

LIVED THEOLOGY: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

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THE WAY TO THEOLOGY

Much of my life has turned out differently than I at one time planned. I wanted to study physics and mathematics; Max Planck, Niels Bohr, Einstein, and Louis de Broglie were my heroes. But then, miraculously and with great difficulty, I survived the firestorm of the RAF-Operation "Gomorra" which destroyed my hometown of Hamburg in July 1943; 40,000 were killed in the last night of the raid, including my friend, Gerhard Schopper, who was blown up right before my eyes. It was during that night that I first called out to God—"Where is God?" and "Why am I not also dead?"—questions that have not left me to this day. They seemed more important to me than the formula $E=MC^2$. When the attack on the bridges at Arnheim began in 1944, we were hardly done with school when we were thrown onto the front line at Helmond. After the first tank attack only half of our company survived. In 1945, I was captured in Kleve, and liberated, at least from lice.

The war finally ended and we all looked forward to returning home. For me, however, that took another three years. First I was sent to a work camp in Scotland, then to the Norton Camp, and finally to a YMCA-sponsored theological school behind barbed wire run by the Swedish pastor, Birger Forell. There, to the disappointment of my humanist father who believed that his weak son wanted to become a Catholic and perhaps even a monk, I began to study theology. I wanted answers to my questions about God and wanted to know what was true in faith. To me, all of this was wonderfully new. On some fundamental level, this sticks with me even today: my piety is my theological curiosity.

In 1948, along with the injured and refugees, I came back to Hamburg and immediately went to Göttingen to study at the university. It was through the efforts of Helmut Traub, the Arch-Barthian, that I came to study with Ernst Wolf. At first, I was allowed to sleep in the cloakroom of the Seminary and could eat for thirty Pfennig. In the evenings, I

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attended Iwand's lectures by candlelight on account of the power cuts. What a wonderful time! We lived in the Spirit alone, with much to spare. My father agreed to finance eight semesters of study for me, providing 100 Marks monthly. Thus my time limit for study was set.

After two semesters, however, I fell in love with Elisabeth Wendel, a doctoral student of Otto Weber's. In order to be closer to her, I asked him to direct my dissertation: "Moyses Amyraut and the Theological School of Saumur." This, among other good things, kept me busy throughout the remainder of my studies. In 1952, I concluded my studies with first exams, oral exams and marriage, all within fourteen days. I overworked myself, and that remains my fate even today.

In Göttingen, the theological conflict between the Confessing Church and the German Christians, or more precisely between Iwand and Gogarten, seesawed back and forth. With the arrival of the U.S. Army, Emmanuel Hirsch resentfully returned to private life humming the German National Anthem and the *Horst-Wessel Lied*. At that time, we concerned ourselves with Gogarten's secularization apologetic and adapting the theology of the Confessing Church to the post-war era. We and our teachers firmly resisted the movement for the restoration of Adenauer and Dibelius. Within our new front we attempted to reconcile and mediate between Barth and Bultmann—Elephant and Whale. Götz Harbsmeier, Hermann Diem, Wolf, and Kreck also chimed in. We students threw "demythologization" and "immanent Trinity" into their teeth. That was the true culture of theological argumentation, before the movement of dispute toward dialogue and then dialogue toward pluralism decayed. Ernst Käsemann also entered the fray with the bombshell of the truth of the justification of the godless. My calmer teachers were Joachim Jeremias and Gerhard von Rad. "What do you have that you have not received?" My wife and I developed a friendly relationship with Otto Weber, and he occasionally helped providence in our direction.

THEOLOGIAN IN A PASTORATE

In 1952, in our youthful kingdom of God idealism, we wanted to take a pastorate in the East-zone (my wife came from Potsdam). We spent a summer in West Berlin, but four applications for visas were denied because I was in a British prisoner of war camp, not a Russian one, and therefore could have been a spy. I was a chaplain at the Hubertus Hospital, which at that time was totally unknown territory to me, and my wife taught the nurses. We felt at home in the critical transitional stage of the Church and the political world.

President Scharf called us back in autumn 1952, and Otto Weber arranged for me to become vicar in the remotest congregation in Wittgenstein, Emdebrück. There I traveled by skis carrying a Bible and herring, the food the people had ordered, in my backpack. In 1953, my friend Johannes Kuhn and I were appointed to the Reformed seminary in Eberfeld, where I perfected my table tennis game and learned the Reformed Psalmody. Through the mediation of Otto Weber, I became a pastor in Bremen-Wasserhorst, a dike-surrounded village twelve kilometers long, consisting of 60 farms, 2,000 cows, 500 souls, 20 percent churchgoers, 80 percent partakers of the Eucharist, where all the young people in town belonged to the Youth Club and old and young women alike to the Women's Club. The disparity between two theologians with doctorates and this small-town congregation was great. Luckily, I had learned to play Skat quite well in the camps and the barracks. After a grandiose attack on the strongest farmers, I kept my distance in fear that I would lose my

call. It was in the small church in Wasserhorst, however, that I learned to preach before more or less large groups of people. It was very difficult for me because I had heard no sermons as a child, and I certainly was not well-trained rhetorically. They were difficult but good years in the rectory. There were eight rooms, but in the beginning we were only allowed the corner of one to live in with a coal heater for heat. We were often flooded out. There were rats in the cellar, mice in the kitchen, owls in the roof, and cows running loose in the garden. In those five years we had our first children, and in the mornings I had time, following Otto Weber's advice, to write a dissertation on "Christoph Pezel and the Transition of Bremen to Calvinism." I was also student chaplain in Bremen.

In 1957, Weber brought me to *Habilitation* in Göttingen. Every Wednesday I would eat breakfast on the train to Göttingen to give rather skimpy lectures on the history of Reformed theology. At the departure, my farmers replied: "OK, Herr Pastor, if it will help you to advance yourself." For us it was not that clear. We gladly wanted to go to a larger congregation in Bremerhaven. I was not totally suited to be a pastor, but I was happy to have experienced the entire height and depth of human life: children and aged, men and women, healthy and sick, birth and death, etc. I would have been happy to have remained a theologian/pastor. But then the call to the Church Hochschule in Wuppertal came.

During my doctoral studies, I was transformed from a despairing, but still confident Kierkegaardian to a Barmen-Confessing Church Barthian. Like others who said after Hegel philosophy was impossible, I saw no further possibilities for theology beyond Barth: He said it all. I was freed from this heresy in 1956/1957 at a theological conference in Utrecht held by the theologian Arnold van Ruler with his "Theology of the Apostolate" and his "Kingdom of God Theology": "I smell a rose and I smell the kingdom of God." I realized that there was indeed more to do than the Elder in Basel had not done.

THEOLOGIAN IN THE CHURCH COLLEGE IN WUPPERTAL

In 1958, Hans-Walter Wolff called Rudolf Bohren and me to Wuppertal. Georg Eichholz taught New Testament and photographed the world. Then Klaus Koch and Wolfhart Pannenberg came. We were a young faculty and began, without regard for traditions and older authorities, to develop our own theologies: Pannenberg, his "Theology of History," I, my "Theology of Hope." We took part in and were part of the first movement out of the era of restoration and the existentialism of the 1950s. In Wuppertal I had my first meeting with Ernst Bloch, but also with Carl Schmitt, Arnold Gehlen, Rut Fischer, Walter Jens, and Gottfried Benn. Dr. Leeb brought them all to the city of mediocre industry and 250 sects. I was even a member of the Rotary Club for theology-at-large for two years. In 1958, along with our entire faculty, we formulated our protest against "Atomic Death" as it was then called. I signed the "Ten Theses of Brotherhood" for peace, which Barth had drafted. In 1961, together with Hans-Ulrich Kirchoff, I collated and published *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*. That brought me the title of the "Keeper of the Holy Grail of Dialectical Theology."

While on vacation in Switzerland, I read Bloch and was fascinated: "Why had theology let go of its own theme of hope?" It was then that the fundamentals of a Theology of Hope began to coalesce in my mind. I tried them out in lectures in Wuppertal and Bonn in 1963, and finally published it in 1964. I didn't need to say much more; the echo flattened me! It wasn't until 1967 in Tübingen that I could recover again. I raced through the country giving lectures, which

unfortunately left little time for my family. Then came the Christian-Marxist Dialogues, the last of which was in Marianbad in 1967. I developed a friendship with Johann Baptist Metz and with Milan Machovec and Viteslav Gardavsky in the Czech Republic. In 1961, Ernst Wolf brought me into the "Evangelische Theology" Group. At those conferences on the Walchensee the great theological controversies between schools and generations were decided.

THEOLOGIAN ON STATE FACULTIES

In 1963, I was called to Bonn and with great hesitation entered into civil service; the incidents during the Third Reich were still too fresh for me. It was not easy in Bonn. Gerhard Gloege was quite friendly, but Walter Kreck felt threatened and held a general Barthian mistrust of me. I was also friendly with the Catholic moral theologian Franz Böckle and we often went to medical congresses together. I was young in this senior faculty, but I finally got my first doctoral students. In 1966, my situation was complicated: Otto Weber died and, as his main disciple, I should have gone to Göttingen, but I really did not want to. Ernst Käsemann threatened me with words of final judgment: if I did not come to Tübingen, and I finally yielded to him; my wife regretted that for several years. So we came to Tübingen in the summer of 1967, but only for the short summer session because my visiting professorship at Duke University, arranged through Fred Herzog, had already been planned for a year.

On the way to Duke, we stopped off in Paris to bid adieu to European culture, and then on to New York where we got lost in the canyon of buildings in Manhattan. Then we flew to North Carolina, the land of pine trees, golf courses, and black ghettos. It was difficult for me to lecture in English, and I managed only through the help of my American assistant and true friend, Doug Meeks. Our four children were placed in American schools and had it no easier than American children in Tübingen schools. In autumn 1967, my *Theology of Hope* was published in English and was discussed on the front page of the *New York Times*. "You've made it!" my students said with wide eyes.

At the end of the term in April, Duke held a large symposium on the "Theology of Hope." It was during that symposium that Harvey Cox broke in and shouted "Martin Luther King has been shot!" Throughout the country, ghettos burned and states of emergency had been declared in many cities. The symposium participants flew home as quickly as possible. And then something totally unforgettable for me happened: the usually apathetic and lethargic students held a sorrow vigil for Martin Luther King. Four hundred sat on the quadrangle for six days and nights, even in the rain. On the sixth day, suddenly black students from other colleges joined the white students and we all sang "We shall overcome ... someday." Deeply moved, we returned to Tübingen right after that.

In Berlin Rudi Dutschke was shot at. In Tübingen student protest reached new heights. "For OUR sake, not only for MY sake" was the cry, with Gerhard Ebeling returning to Zürich and Joseph Ratzinger to Regensburg, where the world was still in order, at least at "mornings at seven." Because I sometimes went with the students and wanted to understand them, I came into some conflict with the majority of the faculty; because I knew Marx quite well, but was no Marxist, I was not well-received by some of the students either. So I remained on the border, unable to do anything right, because I went my own way. It was much the same with the Political Theology that Johann Baptist Metz and I advocated at the time: for the radical students, as for the Latin American liberation theologians, it was not enough.

At that time I wanted to write an "Ethics of Hope," but nothing came of it because I wanted to dialectically deepen my "Theology of Hope" with a theology of the Cross. In order to relieve ourselves of the moral pressure of the political, my assistant Marcel Martin wrote his book on "play" and I a treatise on "The First Liberated of Creation."

Through the Ecumenical Commission on Faith and Order, which I belonged to since 1963, and through the translations of my books, I had made several international contacts in the 1970s: Black Theology in the United States, Liberation Theology in Latin America, Minjung Theology in Korea, African theology, Kairos Theology in South Africa, and amazingly, with Orthodox theology in Romania. When Walter Kasper separated himself from Hans Küng in 1979, I became a director of *Concilium* with Küng. I was constantly traveling, and my lectures and seminars at Tübingen and my family were suffering. After Ernst Wolf's death, I took over as editor of *Evangelische Theologie*. That proved to be a bit much for me.

It is strange in theology. Problems arise, are discussed until they become personal conflicts, and then they disappear again, unnoticed and unresolved. They are, so to say, "retired." In the 50s, it was "the secularized society," in the 60s it was "revolution," in the 70s it was religion and the interreligious dialogue. In the 80s, the "Me Decade," it was the search for identity and the new thrust toward individualism. Self-help books and books on the mind threatened books on theology. In Germany, Eugen Drewermann mystified the masses.

Last, but not least, Feminist Theology came on the scene, and for the first time in history men had been shoved from the center to the side. I think it was in 1977 that I suddenly realized: I am not black, so I can't write Black Theology; I am not oppressed, so I can't write Liberation Theology; I am not a woman, so Feminist Theology is also impossible for me. As that became clear to me, I attempted to use what power I had to support these new contextual theologies, but I made my own way in productive disengagement and concentrated on long-standing theological problems.

I began with "systematic contributions to theology" and surprised both my friends and opponents with a social doctrine of the Trinity. I followed with a doctrine of creation in the Gifford Lectures of 1984-85. They did fit well into the ecological trend of that time, but I did not desire to write a "trendy" book. After that, I really wanted to stop because I thought I had said all that I had to say. I found, however, that I couldn't stop, and so with increasing joy I wrote a totally unplanned book on the "Spirit of Life," and I have just finished a book on "the Last Things," *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, a theme I had begun with thirty-five years ago with my *Theology of Hope*.

It was the academic pressure to lecture four hours a week that allowed me to write my books. I could rework my lectures into books and then have them published for others to read. The freedom that I had to discuss different topics with doctoral students helped my own thought to develop and allowed me to go even further. I could test out my manuscripts on my "first readers" and they could correct what I had written. The look in their eyes and their reviews filled me with thankfulness. I have had immeasurable luck to work with such fine people.

While I was retired in 1994, I have not retired myself. In every end lies a new, hidden beginning.

