology as social science is an auxiliary science for dogmatics. In comparison with the other scientific disciplines being used by dogmatics in basically the same sense, it is certainly today an auxiliary science of special importance! On the other hand, sociology conceived as social philosophy is no merely indispensable scientific basis for dogmatics as are the traditional disciplines which dogmatics uses. It stands rather in definite formations, when it is rightly understood, as a philosophical statement of faith over against definite formations of dogmatics, just as dogmatics must be understood as the form of a definite Christian philosophy of society. In any case within social philosophy and within dogmatics as philosophical theology, scientific statements no longer stand against other scientific statements, but faith against faith, or one faith discovers itself in the symbols of another. From the effects of different symbols one is able to sight the community of different, or perhaps finally common, self-understandings.

We may now ask more precisely about the essence of faith and its truth.

III. THE ESSENCE OF BELIEF.

Truth is a matter of belief. Within all demonstrable conditionality and relativity of its objectifications in the area of theory and practice as in that of institutions, truth is the unconditional decision of a choice. Responsibility for the decision may be taken away from the individual neither through a supernatural authority nor through information which supposedly would carry an equal authority. Unconditionality is proper to belief in so far as the believer understands himself as personally responsible for his choice and is willing to take over this responsibility concretely, to prove it in theory and practice. Such faith is by no means only a concern of Christian dogmatics — in fact, it has rather seldom emerged in dogmatics and is ever in danger of being betrayed in dogmatics. Such faith is rather something which addresses every man, because personal being itself presents the authentic criterion of becoming human. One has to do here with the philosophical sense rather than the biological. Certainly this philo-

sophical belief may also be brought to expression with the help of Biblical-Christian symbols as objectifications of the non-objectifiable. The God-symbol, or better, the Christ-symbol, and the two in connection, may be found useful for this purpose, but that is not necessary. There is also atheistic and non-Christian personal being, although usually in such contexts one finds a misunderstanding of Christian belief. One finds also within atheistic personal being, as experience shows, that the comprehension and hence actuality of personal being stands in constant danger because of the lack of symbols for personal transcendence.

Rightly understood there is also no isolated self-being, but being a self means being a person only in community with other men, and only so is respect for other men possible. Without co-humanity we can neither become men nor remain men. A normative model for society, whose realization the church would have to serve with its specific possibilities, may not be won from a divine command, with which churches fancy themselves entrusted. Nor may it be won out of any sociological research on religious ideas, habits, moralities and social conditions. Nor may a normative model of society be won simply through negative protest against a repressive society. It may only be won from the normative insight into the essence of personal being destined to unconditional responsibility in community.

We have referred to self-understanding which is not objectifiable in its execution for the determination of the legitimate relation of sociology and dogmatics. In understanding itself as unconditionally responsible, the self is not able objectively to look upon itself. Only through its objectification does the self become visible. Dogmatics as philosophical theology and sociology as social philosophy, in all requisite scientific methodology of endeavor, have to do with just this non-objectifiable self. And once again, it is only possible in community.

Certainly social philosophy will be reserved about this union with dogmatics. It will say, in distinction from dogmatics of the self-understanding of Christian faith, that something belongs essentially to it which does not seem to be but actually is, and by definition, essential in our emphasis on the self, namely society. Sociology may also say of its distinction from dogmatics that it can take the relation to God as object, but that in so far as it does so violates the dogmatic relation to God as reflection on the non-objectifiable foundation of faith.

We have indeed mentioned both relations, those to co-humanity and those to God, in the context of the experience of being determined to personal being. However, the self-understanding of the

relation to transcendence seems equally unapparent for sociology. Since that is so, we wish particularly to fix our attention on these relations and to comprehend them in their true significance for both disciplines.

We do not believe the I-Thou relation, interpersonality, to be ontologizable, and certainly not in the form in which one says that the I has its being only from the Thou (Buber). Equally, however, we do not think that the enactment of a self-understanding of personal being is at all realizable without allowing to the fellow man also *his* unconditionedness and *accordingly* understanding him, including him in his self-understanding and respecting him by virtue of this non-objectifiable community. Without this character of community the self understanding could not be truthful, but would lead into a solipsism as illusory as disastrous.

Sociology, which seems to be protected from error in this regard simply by virtue of its social point of view, may witness that it really does have to do with a "Thou" and not with a mere number. And it does not have to forget that which, beyond the social, alone can make possible society in the philosophical sense, that is, the personal being of the individual.

Christian dogmatics, however, as it comes into contact with philosophy of society, may protect itself from allowing its belief in God to appear only as an objectively researchable, psycho-sociological fact which may correspondingly be calculated, evaluated or devaluated by sociology. Belief should so be spoken of in dogmatics that sociologists become aware that faith is a matter not accessible to science. A sociologist himself may see that he, in the unconditionedness of the enactment of his self-understanding and indeed just in regard to his essentially social character, stands in the transcendental relation of faith, for faith is no other than the expression of the unconditional character of personal responsibility in community. A philosopher of society who has such faith is no less possible than superstitious church dogmatics. The possibility of a superstitious dogmatics, however, hangs together with the problematic of the origin of the Christian church.

IV. THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The self misunderstanding of the Christian faith now standing in question may historically, psychologically, and sociologically be clarified and even corrected by insight into the problematic of its origin. This problematic of origin consists in the fact that the church, establishing itself in the world, replaced the Kingdom of God ex-

pected in the New Testament. If in the relation of theology and sociology there should be talk of a "specifically theological knowledge," then that knowledge as knowledge of the problematic of origin would be specified in the first place in both a positive and a negative sense. Negatively it would be the removal of every supposedly supernatural character of salvation history from the church. Positively it would be a way to a winning of socially meaningful symbols and an interpretation of the Christian tradition according to those symbols. Thereby it is to be observed that the truth of a symbol reveals itself only in the symbol's use in the enactment of self-understanding, and only seen from this point is the symbol's community-establishing function legitimate. Of course, this function would then have to be brought comprehensively into effect by the church.

The problem of the origin of the Christian church consists in the fact that the church has arisen in the place of earliest Christianity's expectance of an end of this world and the beginning of the Kingdom of God, and in the fact that the church has, in the course of an historical process whose end cannot be seen, established itself in the world as a divinely founded institution of salvation. Here already the problem of secularism and of church as establishment has arisen and not first with the modern world or even with the emergence of capitalism, for whom even Kant is counted as a compurgator in Marxist historical dogma. "Post-Christianity" is not first to be spoken about in view of the collapse of the medieval order, which measured by the New Testament was anything but a Christian order, nor is it only to be spoken about after Nietzsche's announcement of Nihilism. "Post-Christianity" rather begins with the delay of the parousia. Measured by Jesus' expectation of the end, everything which came after the catastrophic end to Jesus' expectation is post-Christian. In this sense, as Nietzsche said and Overbeck also with his concept of "Urgeschichte," there was in fact "only one Christian, and he died on the cross."

Meanwhile the statements and attitudes of Jesus and the early Christian community, as well as those of their succession through the centuries, are not to be judged only as error, delusion, superstition and deceit. In these statements and attitudes we have not simply to do with objective doctrines and institutionalizations, but with symbols of self-understanding and their historical effects. We should evaluate them entirely otherwise in so far as they can serve as expressions of unconditionally responsible personal being in community and in so far as with their help such personal being is made possible.

Considering the problematic of the church we cannot speak of

a divine foundation of the church as institution. The church within its institutions is justified against all simplifications and distortions only in so far as the institutions serve for the awakening of the question about the meaning of human existence and advance a corresponding formation of human life together. In this context a divine foundation may then be spoken of in so far as this expression can be a symbol for the unconditionedness of responsibility about which the church in its essence is concerned and which should come to effectuation within it. Being in Christ means unconditionally being responsible in community and its realization is just as much gift as act, that is, a graced act.

All that serves the awakening and advancement of unconditional responsible being in community, that is, faith, is the criterion for what in the symbol of a divine foundation is to be acknowledged, effected and formed. So stand church and culture under the same judgment and under the same promise.

It is the task of dogmatics to work out the significance of symbols which are within the Christian tradition for such personal being and its realization in community. That means that dogmatics must produce and bring to validity in theory and practice for its specific epoch the time-relative model of a philosophy of society, and it must do this with the help of the corresponding interpretation of its tradition and in relation to and with reckoning of the forms of community which the tradition immediately presents.

From the point of its origin in the tradition of the Biblical history of salvation until today, and particularly in the form which salvation history took in early Christian eschatology, the church possesses not only a rich heritage of symbols for the formulation of that criterion for a genuine human social structure, but also an equally rich heritage of concrete examples of guiding principles for a corresponding attitude and for its application and effectuation. To be sure, the presupposition here is that the church understands how properly to translate this tradition into our language and conditions, and that means to avoid sacralization and ideologizing. Just as surely, the church is especially susceptible to such deformity. By means of insight into the problematic of its history, however, the church may to a significant degree be protected from it. Certainly it is not a necessary thing that the church and theology be unconditionally unbelievable.

V. THE QUESTION ABOUT THE NECESSITY AND BELIEVABILITY OF THE CHURCH AND ITS THEOLOGY

The question about whether there must be a church at all and whether, with the comprehension of its determination here repre-

sented, the church may yet be maintained as a particular institution, is to be answered: there are situations in which the church, just for the sake of the society, must be church or must more than ever become church. There are also situations in which the church, for the sake of its being as church, and that means because it should be the conscience of society, must at first become society. To perceive that one or the other is the call of the hour is one of the essential tasks of theology. It is in fact that task in which all its other tasks result.

What is demanded instead of silence is not shouting and cursing, but the conversation of men who are ready to clarify their decisions of conscience with one another on the basis of the best possible information, and who are ready commonly to assume responsibility in unconditionedness for the corresponding formation of human life together and its future. For that purpose it is first necessary materially and spiritually to create the conditions which make possible such responsible being and to oppose all that endangers it.

Is the church still necessary after all that we have said about the problematic of its origin and its history, and also in view of the basic identity of social philosophy and dogmatics as philosophy? Should we not be frightened by the end of the church prophesied by sociology? (And sociology is not the first so to prophesy.) Do we need now the ecclesiology of a church dogmatics, and should we with all possible means seek to modernize the church?

Both by virtue of its origin and history and in view of the contemporary situation the church's unconditional will to preservation is out of place, even when it happens with reference to God's plan of salvation. Through all measures so designed, even if they occur allegedly not for the sake of the church but for the sake of God, the church and its proclamation can become only unbelievable. Even sociologically seen, the simple opposition of church and world or of church and society is not justified and represents a self-deception "theologically," that is, by reference to so-called Biblical salvation history.

A church can only be believable if it reckons its historical problematic and shows itself as the place in society where unconditioned responsibility in community as socially normative is demonstrated, where existing conditions are measured by this norm and all is done for its future realization.

The question is secondary as to whether this occurs within the contemporary church or whether it has to happen without the church, as is the case if the church is not capable. Responsible community *may* be, but is not *necessarily* Christian, wholly apart from the fact that the concept of responsible community is essentially too ambiguous

and becomes meaningful only by means of the norm we put forth — and that also in view of its historical origin. The Kingdom of God is not in need of the church.

Also in this regard no basic difference results between church theology and any form of social philosophy. Church theology is distinguished only through the fact that it has properly to validate the meaning of its tradition in its specific historical place and for the specific situation. It may of course only practice this social-critical function in the positive sense when it first of all brings into use over against its own tradition and sociological forms the above-stated criterion of unconditioned personal responsibility in community. Only so is it able to be acknowledged by the society as its own conscience and to protect society and itself from illusionary hopes and disintegrating nihilism, which is the way-maker for inhuman power politics.

Neither becoming secular nor remaining church suffices. In view of the history of the church in human society one may well ask where this becoming man was better preserved and where it comes into reality today, whether in churches which refer themselves to the once-for-all incarnation of God in Christ or in the world in which this dogma and the Christianity representing it appear unbelievable and where therefore men wrestle for realization of true human being in rejection of so-called Christian being?

Because this wrestling for self-realization belongs to the essence of man, the church will be relevant to the society where its theology becomes anthropology. Prior to that sociology will not be able to understand that also in it the concern of true theology can be at stake.

However, for the sake of the self-understanding expressing itself in theology, theology can never emerge other than in personalistic form. Yet in personalistic form it is irrefutable.

VI. THE IRREFUTABILITY OF PERSONALISM

“Personalism” is confirmed as much by those who on the basis of their belief in revelation think they reduce it as “something only human” as it is by those who believe in view of the actual situation that they see in it a simple utopia or a product of capitalistic individualism. Those who simply dogmatically and uncritically hold one or the other of these views are still responsible for their judgments. They experience this responsibility of course not as freeing and constructive but, as they put it in question, as inhibiting and destructive. With protests and self-denial one creates nothing positively new but only an emptiness or a chaos. But one should attempt to supercede

such emptiness and chaos neither through a super-natural nor a naturalistic pseudo-faith.

I suppose, and certainly not without right, that both from the theological as from the sociological side objection will be raised against the personalism which we here represent. To the one it seems too human, only human. To the other it seems too little human because it does not sufficiently regard the sociologically demonstrable conditionality of personal being, because it is too individualistic and idealistic.

I would like to say to both of these sides that in these objections they themselves refute their own criticisms and hence themselves become subject to these criticisms.

To those who in the name of a theology of revelation think they have here to oppose a mere humanism it is to be replied: of course there is nothing more human than the unconditional awareness of one's responsibility because that alone is true incarnation. The dogma of the incarnation of God in Christ can be a symbol for this true incarnation. The once-for-all character of the person and work of Christ can be understood as an expression for the unconditionedness of personal being, as expression for personal being's relation to transcendence and the fulfillment of meaning resolved within and proceeding from this relation.

The sociological critic will also not deny that he must be critical. Whether with better reason or not, he in any case feels himself pushed to criticism, to formulate it and to represent it. Yet while he considers the theologian's subject matter questionable when the theologian speaks not only in his own name but also in the name of God, and while he considers it questionable when philosophy thinks it is able to bring "Being" into language, the sociologist will also understand himself in his criticism as no simple factor of sociological conditions or of any other conditions. Just because he refers himself in his argumentation to such conditionalities he differentiates himself from them. Just in that reference he differentiates himself from conditionality by the act of responsibility. He, as any other critic, in enacting his criticism takes over responsibility for the conditionalities he sees, and hence he confirms just the personalism which he otherwise falsely puts in question.

The critics of personalism, instead of placing themselves in question, would do better to become aware of the sociological and subsequently also political significance of responsible personal being in community and indeed for the purpose of the concrete transformation of questionable conditions in both church and society.

The task of dogmatics in this situation consists in helping the

church to gain a social philosophy which is founded on the self as called to unconditioned responsibility in community. In that light the church can test its tradition, its institutions and their propriety. So will the church be freed from much historical ballast and become able to fulfill its social function. Without secretly being interested only in its own existence and so becoming unbelievable, it will work together with all who are of good will for the advancement of the presupposition of responsible personal being in community. Thereby the church will also be willing to take upon itself the risk of a certain always unavoidable untimeliness, an untimeliness which is in light of sociological trends today, in a specific way, required.

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