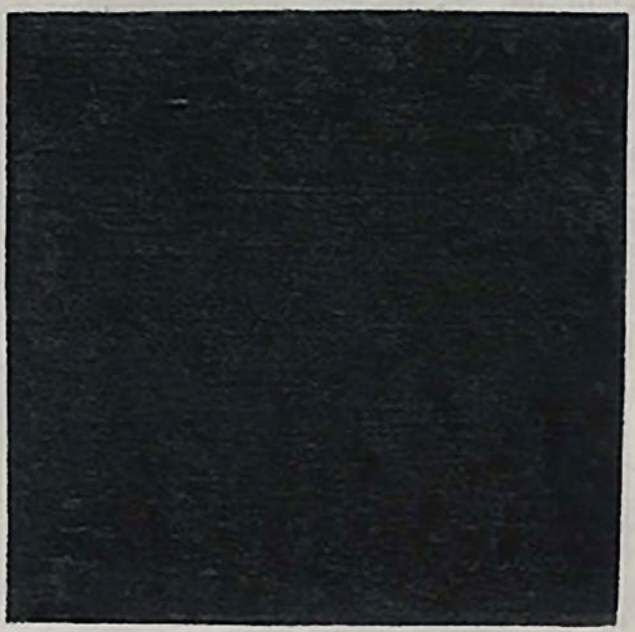
Formerly GOD



Rethinking God after God

Rick Benjamins

Amsterdam
University
Press

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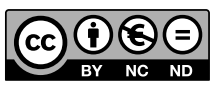

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Introduction

1. God as a Meaningful Concept

Abstract: God is a meaningful term that refers to what carries us, transcends us, calls us, encompasses us, or interrupts us. Today's reflections on God are situated in a post-Christian, postmodern, and post-secular context in which religion is returning in transformed ways. In this context, it still makes sense to talk about the voice of God after God. Yet the question is, how to think of God's voice without a God who is detached from the world as a supernatural being. This book intends to provide an overview of the conversation about God after God and develops an argument of its own in the structuring of this conversation.

Keywords: postmodern, post-Christian, post-secular, transformation of religion, supernatural being, voice of God

Believing in a God up there is a closed case for many people. They said goodbye to a God like the one described in the Belgic Confession, which states: "We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God—eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good; and the overflowing source of all good." Many people nowadays are no longer convinced of such a being or its properties.

Yet, even if a God up there is rejected, the matter with God is not over, as theology can clarify. Such a clarification does require, in my view, a substantive change in our thinking about God because a so-called "onto-theological" conception of God as a separate or supernatural being will no longer be possible. This change of thinking may be challenging, especially to classical theology; yet theology has the space to move away from long-lived notions and is doing so in various forms, as I want to point out in this book. New concepts that revolve around God after God try to break new ground. Still, these concepts focus on God (albeit "after God"), and thus remain connected to the classical tradition of theological thinking that always had to express itself again and again in new situations.

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My presupposition is that the word God is and remains a meaningful term, even if traditional conceptions of God are no longer adhered to. The word helps us to understand and name a transcendent dimension of the world and to orient ourselves in it. In this respect, God is still important, albeit in a different way than before.

When we use the traditional word God as a meaningful term, it is not always clear what exactly it refers to. This may not be too much of a problem in the practice of our daily lives, as it happens all the time with many words. There are plenty of people who care about goodness, justice, or humanity without being able to say exactly what these concepts mean. God is a human concept like that. It refers, simply and broadly speaking, to what carries us, transcends us, calls us, encompasses us, or interrupts us. It helps us to position ourselves in the world because it names what gives us a foothold, upsets us, or is greater than us.

Those seeking further reflection on God can turn to theology. A theological reflection can clarify what the word God may refer to. Such a reflection is of cultural importance, like the reflections of philosophy, the insights of the sciences, and the products of the arts, as they express what the world is like and how people can relate to their world, eventually on the basis of what transcends them and their world.

For many people, God is related to a familiar world, just like the sun and the moon, the land and the sea, the earth and the sky. For others, God is associated with profound experiences or dramatic events. God may be involved in the unforeseen turns that can happen in life or with the consequences that are tied to fundamental choices. The word God seems especially at home in the praise of thanksgiving or the curse of damnation. When we talk about God, the primary experiences related to the word are obviously of great importance, but they are not what this book is about. It is about the terms and concepts we use when thinking about God. They are not separate from our experiences, but they are of a different order.

We always talk about God in a certain context and from particular philosophical, theological, or religious backgrounds. My background is defined by the Protestant theology of a modern and liberal signature. At the moment, this type of theology is not in good shape. Protestantism slowly but steadily faded away in the Netherlands after the Second World War and became a marginal movement. Faith language eroded from within, and the belief in a personal God, a divine Jesus, and an infallible Scripture was done away with for many, even within the Church. Liberal Protestantism abandoned these beliefs in the nineteenth century. It tried to mediate Christian beliefs with a modern worldview and placed great emphasis on rational thinking

about what to believe. At present, though, liberal Protestantism hardly forms more than a neglected quantity. Yet I think that this background provides important views on God for those who want to think about God in a post-Christian, post-modern, and post-secular context.

Beyond Christian, modern, and secular

The fact that we live in a *post-Christian* world entails that society is no longer defined by Christianity. It does not mean that the Christian tradition has therefore become fully irrelevant, though. Under the skin, Christian views still have an impact and press their mark on Western thought. The belief in the inviolable worth of every human being, or the belief in justice, for example, is largely inspired by Christian notions, even though human dignity and justice nowadays are usually no longer based on a religious foundation. That we have turned post-Christian means that Christianity is no longer the provider of our social values and that most people, believers or unbelievers, do not engage with a churchly Christianity that implies a defined or dogmatic belief anymore. Yet this does not deprive us of the possibility to keep reflecting on notions from the Christian tradition and to understand the world from a point of view brought up in that tradition. The fact that there are still ecclesial communities carrying and transmitting the Christian tradition in a post-Christian context is of great value, both to themselves and to the Christian tradition as well as to society and culture as a whole.

The fact that we have become *postmodern* means that we have not only moved beyond Christianity but have also put modern ways of thinking under growing criticism. Modernity promised reasonableness, progress, and emancipation, but the dark sides of these esteemed values are now becoming increasingly clear. Reasonableness was also accompanied by intolerance and oppression; progress led to a variety of crises, among which the climate crisis is prominent; and emancipation in the Western world went hand in hand with colonialism. Postmodern and postcolonial thinking try to reflect on this.

The difference between a modern and a postmodern way of thinking can be presented very briefly in the following way: Modern thinking detached itself from Christianity and brought the human being, or the subject, centre stage instead of God. The subject is endowed with the ability to look at the world from its own perspective and to arrange an ordering of the world based on insights that should be reasonable and

universally valid. Modern thinking thus assumes a human mind with a universal rationality that is valid everywhere and is always the same under all circumstances. What is reasonable here and now will also be reasonable there and later. Citizens can and should organise themselves on the basis of these reasonable insights. They no longer live in a God-given place in an order established from above, but join together by obeying what reason, duty, and compassion tell them.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, heavily emphasises the difference between people. Its starting point no longer lies in the assumption that subjects comprehend themselves as they truly are, organising their world with a rationality that applies to all. The emphasis is on the different situations in which people live, in which they are exposed to influences of all kinds that shape them, even if they are unable to fully understand these influences themselves. People do not determine their own world but are shaped by the way they are situated in it. They do not experience the world equally everywhere, but they develop a very different view of the world in different languages and in different cultures under different circumstances. If one nevertheless speaks of a universal humanity, like modern thinking tends to do, one actually always argues from one's own point of view, as one perceives humanity oneself, but there is no way to generalise such a view whatsoever. If one still does, one forces others to bow down to one's own mind as a standard that is declared universally valid. Postmodern thinking, therefore, is critical of grand narratives—Christian, socialist, liberal, or humanist—that pronounce the nature, destiny, or development of human beings. In big stories, reality is distorted, and people are forced to adopt a normative image of themselves. Big stories always deny what does not fit into the story, what is different, beyond our understanding, and beyond our grasp.

The fact that we live in a *post-secular* context is related to a postmodern accentuation of the other, the different, and the elusive, which is beyond our grasp and our horizon and does not fit in. The otherness that is thereby signified resists feasibility, manageability, and comprehensibility and thereby creates a new sensitivity to religion, traditionally oriented toward the otherness of transcendent powers, making religion return from never really being completely gone. Yet, this return of religion shows itself to be quite ambiguous. In some situations, religion puts modern rationality aside and manifests itself as fundamentalist or militant. In other situations, religion appears in new guises on yoga mats or in the wild, without fixed forms and institutional embedding, as a spirituality that is removed from the concepts we generally use to define religion.

A significant shift in the relationship with religion can be exemplified with the help of two popular books that went through several printings in the Netherlands. In *How God Disappeared from Jorwerd* in 1996, Geert Mak painted a layered picture of the upheavals that took place in a small Frisian village in the second half of the twentieth century.[1] Modernisation processes took place there, and God naturally disappeared because of what we label as "secularisation." In 2018, Yvonne Zonderop published *Unbelievable: About the Surprising Comeback of Religion*.[2] In this book, she reflects on the radical secularisation of the Netherlands, which she went through herself after a Catholic childhood. She finds that more has been lost with the church and religion than just a pinching suit, and she shows an interest in all sorts of contemporary religion. Whereas Mak described secularisation, Zonderop pleaded for the importance and value of religion afterwards. She does not become a believer again, and she does not want to commit herself institutionally. She remains secular but is sensitive to religious themes. Precisely in this respect, she illustrates a post-secular attitude.

Scripture as the only voice of God?

A theology for those who want to think about God in a post-Christian, postmodern, and post-secular context from a liberal Protestant background will not simply build on an established ecclesiastical theology, even if it continues to be theological. The established Protestant theology is very strongly focused on the Word that resounds in the Bible. Historically, there were good reasons for this. The Word—the voice of God—can be heard by everyone through the Bible. Thus, at the time of the Reformation, the claim of the Church and the Pope of Rome that they interpreted the voice of God with authority was refuted. The voice of God does not speak to laypeople by means of an institution but rather sounds through the Scriptures to the heart of each one personally.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on the Bible also turned out to be disadvantageous. The voice of God was easily equated with the letter of the Bible. As a result, the Bible was perceived as a book that is true and provides descriptions that are historically accurate in all respects. This untenable vision was admittedly explained, adjusted, and refuted by all kinds of Protestant theologians, but it still has a large impact on Protestant theology. This type

1 Geert Mak, *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd* (Atlas, 1996).

2 Yvonne Zonderop, *Ongelofelijk: Over de verrassende comeback van religie* (Prometheus, 2018).

of theology is oriented toward the Word and focused on the Bible, often as the only source from which theology can draw.

The emphasis on the word of the Bible often obscures the fact that the voice of God can sound in very different ways throughout all of reality. That voice can speak to us when another person appeals to us, in experiences in which we are lifted above ourselves, or when we realise that we are wrong. The Word of God can come to us through very common words from people close to us or through the behaviour of role models who can be loving or steadfast. Others don't even need to know that they give sound to the voice of God or embody God for us. The voice of God can speak through a Van Gogh painting, Pärt's music, a child's drawing, or the neighbour's stutter.

That church communities have designated the Bible as a place where the voice of God is heard in all kinds of experiences, historical developments, persons, and reflections is a great good. It helps us to speak about the voice of God, to be adjusted to it ourselves, and to distinguish various voices. It is a mistake, though, to identify the Bible with the Word of God and to count it as the sole source for theology. That mistake causes the Word, as the voice of God, to be enclosed in a book and ignores the monumental religious and literary value this book has as a human word.

Tradition, reason, and experience as sources of knowledge

In dogmatics, or systematic theology, several sources are held to be valid for theology. Besides the Bible, these are tradition, reason, and experience. These sources have been given different weights in different periods or movements of church history. In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, tradition is of great importance. The tradition states, for example, that women cannot be office holders and that celibacy applies to priests, although the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions related to celibacy happen to differ from each other. In both cases, though, their tradition seems irrevocable. Protestantism at the time of the Reformation laid great emphasis on the source of the Bible and thereby took the liberty to correct tradition.

In the age of the Enlightenment, reason became the most important source of knowledge, including knowledge about God. What was handed down as truth by the Bible and tradition can also be provided by reason and may certainly not conflict with it. In Pietism, a great emphasis was placed on experience and the finding of truth by means of introspection. Experience gives knowledge based on inner experience but also provides insight into the world in which people live through empirical science.

The absolute validity of statements of faith is fundamentally under discussion once it is recognised that the Bible forms a collection of scriptures with diverse content and once it is confirmed that theological expressions are based on several sources, the weight of which must be considered. Consequently, conservative churchgoers quickly see their faith challenged, but I can see no reason for that. It would only apply if faith were based on undoubted certainties or unshakable principles. A faith that is directed to the voice of God does not need to be concerned, though. The voice of God can still be heard, and by means of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, we can still continue to speak about God. We can do so in a post-Christian, post-modern, and post-secular context and outside the confines of ecclesial frameworks as well as before—on the premise, though, that the Word will be understood as the voice of God that can come to us through all reality. Even someone like Karl Barth, who is known for his tough stand on revelation, acknowledged it. "God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does."[3] But to know whether God is "really" speaking, as Barth calls it, a conversation is necessary.

People can be addressed, supported, judged, or questioned by what they experience as the voice of God. God can, to broaden the metaphor of speech, light up in the world and manifest Godself in its perception. Such an experience leads to reflections through which individuals, groups, or traditions form ideas about God, the sacred, or the transcendent. But who can actually determine whether we are really dealing with God in our experiences and whether our reflections about God make any sense? In my opinion, there is no way to find a clear standard. Any standard will lead to further discussion, so the conversation itself should be the place to evaluate our experiences and ideas. Pope, Church, Bible, or experts can indeed be regarded as the last authority within faith communities, but if we recognise several sources in theology, it immediately follows that such a last authority is never indisputable in practice. Those who do not want to lock themselves up in their own rights nor want to submit themselves to any supreme authority will have to engage in conversation to think through their opinion of God's actual speaking. In that conversation, critical questioning can take place, which helps humans assess, according to their own free conscience, what word should be heard as the voice of God.

3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (T&T Clark, 1975), 55.

Of course, I am well aware that historical discourse has not been a peaceful roundtable, free from dominance. The conversation within the religions and between them unfolded as a great quarrel with all kinds of interests that was also fought with improper means. Yet I consider the conversation—free from coercion, interest, and dominance as much as possible—of fundamental importance to come to collective reflection based on one's own experience and to determine what can count as the voice of God.

Now, it may seem odd from a post-Christian, post-modern, and post-secular perspective to keep talking about the voice of God, even if it is detached from a specific church theology. Yet this concept seems important to me for theology to remain theological. The voice of God is a concept that can still apply and make sense within a post-Christian, postmodern, and post-secular framework. For this to be the case, however, it should be emphasised that the voice of God does not have to be a separate voice from the outside, indicating a separate being of God. It rather seems to me that God's voice is intertwined with this world. In my opinion, this voice does not come to us directly or unmediated but will always be a voice that we hear through other voices: in, with, or under the affairs of this world, as a classical theological formulation says. The light of God is not a light next to other lights but a radiance we perceive in this world that can be read from it.

The purpose of this book

The claim that there is such a thing as the voice or the light of God, which can sound or shine in the world without a God who is detached from the world as a supernatural being, will raise the necessary questions. How can we even imagine or think of such a God? Well, about such a God after God—that is, God without God being any longer thought of as a supernatural, all-determining, and all-good essence—a lot of valid notions have already been formulated in contemporary theology and philosophy of religion, which allow us to articulate and present quite some tangible representations and defined thoughts indeed. However, these representations and thoughts do not always coincide. They are presented, elaborated on, discussed, and criticised in a conversation among very different thinkers and schools with different starting points.

The main purpose of this book is to provide an overview of the conversation about God after God, partly from the perspective of a religion that is

not institutionally organised as a religion. Central to that conversation for me is the question of how one can think about God after theism, i.e., after a God from above has disappeared, while the sacred, transcendent, or sublime can still present itself to us, outside the ecclesiastical framework as well as inside.

After being a pastor for fifteen years, I was able to delve into this subject in various academic positions. I tried to gain as much insight as possible into current developments in the theological and philosophical fields; I wanted to trace the key figures to whom contemporary thinkers are indebted; and I sought the exits that made different schools of thought diverge. This research strengthened my conviction that theology does not end with theism but that there are plenty of new perspectives and designs, with all the contradictions and discussions they entail, to continue the long-running theological conversation in a new and exciting way.

The importance of mapping the conversation after God and reproducing it in this book can be illustrated as follows: In 2020, the Dutch website *liberaalchristendom.nl* made an inventory of the books to be included in a liberal theologian's baggage. It resulted in a top ten, the value of which was widely recognised. At the same time, it was also noted on the website that this list mainly contains common titles from the 1970s and 1980s, which now seem somewhat outdated. On the website, therefore, several authors were invited to name recent work in addition. In line with that, in this book, I try to fill a gap by showing how the academic theological discourse, as far as it is about God after God, developed after the seventies and eighties of the previous century. I hope this is helpful for students, (liberal) theologians, and those interested.

To provide such an overview, I render the thoughts of quite a number of theologians, divided into three streams. It is emphatically part of this book's intention to portray the diversity of their thoughts as carefully as possible. In this way, the discussion gets portrayed. I am aware that by doing so, I am taking the reader on a demanding tour of very different viewpoints, even though an even greater number of viewpoints and authors would have been possible. Nevertheless, I hope that the effort of reading pays off, as a landscape is opened up with something like a road network, on which readers can determine their own direction to find places worth staying. All kinds of connections between the different authors could have been added. There would still have been many motifs, themes, and sub-themes to be worked out in more detail, and many loose ends and open questions remain. Surely there are passages that the reader will pass by, but hopefully there are also fragments that prompt further reading. All this belongs to the

display of a conversation, and it is, as said, my first intention to introduce the reader to the theological conversation about God after God.

Of course, I don't just display the conversation; I organise it as well, so that my own voice is constantly present. In the structuring of the conversation, I will of course construct an argument myself, although I try to learn more from the material studied than to impose my own thoughts on it or use it as an illustration. On the main line of this book, my claim is, in two steps, as follows: In the first step, I argue that we can think about God without using this word if we speak about Spirit or Being instead. In that case, we are still talking about God in disguise. The first advantage of Spirit or Being is that we leave many traditional determinations, associations, and distortions behind that automatically pop up with the word God. The second advantage is that by using Spirit and Being, we can regain an eye for the riches and power of the word God, because it is newly charged, so to speak. In a second step, I argue in favour of understanding God as a reality that is partly shaped by humans. God and humans are mutually dependent on each other. God is that which grants people their existence and offers them possibilities in their existence. Conversely, humans can embody God and add reality to God.

The two intentions of the book—on the one hand, to outline the theological conversation about God after God and, on the other hand, to take a position and contribute to it—are a challenge. I try to draw a line through the many facets of the conversation on the basis of my own claim and position. My own position, however, is by no means supported by all the thinkers quoted. I try hard to make my position plausible, but I also try not to make the conversation to my liking to such an extent that only my view can follow from it. I positively appreciate the complications, problematisations, and deepening that this produces. They favour reflection and exchange, and they ensure that not only one voice is heard, to which the rest must listen. I have done my best to render the quoted thinkers correct and accessible. To make complex thought processes clear, I sometimes repeat the same thing in a slightly different way, which may be helpful in unfolding the theological and philosophical concepts in which we can think of God after God.

The argument in this book can be read in different ways. If you want to start immediately, you can continue with the third chapter, where the first part begins. If you first want to get an overview of the different parts, these can be found in the second chapter. This chapter describes the steps that are taken, the insights that they provide, and the lines that are drawn between the various parts and chapters. The second chapter is entitled "The Track of This Book" and can function as a reading guide or an instrument

to get or keep track of the whole of the book. It may also help the reader not to read the book chronologically but to focus on the part or chapter that arouses the most interest. In addition, it can be helpful for the reader's understanding of more extensive explanations to already have grasped their core in concise form.

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Zonderop, Yvonne. *Ongelofelijk: Over de verrassende comeback van religie*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2018.

2. The Track of This Book

Abstract: This chapter contains an outline of the track that is followed in this book. The Dutch theologian Kuitert offers its problem statement. He rejected a God from above but demanded that God exist independently of the world in order to be really God and thereby got stuck. Hegel and Heidegger had already enabled theology to replace the old imagery of God by speaking of God as Spirit and Being, without the need to talk about a supernatural or separate being. Hegel and Heidegger also contributed to the shape of the three contemporary theological directions discussed next, namely interpretive, deconstructive, and constructive theologians. The final chapter elaborates on the conception of God after God.

Keywords: God after God, Spirit, Being, interpretation, deconstruction, constructive theology

In this chapter, I present the track that is followed in this book, as it can be helpful to get an overview of its entire course and the various trajectories that constitute the development of its argument.

About the first part

In the first part, *Formerly God*, I focus on the theology of Harry Kuitert, a Dutch theologian who offers the problem statement of this work. Kuitert was one of the most important theologians in the Netherlands at the turn of the twenty-first century, whose books were very well-read and mostly controversial. He came from an orthodox background but had a big clear-out among Christian beliefs and was ultimately applied as a destructive theologian, rejecting or rephrasing Christian doctrine. He can be regarded as the spokesman for many church-leavers in the Netherlands who were done with a God from above in the second half of the twentieth century. His assertion that all talk about "up there" comes from "down here" pricked the

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importance of God and religious beliefs. A closer look reveals that Kuitert did not just destruct doctrines but also tried to keep up with the religious meaning-seekers who had left the Church, focusing on transcendence, spirit, and mystery. Still, he remained stuck and only went halfway regarding his aim to enhance clear thinking about God in modern or postmodern contexts. In his struggle with the orthodoxy he came from, he apparently found the energy to fight old ideas about God but did not succeed in developing a better concept of God or elaborate on God after God.

The biggest objection I raise against Kuitert is that he sticks to the traditional image of a God who must exist independently of the world and human knowledge. If not, God is considered to be nothing but a product of the imagination, which therefore lacks all sorts of reality. In my opinion, Kuitert thereby blocks his own attempts to communicate with meaning-seekers about transcendence, spirit, and mystery in a new way. Admittedly, there could have been many other theologians to begin this book with, but Kuitert's theology offers an important turning point as a start. He fights against an old conception of God and offers new impulses. The tensions that are thereby evoked in his own thinking are recognisable. He closes roads, seeks new ones, does not get rid of the old imagery, and therefore takes a critical stance on both old and new ideas. He thus brings us up against the question of what we actually mean by God when we talk about God from down here and yet do not refer to an independently existing being up there.

About the second part

In the second part, *God as Spirit and Being*, I consult the philosophers Hegel and Heidegger. They both had a major influence on theology, which alone would make them worthy of further study. They make a clean sweep with the old imagery that Kuitert could not get rid of and show that important things can still be said about God as Spirit or Being without the need to talk about a supernatural or separate being. In the background, Hegel and Heidegger also contributed to the shape of the three contemporary theological directions that I discuss in the third part of this book, and they are therefore helpful in getting a better understanding of them. Hegel and Heidegger naturally precede Kuitert, but I read them supposedly after Kuitert and ask the question of how they can contribute to a theology of God after God. This question relieves me of the obligation to present their philosophy in all its finer points and to completely place their thoughts in their historical context. Still, it remains quite a task to enter their thoughts.

I begin the chapter on Hegel with a brief outline of German idealism, which could not get along with traditional Christian ideas anymore and therefore conceived new thoughts about God and religion two hundred years before Kuitert. I pinpoint some ideas of Schleiermacher, who argued that many educated people uphold quite mistaken thoughts about religion. According to him, the core of religion does not consist of doctrines or moral prescriptions, as is often thought, but rather a sense of receptivity to the universe as it shows itself in the world and the people around us. Although piety can benefit greatly from Schleiermacher's receptivity, I concentrate on Hegel since he has more to offer conceptually, which is of great importance to systematic theological thought.

In Hegel's philosophy, God is thought of as Spirit. In a complex train of thought, he claims, simply put, that we can conceive of the world as a unity if we consider all contrasts and contradictions in the world as part of a major development process. In this process, God and humans are involved as Spirit and spirit. They do not oppose each other, but instead interact with each other. The Spirit realises itself in the minds of people, and the human mind can understand itself as part of the Spirit. Thus, Spirit, or human spirit, comes to self-knowledge—and thereby to freedom—which is the ultimate goal of the development process. In this process, Spirit and the human mind (or spirit) form a differentiated unity and depend on each other. Philosophically, Hegel defines spirit in such a way that spirit is not really spirit until it is known as spirit. To be spirit, therefore, spirit must be known as spirit by spirit. In theological terms, this amounts to the following: God expresses Godself as Spirit in the world and needs to be known or recognised by the human spirit. God only becomes God when God is known or recognised by human beings. The other way around, human beings come to understand that they are part of God once they realise themselves to be spirits, which makes them reconcile themselves with their finiteness and the limitations of their situation in the knowledge that their finiteness is part of God's infinity.

Thus, according to Hegel, God is neither a separate being nor the pure imagination of the human mind. That makes him interesting after Kuitert. God is God in such a way that God must be known by human beings as that which they are themselves in their depths, namely spirit, in order to be able to be God at all. In Hegel, then, there is an essential relationship between God and human beings, which goes in the direction of interaction, as I would like to advocate. What speaks against Hegel and earns him a lot of criticism in recent philosophy is the idea that there is a reasonable development in history, which can be rendered understandable by means

of his logic since he has outlined how the Spirit must evolve in history. In this way, he pushes reality into a scheme and makes the Spirit resemble a principle that is unfolding itself by necessity.

To Heidegger, the question of Being is of central importance. The idea that God can be regarded as Being itself is an old and dignified conception in theology, which makes it possible to read Heidegger theologically. To gain access to the idea of God as Being, I dwell on Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, who diverge over the question of whether God should be regarded as Being itself or as a being. I also discuss Paul Tillich, who states that God must be understood as the ground of Being. In an important essay, he discusses the divergent views of Augustine, Thomas, and Scotus. For Tillich, it is important to understand God as Being, but not as a being. He believes that Thomas already tends to view the Being of God as a separate being, thus distinguishing himself from Augustine.

Heidegger tries to penetrate the question of Being in a new way. I take it that his question of Being can be understood as a question about God, even if Heidegger himself did not see it that way. According to him, in dealing with the question of being, Western thought has always drawn on the highest being. Such a highest being would contain the fullness of being and thereby clarify what Being is in its deepest sense. From the highest being, it can also be deduced in what order the beings are placed. According to Heidegger, the approach to the question of Being is fundamentally wrong if it is dealt with this way, for *Being* is not *a being*, not even the highest kind of being.

Heidegger argues that we can never inquire about Being as if it were a being outside of us. We are not the spectators of Being, but we are in the middle of Being ourselves, and we shape it in our existence. Being can be found nowhere else than in beings, to which we ourselves belong, yet Being itself is neither a being nor the totality of all beings together. But what on earth do we imagine Being to be in that case? Do we not thereby turn Being into something puzzling that can never be named and always eludes our understanding? Exactly, Heidegger says, and we lost precisely that sense of enigma because we only looked at beings to control them, especially by means of the idea of a highest being. We have to think differently, therefore. Enigmatic and elusive Being shows itself in beings but does not constitute a firm foundation for beings, fixating their being. Admittedly, it lets things be and grants beings the possibility to be, but it is itself unfounded and ungrounded. Being *is* not but *happens* in beings. This groundless Being, as a possibility to be, can therefore always reveal itself anew and differently in beings, partially depending on the way in which people understand, receive, and shape Being in their own existence. We should not want to

grasp Being conceptually or capture it mentally, but rather open ourselves up to it receptively.

A theological reading of Heidegger, which conceives of Being as a reference to God, will be critical of a traditional theological stance. God is neither a supreme being nor the first principle from which the world and reality can be deduced. God manifests Godself in the being of the world, or through reality, without being above or beyond it. A God from above, therefore, has radically disappeared. If we interpret Being as a reference to God, God becomes the mystery of reality, its baseless ground or unground, which happens because beings are. In this way, Heidegger steers clear of all theistic thinking and sharply distinguishes himself from Hegel as well. Hegel conceived of humans as spirits and as part of the Spirit that is engaged in a great process of development, thereby coming to itself. Heidegger rejects such an overview of the whole. We are just beings that exist in the middle of the world as beings in and to whom an enigmatic and baseless Being manifests itself.

After Kuitert, then, God can be thought of as Spirit and Being. That is no longer God from above, but a God who is never apart from human beings or the world. Hegel helps us to see that God can never be thought of as a separate entity detached from human beings, since God is Spirit in the mind of human beings. Heidegger helps us see that God can never be instrumentally used as a means to get hold of the whole world. God allows beings to be and happens in the being of beings without being above or beyond their being. The paths of thought opened by Hegel and Heiddegger are, of course, very different, and they point theology in very different directions. It matters whether we think of God with Hegel as Spirit or with Heidegger as Being. In both cases, however, we pass by a God that is supposed to exist separate from the world and human knowledge.

About the third part

In the third part, *Theology after Kuitert*, I distinguish between three schools of thought in recent theology. The theologians whom I count among the same theological school clearly differ from each other, but they are close enough to be discussed as part of the same movement. First, interpretive theologians are discussed. They argue that we live in a world of meaning. The reality we perceive is always an interpreted reality, which receives its meaning through the meaning we attach to it. From that point of view, it is odd to say that religion is a matter of imagination—as Kuitert did—and

therefore God cannot be real. All knowledge is a matter of imagination, that is, of interpretation and meaning. The primary question, therefore, is not whether something is "real," but what meaning it has for us. Understanding, imagining, and interpreting are radically stripped of their negative connotations, as if they only offered subjective perspectives on the world. On the contrary, they give us the only access we have to it. We have no other access to the world than through symbol systems that allow us to enter the world by means of interpretation. According to the interpretive theologians, religion is an important symbol system that has nothing to do with excessive interpretation, fantasy, or projection. In fact, religion is essential for the interpretation of human beings and the world, and it is even important for interpretation as such to be meaningful.

Obviously, there are interpretive theologians of all shapes and sizes. I focus on a number of contemporary German theologians in particular, for whom interpretation and hermeneutics play an important role. Ulrich Barth argues that through interpretation, people arrive at the idea of a final ground for all there is, which is the absolute. Next, they can understand themselves as an instance of this final ground. Hegel, of course, is not far from here with his idea that human beings as spirits are instances of the Spirit. Human beings are able to see the world as a whole, in which chance is included in a higher necessity and the eternal manifests itself in the temporary. By viewing the world like that, humans produce religion. They can view the world this way because they are instances of the absolute themselves. The final ground, which is held to ensure the unity of the world, enables human beings, or the subject, to actually perceive the world as a unity. The fact that humans are capable of this shows their high dignity. This dignity gives them their self-esteem, apart from the judgment of others and regardless of the roles they play in the world. A religious view of the world and oneself elevates human beings to the world and enables them to contemplate themselves.

Dietrich Korsch bases his interpretive theology on a footing that differs from Ulrich Barth's. For Barth, interpretation starts with the interpreting subject. Korsch begins with life and culture. The core of life consists of the maintenance of an internal structure vis-à-vis the outside world. The structure of the organism can function as an example of such a structure, as it maintains its independence from its environment. At the same time, though, the internal structure of the organism, which delimits itself from the outside world, is dependent on the outside world to be nourished and supplied with new elements it can absorb. Cultures are organised in a similar way. In culture, too, new people—descendants—are included. They participate

in the organisation of food production and join the web of mutual relations regulated by mutual rights and obligations. In this way, culture forms an internal structure that offers resistance to chaos and decay. This structure needs symbol systems in order to arrange and organise itself. According to Korsch, religion constitutes a symbolic system of fundamental importance to culture. Religion has always provided culture with an overarching symbol system in which the various and different symbol systems used in society are connected to each other. Because of that, religion also offers a proper symbolic system in which the ground of interpretation is thematised, which makes interpretation possible and meaningful.

Whereas Dietrich Korsch offers an alternative view to Ulrich Barth's perspective on interpretation, Jörg Lauster gives a correction to Barth. The subject does not produce religion, as it arrives at the idea of the absolute and sees the world in its light. Instead, the subject receives religion by gaining experiences of transcendence that happen to it. Such an experience of transcendence is emphatically not the experience of a supernatural object, according to Lauster, but an experience of reality that impresses the subject to such an extent that it feels invited by the outside to interpret the experience as divine, sacred, or supernatural. These experiences of transcendence, which depend on religious symbol systems for their realisation, shed light on human life. They enable human beings to arrive at a better and richer understanding of themselves and their existence.

Hartmut von Sass, finally, is an interpretive theologian who firmly opposes the interpretive theologians mentioned so far. According to him, they focus on the interpreting subject, while theology should have its focus on God. In the tradition of hermeneutical theology, he therefore wants to arrive at a theological understanding of God. Yet he claims that we should not understand God as an object seen as an independent entity separate from ourselves and the world. He interprets God as the event through which we arrive at a new understanding of ourselves. God is a reality that reveals itself to us in such a way that we receive a new view of ourselves and the world. God is a reality, precisely in this event.

To interpretive theologians, the subject, culture, and the meaning we attach to the world and ourselves are of great importance. They hold that religion and theology are of great value because they endow human beings and their cultures with a better view of themselves. Since human beings are related to the absolute or the transcendent, they can perceive their self-worth, interpret their lives, and participate freely, independently, and therefore critically, in culture in order to find meaning in life. In the human interpretation of life, the world, and themselves, a reality (formerly God)

comes to light that carries people and gives them a view of themselves and their world.

As a second grouping, I discuss postmodern deconstructive theologians and philosophers. They do not dispute that we gain access to the world through interpretation only, but they believe that Christianity no longer has any value for the interpretation of current life because it is attached to the idea of a transcendent principle or a supernatural God. Such an idea supposedly puts Western thinking on the wrong track. Heidegger, of course, is not far away from here with his criticism of a highest being that has hidden the essential question of Being from view. According to postmodern deconstruction, the Western and Christian interpretations of the world should be unmasked and dismantled by a critical interpretation in order to allow the appearance of new perspectives on reality. It is particularly noteworthy that the thinkers of this group criticise Christianity but likewise consider it a source of incentives for a different way of thinking that rids itself of dominant Western views. This makes their relationship to religion and Christianity critical and complex. They detach themselves from religion with religious incitement; they use Christian notions to dispose of Christianity; and they counter theology, so to speak, theologically. Yet they do this in very different ways.

In a number of publications, Frits de Lange argues in favour of deconstructing supernatural theism and saying goodbye to a God who exists. He speaks out for a minimal theology that ignores the big questions of "why" and does not turn itself into a project, but continues to believe in a truer and better life. In a similar way, the American theologian Carl Raschke argues that theology has come to an end after Heidegger's critique of a supreme being and the so-called death of God. Therefore, theology no longer has its own object of study. In this situation, Christianity must no longer look for a solid metaphysical ground for its worldview or try to find a legitimate place for itself in modern thinking. It has to distance itself from these firm bases in order to embody the gospel. De Lange and Raschke thus both want to leave theology in order to arrive at a new, but mutually different, attitude of faith after God.

Slightly different from De Lange and Raschke, who want to get rid of a theistic God and a theology that is centred around it, Thomas Altizer and Slavoj Žižek criticise the transcendent. They want to acknowledge the radical loss of transcendence that has spread widely in modern culture, but they want to do it in such a way that we are left with more than just a flat reality in which we chase our own illusions. Thomas Altizer developed a God-is-death theology in which he assumed that there was absolutely no

transcendence left after the death of God. In spite of his radical denial of transcendence, though, he also argues that a dimension of holiness can be found immanent in this world. Slavoj Žižek takes absolute immanence as his starting point but claims that this immanence can never be conceived of as a closed, rational, complacent whole that can be explained by itself. The idea of such a completed immanence is as untenable as the thought of a transcendent God and is actually only used to create and maintain illusions about ourselves. Remarkably enough, Žižek argues that it is precisely the Christian idea of God that can help us live without illusions and heal from our fantasies and projections.

Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, finally, oppose the idea that this world has a purpose and a meaning, which can be derived from a principle that orders the world. Western thought, Christianity, and theology fell into the trap of metaphysics by presupposing such a principle and naming it God. Nancy wants to undo the closure of the world that has arisen as a result and claims that it is precisely a deconstructed Christianity that can contribute to the world's opening up or dis-enclosure. God must be understood as the radical denial of a principle that governs the world. The world is nothing else but all there is—which does not actually build a whole—in which people adhere to each other, can communicate, and only have to be what they are. Agamben argues that human life is indefinable and indeterminate. It has no essence to be realised, and there is no intention life has to comply with, but it is characterised by the pure possibility of being. Yet it is governed and dominated by ideas and authorities requiring that life be shaped one way or another in order to make something of itself. Life as a possibility is thereby nullified. A liberation of life from preconceived norms and ideas is therefore needed so that it regains its ability to be different from what it is now. Agamben mostly views the Christian tradition as a grid imposed on life. In his search for life forms that do not harm life, he nevertheless draws from the Christian tradition, which thereby shows its ability to break through a fundamentally wrong way of thinking.

The interpretive theologians argued that religion matters because it endows the subject with a fundamentally important view of itself and the world, which enables the subject to contribute meaningfully to life and culture. The thinkers of postmodern deconstruction are far more critical of humans and their culture. The complex of ideas about an independent subject, a final ground, and a meaningful culture—to which the interpretive theologians attach—is like a giant on feet of clay, according to them, which is actually shattered already. There is no such subject, such a last ground, or such a culture. We need to get rid of such ideas to create a new view of

reality. However, the thinkers in this group have difficulty working out a new view of reality. Their emphasis is on criticism, which, by the way, makes sense and is therefore important, even for an interpretive theology that wants to maintain that it can contribute to the reflection of humans on themselves and their culture in a relationship to God or the transcendent.

As a third grouping, I discuss some constructive theologians, i.e., theologians who speak about God again after God. Among this group, I count Richard Kearney, John Caputo, and Catherine Keller. In their thinking, they still assign an important role to God but provide the notion with new content that deviates from traditional views. They don't think of God any longer as a supreme being or as the final ground and foundation of all that is, but they conceptualise God in a new—albeit mutually different—way.

Richard Kearney argues that Christianity can return to God precisely after the loss of an almighty, sovereign God. In that case, God is not a God who exists or does not exist, but a God who can be. This God gives people possibilities with which they can contribute to the realisation of God in the kingdom of God. Consequently, God is not a God in fullness from the beginning but a God who can gain reality through interaction with human beings.

John Caputo developed a theology of the event. The name of God does not refer to a being but denotes an event. This could be, for example, the event of a gift, of justice, or of hospitality. These are events that break through the existing order and open up new perspectives. Humans can long for such an event and open themselves up to it, even without being able to name exactly what they desire. In the name of God, such an event is hoped for, prayed for, and cried for. Such a God does neither exist nor not exist but insists, Caputo claims. That is, from God or the event stems a call that awakens our desire and moves us without accrediting God or the call with the status of being.

Catherine Keller takes God as a designation for the relationships out of which the world is constituted. God is intertwined with the whole of the world and constitutes the unity of the multiplicities that compose our world. As the unity of the many, God is not separate from the multiplicity but is shaped or built up by it. Still, we cannot speak affirmatively or positively about God because we cannot oversee the whole of all the relationships that make up the world. We are enfolded into that whole, just like we fold the whole of our history and our context together in ourselves. Our connection with God coincides with our entanglement in the world. It is precisely from our opaque entanglement that new possibilities arise to improve or heal mutual relationships.

Although Kearney, Caputo, and Keller agree in their attempt to speak about God again in a new way, their theologies result in very different conceptualisations of God that emerge from fundamentally different beliefs about God. It shows that an essential debate is always present within every theological movement "after Kuitert," just as an essential debate is possible between these groups. Core beliefs about God will continue to vary after God.

The trajectories of the second and third parts of this book have been elaborated extensively in order to bring a current theological conversation into sharper focus. The thread of the discourse, which reflects the line of my own reasoning, can be displayed briefly as follows: With Kuitert, theology will have to say goodbye to a God up there if it wants to be able to address post-Christian, post-modern, and post-secular meaning-seekers and those who want to think about God. Such a theology—after Kuitert—has to go through Hegel to see that God and humans are not opposed. It has to go through Heidegger to free itself from a concept of God to which the dominion of the world is attached. It must go through interpretive theology, which focuses on humans as interpretive beings, and also go through the postmodern critique of it, which questions and deconstructs interpretations. From there, we can speak about God again to offer new perspectives or to tell a new story in which we improve our understanding of ourselves and our world and learn to act meaningfully in better ways, even though our talk about God will continually have to remain open and be subjected to discussion because fundamentally different core beliefs are at stake.

About the fourth part

In the fourth part, *God after God*, I convey my own core beliefs. In my opinion, it is still meaningful to think and talk about God, even though God can be seen very differently as a ground of interpretation, as an un-ground, or as a giver of possibilities. It seems to me that our God-talk begins with the experience of transcendence, which consists of the realisation that the world is more than just this actual or factual world. Such a transcendence must be understood as a transcendence *of* the world, not *above* the world. In their receptivity to the transcendent, humans are passive. However, they are constitutive of the designation and naming of the transcendent, which they actively shape. In this respect, God—as an indication of the transcendent—takes shape in an interaction between God and humans. The reciprocity between God and humans has always been critically viewed

or rejected in classical theology. Yet it seems plausible to me that people matter to God, that God takes shape through the expression of human beings, and that there is an interaction between God and humans in which God becomes and can be realised.

Part One

Formerly God

At the end of the twentieth century, Harry Kuitert (1924–2017) was the most talked-about Dutch theologian. He had started in the sixties and seventies with a number of books in the field of dogmatics, in which he tried to bring the Christian faith into accord with the times.[1] From 1967 on, he devoted himself mainly to moral issues as a professor of ethics and the introduction to dogmatics at the Free University in Amsterdam. However, he became famous and infamous after his retirement in 1989, when he re-established himself as a bestselling author devoted to reflections on the Christian faith. His 1992 book, translated as *I Have My Doubts*, was the starting point for this.[2] With each subsequent book, of which only *Jesus: The Legacy of*

1 See, for example, Harry M. Kuitert, *The Reality of Faith: A Way Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Existentialist Theology*, trans. John K. Tuinstra (Eerdmans, 1968), originally 1966; *The Necessity of Faith: Or, Without Faith You're as Good as Dead*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Eerdmans, 1976), originally 1974.

2 Harry M. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian Without Being a Fundamentalist*, trans. John Bowden (SCM Press, 1993), originally 1992.

Christianity appeared in translation, he seemed to give up another part of the faith, and new commotion arose until, at some point, it was over. *Alles behalve kennis* (Everything except knowledge) was published in 2011 and *Kerk als constructiefout* (Church as an error of construction) in 2014. These books looked like a repetition of moves and called forth a certain fatigue in the theological world. Kuitert got back to where everyone else had already passed. In 2016, a biography appeared about him, and on September 8, 2017, he passed away.

3. Up There Comes from Down Here: Kuitert's Theological Development

Abstract: Harry Kuitert was one of the most well-read and controversial theologians in the Netherlands at the turn of the twenty-first century. He came from an orthodox background but had a big clear-out among Christian beliefs and was ultimately applied as a destructive theologian, most famous for his dictum that all talk about "up there" comes from "down here." Several steps can be distinguished in Kuitert's development, in which he kept opposing God and humans and finally concluded that God is an imagination of human beings. He did not succeed in developing a non-contrasting God or elaborating on God after God.

Keywords: controversial theologian, orthodoxy, doubts, secularised, imagination, meaning-seekers

Kuitert is mainly known as a theologian of destruction, but it is probably more apt to see him as a theologian who broke open the closed world of the neo-Calvinist Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. These neo-Calvinist churches were orthodox. They based themselves on the so-called Reformed principles and wanted to maintain the unity of confession. From their beginning, they wanted to avoid all sorts of liberalism and modern theological thinking that were present in the national Reformed Church.[1] From the 1960s onward, though, the neo-Calvinist churches rapidly turned away from their own principles, and their members secularised in radical ways that jumped over liberal modes of belief, undoubtedly under the influence of social developments. Kuitert embodied this movement. In 1961, he was one of "the eighteen," a group of theologians that strove to reunite the neo-Calvinist

1 Whereas the liberals were modern, neo-Calvinism was founded on so-called Reformed principles. Such a foundation plus the intended effect of the principles in all spheres of life nonetheless constitute the typically modern character of neo-Calvinism, which presented itself as "anti-modernism."

Benjamins, R., *Formerly God: Rethinking God after God*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2026.
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"Gereformeerde kerken" with the national Reformed Church, the "Hervormde kerk," which had separated in the nineteenth century. When this initiative eventually resulted in the unification of both churches in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, together with the Dutch Lutheran Church, Kuitert seemed close to saying goodbye to God and church altogether.

For many Protestants, Kuitert became a springboard to secularism. His oft-repeated statement, "all we say about up there comes from down here," marked the break with church, faith, and theology for many people. "Up there" appeared to be nothing but a projection screen once all speech was supposed to come from down here and was dismissed. Yet Kuitert kept being engaged with religion, just like the church-leavers might be doing as well. Yet his work seems connected to his own generation to such an extent that it hardly resonates with younger people. On October 11, 2017, the daily newspaper *Trouw* published the article "Harry Kuitert is really passé," which showed that younger theologians no longer care about him. They called him either outdated or liberal and indicated that they had barely read him, which did not seem to stand in the way of their judgment, though.

Nevertheless, Kuitert's theology touches on themes that are still relevant. Not only did he leave behind much of the orthodox faith, which made him known as a destructive theologian, but he also tried to penetrate ever deeper into the core of religion and to think along with the church-leavers, the meaning-seekers, and the lovers of religion. In doing so, he anticipated an attitude that we now consider post-Christian and post-theistic, and in this respect, he is certainly not outdated. Kuitert was neither a liberal nor a conservative. The attempts in his later books to deal with God and religion in a new way fall back on liberal Christian ideas, but he couldn't really express and communicate them. He continued to fight the orthodox certainty of a revelation from above, on which a genuinely principled faith was supposed to base itself, which conversely led him to the certainty that God must have been invented and that religion is a matter of imagination. The liberal idea that God works through human beings and thereby takes shape through them barely got a foothold with him. He was too fixated on the contrast between above and below to think through such a view.

Kuitert forms an important starting point for this study because he shows the development from believer to religious meaning-seeker that many of his readers probably went through. Kuitert expresses this transition in a theology that changed greatly over the course of some twenty-five years. His development results in the conclusion that religion can offer no more than imagination, although he always tries to look behind the imagination to see what transcendent reality is depicted in the imagination. In this way,

he keeps the transcendent "opposite" of human beings—formerly God—and the human mind apart. He criticises both believers and meaning-seekers for nesting themselves in their own imaginations without recognising their imagination as imagination and sets out in search of the underlying truth. Naturally, there are more theologians who leave theism behind, emphasise the imagination, and search for the core and value of religion, but Kuitert is important precisely because of his development and changes.[2] As he started to shift, he moved into different positions and found himself confronted with many theological themes that required reflection. A careful reading of his books can give a good picture of his development, with all the questions, discussions, and changes thereto. To such a reading, this chapter is devoted.

3.1. A Clarification of the Christian Faith

To get a clear picture of Kuitert's development, his 1992 bestseller *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian Without Being a Fundamentalist* offers a good point of reference. In this book, he is still addressing an audience of churchgoers with the intention of bringing clarity in times of confusion and stagnation. The structure that emerges from this book is decisive for Kuitert's later work. Although the book covers all major subjects that are treated in traditional dogmatics, three themes are important to uncovering its scheme: the preliminary questions, the question of God, and the role of Jesus Christ.

The preliminary questions of dogmatics usually concern an initial positioning of religion and the Christian faith in the field of human thought and action. They must clarify where dogmas are constructed from. Kuitert has strong views on this. According to him, the Christian faith is simply one of many religions. Religions are based on universal experiences, and they make use of an innate sense of God. These are three major assertions that require explanation. First, religions are related to each other and Christianity belongs to the family of religions. It is a religion like many others and therefore does not stand as true religion against false religions. Next, religions go back to universal experiences of joy, sorrow, or finitude and try to answer the big questions of human life: where do we come from, where do we go, why does suffering afflict

2 Criticism of theism was certainly not developed only by Kuitert. Other Dutch philosophers of religion and theologians like Han Adriaanse, Luco van den Brom, and Gerrit Neven also criticised it. See Rick Benjamins, "De problemen van het theïsme," in *Kerk en buitenwereld: opstellen over de kerk in de samenleving voor Marius van Leeuwen*, ed. Koen Holtzapffel, Johannes Magliano-Tromp and Marijke Tolsma (Meinema, 2012).

us, and does life have a meaning? Third, these questions can only be answered with the help of the notion of God. An unarticulated notion of God is innate to all human beings who have not made themselves, are intuitively aware of a creator, and have an innate disposition to want to communicate with their maker. The religions flesh out this innate, vague notion of God. On the basis of life experience and acquired knowledge of the world, they offer a profile of God. The belief they thereby offer does not constitute knowledge but provides a so-called search picture with the character of a draft. That is something like a profile of God based on conjecture to be used as a hypothesis.[3] The image of the divine it proposes can be confirmed, rejected, or adjusted on the basis of lived experience. In this way, dogmatics does not offer a teaching system of propositions and prescriptions but sends us on our way to find the one who is hypothetically drawn out in the draft. This hypothetical construction can only be confirmed by Godself, when God allows Godself to be found in human experience. Otherwise, the search picture will disappear.

What is sought according to the draft must allow itself to be found. In human experience, God must make Godself known. The confirmation of the search picture, therefore, must come from above. Yet we can only speak about God from below. "Everything that we say about what is above comes from below," Kuitert affirms in this book, but he adds that in speaking about above, our approach "doesn't go astray."[4] Our language from below can actually touch on the above and really give an image of whom we are looking for, without, however, being a true description. Indeed, our descriptions have a metaphorical character. The biblical statements that God is a father, a rock, or a consuming fire transfer information from the world known to us to the unknown God. We cannot fully determine, though, to what extent the information corresponds and from where the imagery becomes improper. At that point, great differences arise among Christians, which should be considered legitimate.

After these preliminary questions, Kuitert turns to *the question of God*, which he firmly answers. God exists and is hidden behind all of reality. Behind everything that happens hides a power that can make us or break us. In order to make this thesis plausible, Kuitert initially falls back on a few dogmatic arguments. We only have a search picture of God, but we can already assess it even before we have actually searched for anything. Supposedly, not everything can be called God. God cannot be reduced to a part of the world.

3 The theology of the German systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg is of great interest and forms the background of Kuitert's view.

4 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 10.

God must be thought of in person-like ways, for as creatures can think, feel, and will, the same abilities must be attributed to their creator, who must at least be able to do what they can do. Next, God must be conceived of as omnipotent and omniscient. "God would cease to be God were it otherwise."[5] Kuitert therefore rejects Etty Hillesum's view that we should help God.[6] "A God who can do nothing about anything is no longer God."[7] In that case, it would no longer make sense to appeal to God, believe in God, or hope in God.

It is noteworthy that in this book, Kuitert, as a full-blooded Calvinist, insists on God's omnipotent disposition over all of reality. The Dutch theologian Gijs Dingemans, a contemporary, sought renewal precisely with regard to the concept of God and moved away from the thoughts that Kuitert firmly defends here on the basis of panentheistic and process theological influences.[8] It is clear from Kuitert's entire oeuvre, however, that he is very attached to God's power and will. We encounter God in life as power and will that can make us or break us. This concerns God as creator. Faith must be related to the power and will of the creator if there is to be a connection between God and everyday life. In church, the creator is preached and worshipped as a saviour. The danger is great, however, that belief in the saviour keeps itself safe inside the church in an artificial isolation, which happens when it is no longer related to reality outside the church, where we are not primarily in contact with the saviour but rather with the power and will of the creator, who can make us or break us. The emphasis of the church on the saviour can easily deprive us of the playing field of the unruly reality in which we actually live, which is easily smoothed out through redemption and atonement, whereas it is precisely in harsh reality that we must understand ourselves related to God.[9]

In and under all events, God is hidden as power and will, and such is the God we have to deal with. According to Kuitert, this God is virtually equal to all that happens, even though he continues to say that "all events don't amount to God."[10] It is probably illuminating to mention here the Zeeland

5 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 45.

6 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 54.

7 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 87.

8 See especially Gijsbert D. J. Dingemans, *De stem van de Roepende: Pneumatheologie* (Kampen, 2000).

9 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 65–66, 83. In *Alles behalve kennis*, 223ff., Kuitert integrates this theme in his polemic against Barth, who wants to derive knowledge of God from the doctrine of God and not from the world of realities. In this respect, Kuitert fits into the Reformed tradition of Barth's reception, in which G. C. Berkouwer was especially important.

10 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 63.

flood disaster that Kuitert experienced as pastor of Scharendijke.[11] He was not willing to give up the idea that God is involved in all reality, including the flood disaster, even though he had likewise experienced the devastating evil of the disaster at that time. In *I Have My Doubts*, Kuitert comes to the conclusion that we do not need to save God and that we need to get rid of the idea that no evil may come from God's side. The church minister from 1953 is thereby relieved of the impossible task of justifying God. Indeed, the 1992 theologian argues that we encounter God throughout ambiguous reality. And God may also do us harm.

The crucial question of Kuitert's theology, therefore, is not whether God exists. God exists as power and will behind all of reality. Rather, the crucial question is whether this power can be trusted.[12] Is the all-powerful God also loving and good? Is the God behind the reality we encounter in everyday life also the saviour that is preached by the church? It is important to immediately signal that Kuitert is asking these questions under the assumption of an opposition between God and humans. Kuitert in fact places human beings over against reality, behind which God is hidden as power and will that can make them or break them. He does not assume, for example, that humans themselves are part of reality, instead of facing it, and shape it too. Nor does he make it his starting point that human beings participate in God and that Godself is involved in the adventure of the world process, which could have been options as well.

Can God be trusted as a power? To answer this question, *the role of Jesus Christ* is essential. Indeed, Kuitert argues that the whole of the Christian faith is designed to convince us—against the obvious—that God is good and trustworthy. This is evidenced by Jesus Christ. Through him, it becomes clear that the creator has good intentions toward us and that we are dealing with a trustworthy power. Jesus Christ is of great importance, therefore, although his importance should be seen as secondary. The key question is about God, but the answer to this question is all about Jesus because he shows that God is good.[13]

When it comes to Jesus Christ, Kuitert actually emphasises just one single issue, which is atonement. That is what we really need to believe in. In the church's proclamation of the atonement, God affirms that God is merciful, gracious, and great in lovingkindness. It is not obvious that God shows

11 See Gert J. Peelen, *Spreken over boven: Harry Kuitert: Een biografie* (Vesuvius, 2016), 91–92.

12 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 42, 50.

13 Such a position, incidentally, is not unusual in Dutch theology and can be found among theologians such as Abraham Kuyper and Arnold van Ruler.

Godself this way because, for good reasons, God has something against us. Because of sin and guilt, we have corrupted our good relationship with God and must restore it. However, we cannot do that, and therefore Godself reconciles. Jesus Christ is the emergency measure for this. In this context, according to Kuitert, reconciliation is a (first) metaphor, clarifying that God was in Jesus more than in other human beings and that God covers sin.[14] The covering of sin is expressed in a second metaphor within the first one, picturing Jesus as a sacrificial lamb.[15] Primarily, the atonement shows that God means well for us. Therefore, the crucial question of whether the power behind reality can be trusted can be answered in the affirmative.

No liberal approach

It is remarkable how far Kuitert's *I Have My Doubts* remains from a liberal theological approach. In the second half of the nineteenth century, historical-critical examination of the Bible swept away the foundation under many traditional views. In the work of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel, however, liberal theology found a new impetus for its thinking, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4. Both Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel made it clear that there is a relation between the human mind and God, who is present to the human mind.

Kuitert's idea of God as an all-determining power behind reality vis-à-vis human beings differs considerably from the idea that we are related to God as a power working in and through human beings. Through Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel, God could be related to humans as the voice of their conscience, as the whole of which they are part, or as Spirit in their minds. This would also put the idea of atonement in a different light. Schleiermacher, for example, had parted from his pietistic background precisely because of the doctrine of atonement through Christ's vicarious suffering. Reconciliation, according to him, does not mean that Christ's suffering is needed to restore the right relationship between God and human beings, but intends to offer us Christ's disposition to fellowship with God.

Reviewing Christology

In *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity* from 1998, Kuitert deals with Christology again.[16] The book shows a development and a shift in his thinking away

14 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 133ff.

15 Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 136ff.

16 Harry M. Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (SCM Press, 1999), originally 1998.

from *I Have My Doubts*. The purpose of his book on Jesus is to clarify the theological theme of Christology, which is now no longer meant to prove the reliability of the power behind reality but must bring non-Jews to a Jewish faith in the creator. Ecclesiastical views of Christ are sharply criticised for standing in the way of a Jewish belief in creation.

Christology centres on the confession of Jesus as Christ. Orthodoxy always tries to base this confession on the story of Jesus, telling us something that at its core must have really happened. Critical theologians abandoned this and argued that Jesus mainly gained significance because of his story. Kuitert has no sympathy for a "significance" that is separate from "what really happened" and therefore wants to rely on the hard, historical, but according to him, always ignored fact that Jesus was a believing Jew. Consequently, the church cannot see Jesus as God on earth, since he would not have believed in that himself. "A Jew cannot call himself Son of God (in the trinitarian sense)."[17]

The true meaning of Jesus is constituted by the fact that he brought non-Jews to a Jewish belief in the creator. In fact, Jesus is referred to in the New Testament, and especially by Paul, with the help of the ritual of atonement, as it functioned in Judaism and as it is described in Leviticus 20 and 21. He is the scapegoat who bears away the transgressions of the world, giving the world access to God. This meaning of Jesus corresponds to Jesus' own Jewish faith. Through him, non-Jews can now live before God as people who know of God's lovingkindness and justice and know of responsibility, guilt, and reconciliation. Based on these views, Kuitert opposes the exaltation of Jesus. He is not God on earth but the mediator through whom God reconciled the world to Godself. Based on this, one can say that "God was in Jesus," but not that "Christ is God."[18] Indeed, the latter statement would wrongly install Jesus in the place of God, although he is often put there—unjustly—both in the doctrine of the two natures and in personal piety.

Based on these views, Kuitert wants to respect the creed but also feels the need to reinterpret it. He does so by specifying the meaning of the resurrection, the ascension, the judgment, and the Christian feasts, thereby relativising their literal meaning. In addition, he gives a new charge to his

17 Kuitert, *Jesus*, 129. The straightforwardness of this argument is stunning because of the absence of hermeneutical sensitivity, but precisely because of this, it also blows away much fog in which theologians can shroud themselves.

18 Kuitert, *Jesus*, 179ff. In a similar way, Anglican theologians questioned the change of the metaphor of Jesus as 'son of God' to the concept of 'God the Son', cf. John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, 1977). The development and thinking of Kuitert can be compared to some extent with those of English theologians such as John Hick and Don Cupitt.

theology by arguing for a cultural Christianity.[19] Traditionally, this was primarily a liberal theme. Whereas the neo-Calvinists wanted to keep themselves separate from society with their own lifestyle based on Reformed principles and Christian truth in order to act on culture from there, the liberals, on the other hand, wanted to participate in modern society and let Christianity shine through in society as a cultural factor of importance. Kuitert's attention to cultural Christianity means a departure from the neo-Calvinist opposition between the church and society's common culture.

The cultural importance of Christianity, according to Kuitert, is primarily located in the church as a legacy. Jesus bequeathed the church to the faithful, and the church, in turn, bequeathed Jesus to Western culture. The church and Christianity have had beneficial effects on culture, and a cultural Christianity still affects its language and morality. The very value of Christianity today is present in this impact. Therefore, secularisation is not necessarily problematic because it by no means constitutes de-Christianisation. In the multicultural context of present society, the Christian faith does not need to be thought of as the true faith but must be understood as a formative force that has bequeathed to culture an important value system and therefore still remains of importance.[20]

Kuitert's clarification of the Christian faith leads to a secularised faith because of its characterisation as inheritance, which is subsequently taken as a rejection of faith by his opponents. It shows how Kuitert moves along with Reformed church-leavers, who can no longer cope with the neo-Calvinist antithesis of church against culture. Kuitert's audience is no longer situated in church but also consists of an ever-growing group of secularised believers. Many reformed Christians have become cultural Christians in a multicultural society, and Kuitert increasingly theologises on their behalf.

3.2. Human Beings Are Allowed Their Voice

In his 2000 book *Over religie* (On religion), Kuitert focuses primarily on the lovers of religion.[21] These happen to be precisely the Protestant church-

19 Kuitert, *Jesus*, 258ff.

20 This vision of Christianity was elaborated by the liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch in a body of work that is as broad as it is profound.

21 Harry M. Kuitert, *Over religie: Aan de liefhebbers onder haar beoefenaars* (Ten Have, 2000). The title and book allude to Schleiermacher's seminal 1799 book *Über die Religion*, in which, incidentally, Schleiermacher addresses not the lovers but the despisers. The allusion marks an important systematic theological breaking point because Schleiermacher wanted to base

leavers who have had enough of implausible church doctrine but are now gullibly taken in by fashionable spirituality. They have abandoned true doctrine and fixed principles and now seek poignancy, security, and a deepening of their existence in a culture that has become increasingly technological and one-dimensional. Their longings are valuable, Kuitert admits, but he especially wants to instil a true sense of God in them because they seem far too easily satisfied with subjective representations and experiences. With mere images and emotions from below, religion cannot satisfy itself as it looks for places and moments in which a divine reality breaks through our flat world.[22] Kuitert thus goes along with the church-leavers and the enthusiasts of religion but urgently wants to point them toward a tenable sense of God. To this end, he abandons the idea of God as a person. The imagination of God as a person surely has good papers, but only constitutes an imagination with which a deeper sense of God is dressed up. Kuitert wants to unearth the deeper sense of God because he thinks it is crucial to religion, both within the church and among the enthusiasts.

In doing so, he takes the next step on a route. *I Have My Doubts* was focused on the power and will behind reality, which was to be conceived person-like and proved reliable through the atonement of Jesus Christ. In *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, Jesus was the detour for non-Jews to come into contact with that person-like power. Now, in *Over religie*, the person-like characteristic falls away and "power" takes centre stage. This power is no longer conceived of as a power *behind* reality but as the power *of* reality. There may be some sort of breakdown in this shift, from one point of view, but it also shows an attempt to penetrate ever deeper into the core of faith and religion.

The creator

The religious conception of God in a person-like manner has to do with religion's mythical past.[23] In mythical times, people assigned a will to the powers that controlled them, on which they depended. The mythical thinking human being did not ask *what* made something happen, but *who* did. In religion, the mythical image of God as a person-like being, which dates

theology on a proper understanding of what "religion" is. That liberal view was radically rejected by neo-Calvinists, who wanted to base themselves not on "religion" but on reformed principles, especially the Bible.

22 Where God makes Godself known in people's experiences and confirms the search design, the former Kuitert would say.

23 In the background, the influence of the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann can be noticed, with whom Kuitert was already concerned in *The Reality of Faith*.

from the distant past, still holds, but constitutes nothing but an expression, an imagination, or a casting of reality without information. It is not even a metaphor, as Kuitert initially stated. The metaphor wants to speak of the unknown in familiar terms, but as we know nothing about God, there is no basis for a metaphor, because we cannot tell whether it really touches any aspect of the unknown.[24]

To clarify the idea that religion offers no description of God, even though it is borne of an authentic sense of God, Kuitert further explains the nature of religion. Many functional explanations have been given for its appearance. With the help of religion, for example, human beings reflected on themselves, socialisation processes were stimulated, and humans learned to deal with unsolvable questions. In this respect, religion was useful for the evolution of the species and society, but according to Kuitert, these functional explanations, interpreting religion through its usefulness, don't comply with its true nature. The practitioners of religion are not driven by reasons of utility or well-being, but are involved because humans are attuned to something from "the other side." Kuitert thereby refers to a reality outside of human beings that affects them.[25] It transcends human beings but does not need to be thought of as supernatural.

To illuminate the power of reality, Kuitert reverts to a primal experience. "We are not in our own hands."[26] We are at the mercy of reality around us, and we experience life as a power that can make us or break us. Reality and life thus constitute a power on which we depend and to which religion can be traced. Indeed, religion gives people the ability to deal with this power, to manage their lives, and to feel secure. While doing so, religion further interprets the power of reality and life by indicating it and dressing it up.[27] Since this power acts on us, it is easily referred to in personal terms. Its imagination as person-like can even be perceived as a vote of confidence, as it is thereby held to be good and reliable.[28]

24 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 63.

25 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 110.

26 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 116.

27 The concept of "power" is central to the thinking of Gerardus van der Leeuw, cf. Rick Benjamins, *Een en Ander: De traditie van de moderne theologie* (Kok, 2008), 282ff. Kuitert seems strongly influenced by Van der Leeuw, for example concerning his views on myth and the idea that Israel's God is a latecomer to the scene in the history of religion. By making humans dependent on "the power," Kuitert also distinguishes himself from Schleiermacher, incidentally, despite a common emphasis on dependence, because Schleiermacher does not place human beings over against a reality on which they depend but conceives of a human being as someone who reflects reality in its own way. Schleiermacher primarily elaborates on the sense of dependence in a consciousness-immanent way.

28 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 158.

Kuitert here, of course, harkens back to his earlier claim that God is behind all reality as power and will. Yet his position has changed radically, however, in that this power is no longer thought of in person-like terms and is no longer situated above or behind reality. Initially, Kuitert wanted to infer the reliability of God as a person-like power behind reality from Christology. Now, however, he rejects the very idea of a person-like God because it does not offer us trust but creates problems for faith. Indeed, believers encounter insoluble problems when they have to reduce the evil in this world to a reliable person behind the world, which makes the person-like representation of God untenable.[29] Instead of a personal disposition, there is an impersonal evolutionary process behind much evil. Therefore, as stated above, the power of reality should not be seen as a person-like power, nor should it be placed *behind* or *above* reality. It should rather be understood as the power *of* reality.

The idea of God's power cannot be truly expressed in the image of a personal God. It can, however, be expressed in the concept of a "creator." By means of this concept, Kuitert actually brings back a form of transcendence in describing the creator as the power of power, which still rules over reality as the power of reality. The creator, according to Kuitert, is not a factor among factors but the Factor that handles and controls all factors and plays with them. In this way, the image of a supernatural being or subject as the bearer of transcendence can be avoided, but the creator still remains of a different order from creation, which is transcended in this sense. The creator operates in reality as a power that determines all powers. As a result, Kuitert maintains the positioning of human beings vis-à-vis a reality that can make them or break them. Thereby, he still does not allow creation to participate with the creator. "To experience reality in its power over us and ourselves in our dependence upon it … is to experience the Creator."[30] The creator, therefore, is as ambiguous as reality itself. It is the creator's intention to build life, but the creator also creates a reality that can do us harm. God is the reality that, as a working reality, controls us, governs us, and rules us, and thereby gives us existence but also inflicts suffering on us.

In one respect, however, God, the creator or the working reality, is more than reality, and in this respect, there is cooperation between God and human beings. The creator addresses us when we are called to improve or alleviate the plight of our fellow human creatures. The creator, therefore, is both reality and the call to make reality more bearable for human beings.

29 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 156.
30 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 175.

This results in what Kuitert takes as an irritating ambiguity in the image of God. The creator both has a grip on reality and is the one who calls for its change. So, we cooperate with the creator when we feel addressed by people crossing our path.[31]

God is the power of reality that allows us to exist. This power can harm us through collateral damage, as it were, but also appeals to us to alleviate human beings' fate. This is the idea of God that Kuitert wants to impart to the church-leavers and to the lovers of religion, so that they do not let themselves be taken in by subjective representations and emotions. On the basis of the idea that God, being the power of reality, appeals to us to alleviate human fate, the imagination of God as a God who speaks his Word through the Spirit is, according to Kuitert, not at all strange. With this view, he steps back into the Christian imagery that the enthusiasts, whom he wanted to inform with a true sense of God, had actually already stepped out. Having re-entered the Christian building, Kuitert proclaims that over there, a thorough clearing is needed of religious representations that are wrongly believed to be true. Faith should not be attached to creeds that pretend to describe a state of affairs, but should be manifest in the demonstration of spirit and strength. In this way, Kuitert is marketing himself again as a churchly theologian, practicing destruction within the church, whereas he wanted to deal primarily with the lovers of religion outside the church.

Humans as bearer of the Spirit

In 2002's *Voor een tijd een plaats van God* (For some time a place of God), Kuitert continues on the path taken but again changes his position.[32] He no longer looks at reality as a power or creator facing us but now transfers the creative function to humans. Humans have the ability to put reality into words, which allows them to create a world of meaning dispersed from chaos. Kuitert is now concerned with the world of meaning, which is created by people as a transformed reality.

The transformation of reality takes place through the imagination. Imagination, in turn, begins with an inner experience that is attached to the harsh, gratifying, or comforting reality outside of us. The inner experience is then expressed in an image that imposes itself as an effect of the experience.[33] The imagination, therefore, is not simply a shot in the dark

31 Kuitert, *Over religie*, 186.

32 Harry M. Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God: Een karakteristiek van de mens* (Ten Have, 2002).

33 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 55.

since it remains linked to reality through the experiences of our existence in the world. As imagination, however, it contains no information about reality as science does. Exactly at this point, Kuitert claims, the church has gone wrong because it has come to hold an imagination of feelings for a representation of facts or a state of affairs.

Religious myth, according to Kuitert, constitutes the oldest form of a world put into words by means of imagination. As a narrative construction, the Bible should be considered a myth too, in which Israel puts its own identity into words and the Christian congregation defines itself. In church history, however, with the help of allegory, the depictions of myth were understood as providers of information that encoded descriptions of reality. Since the Age of Enlightenment, it was disputed that biblical representations pictured reality truthfully, but they were still seen as providers of information. Rudolf Bultmann wanted to de-mythologise biblical representations but, according to Kuitert, even de-mythologising presupposes some information that can be peeled out of its traditional, mythical form. Wolfhart Pannenberg accepted the mythical language of the Bible but cast it in a metaphysical vessel for the construction of his theology, so that, in Kuitert's opinion, even with him, a state of affairs is still held to be true. Kuitert now wants to radically move away from that. Religion does not describe a state of affairs. Religious representations make no claim to truth but are a representation of feelings evoked by reality.[34]

In doing so, Kuitert cuts away an important part of his earlier theology. At first, he valued theology for offering a search picture with the character of a draft, in which thoughts of Bultmann and Pannenberg resounded. He now leaves this path. Religious representations do not constitute a draft to find the one described in them, but merely contain the imagination of experiences put into words.[35]

With his later view, he might connect well with the lovers of religion who want to experience religion in a non-religious way outside the church. As artists or consumers, they want to use the representations and beliefs of faith for personal growth or for structuring the world. However, that is not to Kuitert's liking. It amounts to trading the search for transcendence for the pursuit of well-being and happiness, but it should not be about that. Kuitert really wants to search for transcendence and for God. On the one hand, God is an image, an imagination, and thus a creation of humans who put something into words, but at the same time, it is a code word for what is

34 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 102.

35 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 121.

beyond human reach, not in our power, and therefore cannot be imagined in adequate terms for being beyond our reach.[36]

True transcendence can only be what is in the world but not of the world.[37] It presents itself without our being able to grasp, reduce, or legitimise it. We have no grasp of it, but conversely, it has a grip on us. "Spirit" meets this criterion. Somewhere in reality, namely in human beings, the Spirit, or spirit, emerges, enabling them to put reality into words and create a world of meaning that is dispersed from chaos. True transcendence must therefore be sought in human beings who have become bearers of spirit. Humans are, for a time, a place of God.

With this view, Kuitert actually adopts liberal theological thinking and seems to depend on Hegel.[38] He himself is aware of making a big turn in doing so. Whereas he initially spoke of God and next about reality as a power that controls us, he now shifts the power to human beings, who put reality into words and create a world of meaning. He himself articulates this shift as a transition from a religion of redemption to a religion of becoming human.[39] The human being has an unprecedented dignity, which traditionally has never been recognised and has been oppressed by a dreary, gnawing, and undermining sense of sin. Religion must now no longer be about ensuring that humans are redeemed from sin but about realising who they are, namely, human beings spoken to by the Spirit. For Kuitert, this change of view is accompanied by an outright acceptance of evolution as the framework in which Christian faith should be understood. The miracle is in the evolution that produces a human being and in the Spirit manifesting itself in human beings, through which these beings themselves create a world of meaning.[40]

36 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 123, 125.

37 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 133ff.

38 The terminology in *Voor een tijd een plaats van God* points to this. On page 119, for example, Kuitert speaks of the "sublation" of God. The relationship between Kuitert and Hegel is intriguing. Gert J. Peelen, *Spreken over boven*, 161, mentions that Kuitert, in his dissertation on the humanity of God, wanted to argue that "God exists in the (human) knowledge of God." This seems to come directly from Hegel. Berkouwer, Kuitert's supervisor, intervened, however, and demanded nuance. This Hegelian, liberal idea was apparently unacceptable. Kuitert accepted that, also because he himself still shrank from this idea. In my opinion, Kuitert's later work can be understood as an elaboration of his censored Hegelian idea, then transformed into the view that God exists exclusively as a human invention. That was exactly not what Hegel meant to say with his idea that God (the Spirit) becomes reality and takes shape in the human mind. On Hegel, see chapter 4 of this book.

39 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 156, 184.

40 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 183. Kuitert initially uses the dogmatic scheme of creation-fall-salvation. In *I Have My Doubts,* he does not want to use the creation-fall-salvation scheme in a historical way but still takes it as a characteristic of reality (p. 58). In *Over religie*, he

The Spirit is human's ability to speak and, thereby, to name things. By naming things they are put into a connection that was not there before, and thereby the Spirit allows human beings to create.[41]

Obviously, there are many worlds of meaning, but not every world can automatically be conceived as good only for being a product of the human mind. Worlds, cultures, and political systems can be oppressive or driven by selfishness and self-preservation. Therefore, a criterion is needed to distinguish good worlds from bad ones, and to assess mindsets and cultures. For this reason, Kuitert introduces the notion of a primal word, a first and initial claim of reality on us with which everything begins. This claim consists of the fact that we are addressed by people who need us. Such an address constitutes the beginning of language, culture, and humanity. In mythical language, "feeling addressed" is called God, and in this, transcendence and the beginning of everything are present. "Without this primal word, there are no words that can create; without this primal word, every culture collapses."[42] The primal word is the one that makes humans feel drawn to help their neighbour.[43]

With the primal word of address as a criterion, Kuitert has a tool in hand to determine the spirit of Christianity. Its spirit can be determined as a commitment to humanity, as is illustrated by Cain, who heard the primal word "where is Abel your brother?" and by Jesus, who felt addressed by his fellow human beings and thereby became an address to us to commit ourselves to others. As a commitment to humanity, Christianity has stamped Western culture, and therefore humanity has become a religious or sacred concept in it. Today, an important argument for a cultural Christianity presents itself therein, which is not about the church but about culture in which humanity must be fought for. The church must contribute to that. It should become an institution for the enhancement of humanity by teaching people how to ward off chaos in their own lives and in society.[44] In later books, Kuitert will continue to expose this view. The church can be valuable as

argues that a person-like God and evolution go together poorly. In an evolutionary framework, creation-fall-redemption becomes impossible, and God loses God's face (p. 70). In *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, Kuitert takes evolution really seriously and entirely moves past the who or what behind reality.

41 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 135–137.

42 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 169.

43 Kuitert's claim of a primal word as the very first beginning of everything, which in my view is arbitrary and has not been elaborated well, betrays the tendency to look for a final ground or a first principle of everything. The (un)desirability of such an *arche* is discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

44 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 188.

an enabling ministry. It can constitute a library of Christianity, in which the tradition, the imagination, and the legacy that lie at the foundations of Europe are preserved. The church can curate material that is helpful to individuals who can think and imagine for themselves without patronage.[45]

3.3. Endpoint or Passage

In *Voor een tijd een plaats van God* Kuitert seems very close to liberal views in which humanity is central and the idea of reciprocity between God and humans is adhered to. He himself calls this a corrected belief in creation, which consists of the idea that reality produces human beings, who are bearers of spirit and create a world of meaning by putting reality into words.[46] The mystery of transcendence presents itself in that reality, which allows us to create reality through the Spirit. Reality carries us as we name and structure it. Kuitert thus comes close to someone like Gordon Kaufman, who conceived of God as creativity in the world, in which human beings participate and to which they contribute through their own creativity.[47] He also gets near to someone like Hans Jonas, who, in a modern myth, depicted God's kenosis in the world so that the world could produce spirit bearers.[48] In a panentheistic or process theological context, views can be found to expand on the conception of the interconnectedness between a creator as the power of reality and human beings as the bearers of spirit. Kuitert does not go in these directions, though, and the interaction between God and humans, which he touches upon with his modified belief in creation, remains unspecified.

Kuitert continues to contrast God and humans. Initially, he placed human beings in opposition to the power behind reality that can make or break them. Ultimately, however, he states conversely that humans create a world of meaning and imagine God. A real interaction is therefore out of the

45 See Harry M. Kuitert, *Hetzelfde anders zien: Het christelijk geloof als verbeelding* (Ten Have, 2005), 210–211; Harry Kuitert, *Kerk als constructiefout: De overlevering overleeft het wel* (Ten Have, 2014), 150ff.

46 Kuitert, *Voor een tijd een plaats van God*, 184.

47 Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Harvard University Press, 1993); *Jesus and Creativity* (Fortress Press, 2006).

48 Hans Jonas, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz: Eine jüdische Stimme* (Suhrkamp, 1987); *Materie, Geist und Schöpfung: Kosmologischer Befund und kosmogonische Vermutung* (Suhrkamp, 1988). On Jonas, see Hendrik S. Benjamins, *Een zachte soort van zijn: Drie manieren om van God te denken: Plotinus, Rilke, Jonas* (Damon, 2003), 129ff.

question. The idea that God works through humans does not emerge either. In Kuitert's theology, God and humans remain opposites of each other, and one of them must win. He makes this unambiguously clear in *Hetzelfde anders zien* (Seeing the same thing differently). Genuine agreement with a humanistic perspective can only exist "when God ceases to be a competitor of man, and however often it has been claimed that there is no competition, there cannot be two captains on the same ship."[49] Initially, God and reality acted as administrators making or breaking human beings, but finally, humans, creating a world of meaning themselves are at the helm. Thereby, reciprocity between God and humans is fundamentally sidelined.

With his view that religion is a representation of feelings, Kuitert mainly wants to debunk the church's pretence that its views offer real knowledge of true reality. With that, he has arrived at his final point, from which he keeps setting up a number of old polemics. In *Alles behalve kennis* (Everything but knowledge), a book in which Kuitert deals sharply and precisely with the history of theology, he points out once again that theology cannot claim knowledge of God on the basis of revelation.[50] Karl Barth did want to make revelation the starting point for theology, but he could not point to a landing place for it other than his own mind. According to Kuitert, Barth thereby ends up getting no further than mistaking his own views for those revealed by God.[51] This is how anyone can regard their own thoughts. In *Kerk als constructiefout* (Church as an error of construction) from 2014, Kuitert once again argues that the church is essentially built on authority from above, which legitimises church authority and demands obedience but is inconsistent with the idea of religion as a matter of imagination.

The view that religion is a depiction of feelings does negate the church's truth claim, yet it also leaves open a number of questions that Kuitert does not answer. According to him, religion remains connected to our earthly reality, even as an imagination, because it expresses the way reality is experienced. If so, religion at least seems to be able to say something about reality, even if it does not offer scientific information. However, how science and religion relate to each other in mutual engagement with reality remains out of the picture. Kuitert does not thematise the question as he conceives of religion as mere imagination and views science, apparently, as

49 Kuitert, *Hetzelfde anders zien*, 200.

50 Harry Kuitert, *Alles behalve kennis: Afkicken van de Godgeleerdheid en opnieuw beginnen* (Ten Have, 2011).

51 Kuitert, *Alles behalve kennis*, 244, 247.

real knowing. This creates unclarity about the extent to which religion is truly important to culture. Does religion preserve the address of a primal word that is fundamental to culture, or does it merely administer the archives of a bygone world from which contemporary culture emerged?

Kuitert's views on religion are critical on several sides. He criticises the church for claiming truth about up there but forgetting that its beliefs are constituted by imagination. He chastises religious meaning-seekers—some of whom have left the church supported by his theology—for being too quickly satisfied with subjective representations without really looking for God and transcendence. His criticism of both sides comes sharply to the fore in *Dat moet ik van mijn geloof* (That I must of my faith) from 2008.[52]

In this 2008 book, Kuitert opposes the 2006 report *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformative* (Believing in the public domain: Explorations of a dual transformation) from the Scientific Council for Government Policy. In this report, the Council noted that religion and meaningfulness returned in new forms to the public domain and that the government increasingly interferes with what was previously considered to be private. In doing so, this report was the first Dutch study to discuss what has by now become known as a "post-secular" return or transformation of religion in the public domain.[53] Kuitert argues vehemently against the report, basically because he is opposed to all sorts of new religion. In *Alles behalve kennis* from 2011, he concisely re-articulates what disturbed him about the 2006 report, already expressed in 2008, in *Dat moet ik van mijn geloof*. "The new religiosity is a residual product of what is called religion, which is, in familiar terms, the Christian religion as it is represented by the church."[54] According to Kuitert, there is no "new religion" at all but only a residual product of the old Christian one. Christian religion has been individualised and is now in the hands of believers, who are allowed to have their own imaginations. The church is allowed to facilitate imaginations and to reflect on them. However, talk of a new religiosity only legitimises the old, institutional religion to regain influence in the public domain. Kuitert is vehemently opposed to that. Religion is a remnant of the old religion now under control of individual believers, which must not be brought back

52 Harry M. Kuitert, *Dat moet ik van mijn geloof: Godsdienst als troublemaker in het publieke domein* (Ten Have, 2008).

53 On the issue of post-secularism in Dutch society, see, for example, Joep de Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen: Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit* (Bert Bakker, 2011); Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband* (SCP-publicatie, 2014); Gabriël van den Brink, *De lage landen en het hogere: De betekenis van geestelijke beginselen in het moderne bestaan* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

54 Kuitert, *Alles behalve kennis*, 256.

under supervision of old institutions or mistaken for a matter of government interference.

Kuitert's endpoint thus seems to lie in the view that humans create a world of meaning, that religious representations are made of imagination, and that there is only ancient religion in the hands of individual believers. This endpoint, however, can be questioned. The secularisation of neo-Calvinist Reformed Church members toward an individually experienced cultural Christianity—and that is in fact the path taken by Kuitert himself—is not necessarily also the endpoint of all religious development. The idea that religion is based on imagination by no means implies that it has become superfluous or meaningless. For many people, Kuitert's theology has become the endpoint of a faith whose beliefs turned out to be eroded and deflated. Yet his endpoint does not at all preclude a further development of religion—or even a new religiosity—nor does it prevent theological thought from continuing precisely from the point where he himself ended.

Theology after Kuitert

Kuitert's theology contains an important impetus for theology after Kuitert. The impetus lies in his conception of a corrected belief in creation, which implies that reality carries us and prompts us to create worlds of meaning. Kuitert thereby shifts the creative power from God to humans, in whom transcendence emerges in the form of the Spirit enabling people to put reality into words. Although this impetus is fruitful, it hardly comes to fruition with Kuitert himself.

Kuitert's path toward a corrected belief in creation will probably be recognisable to older people, who freed themselves with him from a churchly disciplined religion that by now hardly exists anymore or is only frenetically held. At present his theology does not seem to be of much help. He did dispose of the view that God exists as power and will behind reality, but his later view that humans create by putting reality into words remains caught in an opposition between God and humans. As a result, interaction between God and human beings is hardly possible. As soon as humans create, they imagine God, and, according to Kuitert, religious views no longer accrue any truth.

By emphasising imagination, Kuitert unwittingly promotes the idea that religious views no longer are of any value. In doing so, he favours a secularised faith that fails to honour and fulfil his own intensive and valuable search for transcendence. With his search, he provides an important impetus for a theology after Kuitert. Such a theology has to face the question of what we mean by God if, by this, we do not refer to an independently existing being nor conceive of God as an expression of subjective feelings.

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Part Two

God as Spirit and Being

Kuitert made some important transitions in his theological thinking. He began with the idea that God is present as the power and will behind the whole of reality, but eventually argued that human beings create a world of meaning themselves and represent God as a poetic image. His turn to humans seems to me to be of great importance, but the conclusion that God is merely a matter of imagination is, in my opinion, too short-sighted. Of course, people from down here speak about up there. By arguing so, Kuitert fought dogmatic certainties about above and finally found transcendence in speaking from below. However, he does not really examine the transcendence that comes to speak in human beings, that is present among us and is given voice in us. In my opinion, Kuitert does not do so because he keeps fighting himself loose from dogmatic propositions about the above and because he keeps opposing up there and down here. I think that we get a better view of the transcendent, which we call God, if we do not see God as a matter of imagination but conceive of God with a more philosophical approach as Spirit or Being. This offers the possibility of rising above the opposition

between God and humans. Human beings, as spirits, participate in Spirit and belong to Being as beings.

The conception of God as Spirit or Being can be elaborated with the help of Hegel and Heidegger. Although they precede Kuitert in time, they can be read after him, related to the question of the relationship between God, human beings, and the world. Hegel reaches out, for example, to the view that God and humans are not opposed to each other but can be thought of together by means of the concept of Spirit. He elaborates on the idea that the death of God—there is no God above or outside the world—is not the end of God because God must be thought of as Spirit in the spirits of human beings.[1] In doing so, he makes an important contribution to thinking about God after God, that is, after God as power and will has disappeared.

Heidegger argues that human beings, as beings, belong to Being. In the history of theology, it is not unusual to describe God as Being itself. The way Heidegger understands Being does imply a strong critique of classical theology and of Hegel, but by connecting his view of Being with God after God, he can be helpful for a theology after Kuitert too.

The result of delving deeper into Hegel and Heidegger will not yield an unequivocal conclusion because their thinking is too diverse for that. With Hegel and Heidegger, however, we do get beyond the opposition between above and below, and different ways of speaking about God after God emerge. That in itself is sufficient to justify the effort of this part of the book.

1 The distinction between Spirit and spirit is somewhat artificial and was not made by Hegel, who speaks only of *Geist*. Where the human spirit is meant, I omit the capital letter, although it is clear that the human mind or spirit is an instance of the Spirit, through which the Spirit in the human mind comes to knowledge of the Spirit and thus to knowledge of itself.

4. God and Human Being Are Part of Each Other: Hegel on Spirit

Abstract: At the beginning of the nineteenth century, German romanticists and idealists could not get along with traditional Christian ideas anymore and conceived new thoughts about God and religion. In Hegel's philosophy, God is thought of as Spirit. Because humans (spirits) participate in God (Spirit), God is neither a separate being nor the pure imagination of the human mind, which makes him interesting after Kuitert. Hegel reflects on the death of God but claims that the death of God is not the end of God. Through Good Friday and the death of Christ, humans realise that they are not facing an abstract God outside the world but are themselves spirits who have come to know Spirit.

Keywords: German idealism, world process, knowledge of self, the other, death of God, participation

4.1. Hegel's Context

Hegel's thinking must be placed in the philosophical context of German idealism, a movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that was important for the history of modern Western philosophy.[1] Modern Western philosophy is characterised by the so-called turn toward the subject. By this, it is meant that all knowledge about the world begins with the thinking human being or the knowing subject. Thinking about reality no longer finds its starting point in some entity outside the world that structures it and makes it comprehensible, like God or the Ideas, but begins with the subject itself thinking about the world.

1 On German idealism, see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Harvard University Press, 2002); Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Benjamins, R., *Formerly God: Rethinking God after God*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2026.
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Before turning to German idealism, though, it will be useful to name a number of philosophers who were important to Western thinking and had an impact on theology as well. The just-mentioned turn toward the subject becomes eminently clear in the work of Descartes (1596–1651). He sought a fixed and certain starting point from which philosophy could depart to reflect on the world. In his search, he noticed that he could doubt all transmitted truths and certainties except for one thing, namely, the fact that he thinks. "I think" therefore became the new starting point for philosophy. With that certainty, the subject can further reason about the existence of God and the structure of the world. In Descartes' philosophy, therefore, in principle, the contours of modern human beings show up, who discover, measure, and arrange the world according to the knowledge they themselves acquire, which is a knowledge that begins with their own thinking.

On the basis of human reason, Spinoza (1632–1677) formulated thoughts about God and the world that suited the emerging natural scientific thinking of his time. He developed a pantheistic system in which God is not above the world but coincides with it. Everything is part of one infinite substance and thus forms one whole. Descartes still assumed that there were multiple substances because God, the soul, and matter were substantially different from each other. Spinoza, however, argued that there can only be one substance, and this substance is the *one and all*. You may call it God or nature, but it is one entity in or out of which everything exists. Humans do not understand themselves properly until they understand themselves as part of that whole. The human being is a finite (i.e., temporary and limited) mode or capacity of being of the one substance.

David Hume (1711–1776), like Descartes and Spinoza, took his starting point in human thought as well but took a different turn. According to him, human thought is not at all capable from itself of forming reliable thoughts about God and the world because it is bound to sense perception. Of God and the world as a whole, we have no perception. About God, one can only speculate at most. Likewise, the world as a whole is nothing but a construction of thought. After all, we only have perceptions of things in the world, not of the world as a whole. On the basis of our perception, therefore, we cannot arrive at knowledge of God, nor of the unity of nature, the totality of the world, or an infinite substance. Everything we know, we know on the basis of observations, but these cannot lead to knowledge of such encompassing things.

Against Spinoza's rationalist metaphysics, Hume defended an empirical scepticism. Although Spinoza and Hume thought very differently, together they put Christian theology under severe criticism. Indeed, according to

Spinoza, there is no God above the world, but God and the world coincide. According to Hume, theology and metaphysics have no reliable basis for their big ideas. Spinoza even denied that the Bible has a divine origin, and Hume assumed that religion springs from the needs of human beings. In so many words, therefore, they said that the Bible is a product of the imagination and that religion springs from human feelings and desires, so that they actually come from below.

Kant: Godfather of German idealism

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) picked up the questions of modern philosophy and initiated German idealism in the wake of his thinking. Prompted by Hume, he raised the question of what we can actually know. Thereby, he confirmed Descartes' starting point. Humans, the subject, or the subject's thoughts are the starting point for philosophy. Kant's subsequent proposal, however, was to first examine more closely how human knowing and thinking work and to consider next what we can or cannot know.

Kant argued that we come to knowledge of objects, matters, or affairs in the world through the senses. Through the senses, our minds receive impressions of objects.[2] Impressions are transformed by the human mind into representations of those objects. In processing the impressions into representations, the human mind follows its own rules and laws. Thus, the mind is not only dependent on perceptions but is active in their formation as well. Our mind is productively involved in the formation of the representations that lead to knowledge of the world. This is real knowledge, although we never obtain knowledge of the object in itself (the so-called *Ding an sich*), but only of the object as we imagine it.

In ethics, Kant follows a similar track. Our mind tells us to act right when we act. We must act in such a way that the general rule embodied in our action can be followed by all. For example, if we lie, we cannot possibly want everyone to follow the rule embodied in our lying—saying what suits you best—because this would be ruinous to society. In this way, the good we have to achieve in action is not imposed on us by God or nature but follows from reason and is prescribed by the reasonableness of our own mind. According to Kant, due to their reasonable minds, humans must obey the rules and laws that they themselves create and impose upon themselves. Consequently, the human mind is self-creating, both in the production of knowledge and of commandments to be obeyed. In the field of knowledge,

2 Here, mind (*Geist*) is used as the summary designation of what can be technically distinguished as perception, mind (*Verstand*), and reason (*Vernunft*).

the mind is involved in the creation of the perceived world, and in the field of ethics, the mind imposes a law upon itself. Precisely in this respect, the mind shows itself to be free, as it is not subordinate to any agency outside itself but only to its own reasonableness. The mind must obey its own reasonableness in order not to become unreasonable and deny itself.

About God, the world, and the place of human beings in it, Kant thought delicately. Like Hume, he believes that we cannot obtain empirical knowledge of God, the world as a whole, or something like the soul because we have no perception of these. Yet we need these concepts to put all our knowledge into meaningful context. To order our knowledge of the world, we use the unprovable, regulative ideas of God, the world, and the soul. These ideas are neither random nor out of the blue. Anyone who acts morally, for example, must presuppose the ideas of freedom, immortality, and God in order not to come out incongruous. If we feel obliged to do the right thing, we have to presuppose our freedom to do so. At the same time, we must assume immortality; otherwise, simply put, we do not have the time to become good at doing good, which is what makes us happy. Also, we must assume that God exists as the one who actually gives us happiness, provided we make ourselves worthy of happiness by our moral goodness. In arguing this way, Kant does not want to prove anything about God or claim that one must believe in God. He only argues that our minds must implicitly assume freedom, immortality, and God as presuppositions for our moral actions to make sense.

Consistency of mind and nature

Very briefly, then, Kant says that our mind is structured in such a way that it makes us see the world in a certain way and obliges us to standard behaviour. The German idealists further elaborated this insight. They took the human mind as their starting point and held it to be something very special because, on the one hand, it is involved in the formation of the world as we know it, and, on the other hand, acts freely by giving us spontaneously, out of the nature of its own being, a commitment to behave in ways that are not determined by natural factors. Thinking begins with the mind, which adopts Descartes' "I think," and from there seeks to come to an understanding of God, the world, and itself.

An important problem the idealists had to face is posed by the question of the relationship between mind and nature. Is the mind's spirit opposed to nature as something quite different? Or, on the contrary, does it belong to nature and is it in unity with it? Kant's philosophy gave no clear answer to this. On the one hand, Kant argues that all we have of nature are the

representations of our own minds, without being able to say anything about nature in itself. This points to a gap between mind and nature. On the other hand, Kant also suggests that the representations of our mind and the things known in nature belong to a higher unity. Kant refers to this in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, speaking about a 'suprasensible substrate' as the underlying reality both would spring from. According to this view, there is no gap but an ultimate unity of mind and nature. The German idealists were now trying to think through spirit and nature—humans and the world—in their connection.

In the discussions after Kant, the thinking of Spinoza came to the fore again. Whereas Kant posited a gap between thing and representation or between nature and mind, Spinoza indeed posited a unity of mind and nature and of all that is. The suprasensible substrate of Kant resembled Spinoza's one substance, of which thought and extension (i.e., mind and nature), according to Spinoza, are attributes (or properties). Apparently, then, Kant himself had also sought a unity such as can be found in Spinoza. Spinoza was interesting for the German idealists because of the unity he posited but dangerous and suspicious as well because of his pantheism, which was regarded as heretical and could not be supported without risk. The question, therefore, became how the unity of the world could be thought of, how the world relates to God, and what a human being's place is in the world.

The great framework in which Romantics and Idealists reflected on the consistency of mind and nature, on the relationship between God and the world, and on the place of human beings in the world looks like this. The human mind orders the world and rules over it with its thinking, but it also emerges from the world. It belongs to nature, but by virtue of its freedom, its creativity, and its sense of duty, it is also different from nature, which is ruled by laws and acts brutally. Humans are free from the world, although they nevertheless belong to it. The relationship between mind and nature is, therefore, complicated. Nature has produced human beings as if it has intentions and is after something. In that case, nature itself may not be completely devoid of mind or spirit, which makes it seem plausible to be driven by an immanent and creative divine force. Old philosophical and theological questions were revisited and thought through in this context.

The new framework in which the unity of nature and mind was being thought about differed considerably from the worldview in which God as a transcendent or otherworldly agent creates souls and bodies and redeems these souls after the fall because they are meant for eternity. God, creation, the soul, and eternity had not, of course, ceased to exist, but they took on a different meaning in a whole new context. In this way, the German idealists

had been around for some two hundred years before Kuitert made the turn that changed his theology.

Mutual discussions: Reason versus revelation

The various questions and perspectives that the German philosophers—partly in response to each other—raised and introduced to illuminate the relationship between God, human beings, and the world are certainly complex. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kant's pupil Fichte, Romantics such as Hölderlin and Novalis, a theologian like Schleiermacher, and philosophers such as Hegel and Schelling each tried in their own way to bring system to their thoughts. In doing so, they occasionally changed or adapted their points of view. The resulting discussions and polemics were often sharp, fierce, and fundamental. This is evident, for example, in the work of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), who became a major instigator of prickly debates.

Jacobi accused his older contemporaries Lessing and Mendelssohn of Spinozism, which he claimed was equivalent to rationalism and nihilism. Indeed, those who assume a *one and all*, as Spinoza did by means of his one substance, could, according to Jacobi, only think of God as an unfree being whose actions unfold in the world according to laws. If so, humans can only be unfree parts of the whole. This objection of Jacobi made school and was, for example, also raised by Schelling and in the Netherlands by Gunning against Spinozists, pantheists, and theologians who were influenced by them. Jacobi later expanded his denunciation of Lessing and Mendelssohn to an objection against Fichte, Kant, and the entire new philosophy. According to Jacobi, a philosophy built on arguments cannot gain an understanding of God because it remains trapped in its own reasoning, which always builds on presuppositions.

The crucial question for Jacobi, therefore, is on which presupposition one relies. According to him, the only reliable presupposition comes from revelation. He did take the concept of revelation broadly. It refers to something outside the experience of the subject, of which the subject assumes the existence on the basis of an immediately felt certainty. Reason can never give such an immediate certainty because it always works with derivations of previous certainties. The initial certainty it depends on requires the belief in an unmediated presence that is immediately given. All knowledge must rest on this and thus depend on revelation. The new philosophy that denies this is a disguised form of rationalism, nihilism, and atheism, which either does not believe in anything or denies out of prejudice that thinking begins with belief. This allegation clarified that the philosophers were dealing

with "dangerous" subjects, which, from a Christian point of view, were by no means innocent, nor were they always held innocent by governments. Jacobi's attack, however, also evoked objections and rebuttals. It resulted in writings and polemics that came to be known as the "pantheism controversy" and the "atheism controversy."

Sense of unity and dependence

Whereas Jacobi opposed the new German philosophy, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) rather went along with it, although he was influenced by Jacobi as well. Schleiermacher came from a pietistic milieu, which he broke away from at the age of eighteen because he deemed it intellectually deficient. As a pastor in Berlin, he was part of enlightened and progressive circles that challenged him to express his views on religion. In his essay *On Religion: Speeches to the educated among its despisers* (1799), he responded to that challenge. With this writing and his main work, *Christian Faith* (*Der christliche Glaube*), the first version of which appeared in 1821/22, he laid the foundation on which the liberal theology of the nineteenth century largely based itself.

Schleiermacher agitated against the idea that religion would be obsolete and could only be viewed with contempt by educated people. Such a view rests on the misunderstanding that religion is a matter of knowing or doing. But it is not. Dogmas and moral precepts do not constitute the core of religion. Its despisers think so, without realising that religion possesses an inalienable uniqueness that cannot be reduced to knowledge or morality. Religion is a matter of feeling, which is much more fundamental than knowing and acting. When we know or act, we already presuppose a separation between us and the world. We know something about the world, which is outside of us, or we want to act upon it. Religion, however, is based on a sense of unity with the world, or the All, which precedes all separation and is therefore primary. Before we separate ourselves from the world and set ourselves in opposition to it, we are in unity with it, and religion holds to that. Religion thus means to perceive all that is individual as part of the Whole and to view all that is finite as a realisation of the infinite.[3]

In *Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher emphasised not so much this sense of unity as a sense of dependence that goes along with it. We can feel ourselves to be in unity with the universe, but we also feel totally dependent at the same time. This can be explained as follows: People can think that they are

3 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1893), originally 1799, 36.

autonomous, self-determining about their lives, and capable of laying down their own laws, but in doing so, they are partly dependent on the greater whole in which they are embedded. Dependence on this larger whole is always a *relative* dependence because people also affect or can affect the things that affect them. The fact that they *exist* with the rest of the world, however, does not imply a relative but an outright or *absolute* dependence. They have, simply put, never had any influence on being here. Now beware that Schleiermacher does not jump from our feeling of absolute dependence to a God who is outside that feeling or outside the human consciousness. After all, we know nothing of the world outside our consciousness since we can only get there through our consciousness. In our consciousness, in our sense of utter dependence, then, God is present as the "whence of the sense of dependence," without our being able to objectively describe that "whence."[4]

In humans, the feeling of utter dependence comes into conflict with their need to be an independent human being. Now the need to be an independent human being is not wrong, but sin still manifests itself in it, according to Schleiermacher, as soon as the urge for independence becomes all-important. Sin is essentially an aversion to God. Sin impedes the growth toward a higher consciousness, in which human beings experience themselves as free beings in whom God or the universe operates—so that self-reliance and dependence actually coincide. The higher consciousness is a God-consciousness, which is inhibited by the occurrence of sin.[5] Sin, however, can be removed, Schleiermacher argues, when humans come into contact with the perfect God-consciousness of Jesus. The God-consciousness of Jesus impressed his disciples and is preserved through them in the Christian faith community.[6] When it awakens in people, it leads them to feel in unity with God in all their thinking and acting.

Within the paradigm of German idealism and romanticism, Schleiermacher gave theology a new basis, which afforded him the honour of being seen as the church father of the nineteenth century. However, whereas Schleiermacher emphasises feeling and piety, Hegel emphasises knowledge and understanding. Hegel succeeded in providing the most complex, layered, and comprehensive system in which the philosophical and theological themes of his time were discussed. As a result, he became the most important

4 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, Edwina Lawler (Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), originally 1821/22, § 4.4.

5 Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 65–66.

6 Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 100ff.

philosopher of German idealism, with whom subsequent generations wanted to come to an understanding, whether they reviled or revered him. That Hegel was able to build a comprehensive philosophical system was mainly due to his use of the concept of Spirit. With the help of that concept, he brought the coherence of God, the world, and human beings to light, and it is mainly because of this that he is of interest to this book.

4.2. Hegel on Mind and Spirit

In his philosophy, Hegel (1770–1831) wanted to think of all of reality as a coherent whole and a totality.[7] To achieve this, he had to merge the classical philosophical oppositions between object and subject, God and human, being and thinking, spirit and nature, reason and faith into a higher unity.[8] Spinoza had argued such a unity by stating that everything is part of one infinite substance. According to Hegel, however, such a substance was too fixed, too static, and too objective to make a unity through all opposites truly plausible. Spinoza had pushed the oppositions aside too quickly by already merging them into something higher. With Kant, Hegel found no salvation either. Kant had actually lost the unity of the world through his distinction between the world as it is in itself and the way in which our mind presents the world to us. Schleiermacher had then returned to the unity of all there is, but he had based such unity primarily on feeling. Hegel, however, did not consider it a solid foundation. He did not want to *feel* the unity but to *think* it and thereby arrive at real knowledge about God.[9]

The totality Hegel was trying to think of is the totality of the whole world process, with all its developments and contradictions, in which one produces the other; this is the opposite of that; one thing is the provisional result of another. Through all these distinctions and developments, there is nevertheless one great world process. According to Hegel, the absolute

7 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), originally 1807, § 20: "The True is the whole."

8 The secondary literature on Hegel is endless. I have made particular use of the following books. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge University Press, 1977); Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (State University of New York Press, 1994); Arie Leijen and Ad Verbrugge, eds., *Hegel: Een inleiding* (Boom, 2002); Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Martin Wendte, *Gottmenschliche Einheit bei Hegel: Eine logische und theologische Untersuchung* (Walter de Gruyter, 2007); Nicholas Adams, *Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

9 See especially the *Forword to Hinrichs's* Religion, in Peter C. Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit* (Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

(that which does not depend on the whole but is realised or realises itself in the whole) is not a fixed thing—a substance, a being, or an entity—but Spirit. Spirit is not a thing—a ghost or a breath—that remains equal to itself and has its identity in itself, but Spirit is a relation, which precisely comes to itself in the other and thus finds its own identity when it finds or recognises itself in what it is not.[10] The concept of Spirit therefore allows the idea that the one, all-embracing process develops in opposites, distinctions, limitations, and amalgamations and still remains a unity. In this process, Spirit realises itself because it comes to itself in the other. The absolute is Spirit that realises itself in the whole and also needs the whole as the form in which it can realise itself.

The idea that Spirit comes to itself in others is fundamental to Hegel. This idea seems quite abstract, but it can also be expressed in everyday terms. When I read a novel, I come to know myself as a person I am not. For example, I learn things about myself by putting myself in the position of Madame Bovary in Flaubert's novel or in Gregor Samsa's position in Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*. I get to know myself in the other. I find or recognise myself in someone I am not. Yet this movement of recognition and identification is complex, for I do get to know myself in others like Madame Bovary or Gregor Samsa, but at the same time I also learn that I am not them. That is the essence of Spirit. I have come to know that I am in my way, whatever they are. I locate my subjectivity in a common humanity and understand my singularity from there. In the language of Hegel, this is the way I learn to understand that I am Spirit that recognises Spirit.

How groundbreaking Hegel's thought was that Spirit comes to itself in the other is especially apparent from a comparison with Aristotle. Aristotle had described God as Spirit or *nous* that knows itself.[11] According to Aristotle, God is *noesis noeseos*, which can be translated as "thought thinking itself."[12] According to this statement, God is Spirit that thinks or knows. But what does God think or know? God thinks God. So, God is both subject of thinking, the one who thinks, and object of thinking, that which is thought. God is Spirit that is thinking itself and is thought by itself, cause and caused in one, sunk in itself and exalted in a timeless eternity. God brings forth God as thought (subject) thinking itself (object). In this way, according to Aristotle, God is utterly self-sufficient, for Godself is the ground of God's own existence,

10 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 759, 772ff.

11 Hegel quotes Aristotle at the end of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*.

12 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book L, 1074b.

and God is perfect in God's own completed act of thinking. It is precisely because of this perfection that God exerts attraction on the world, which is set in motion by the desire to become itself as perfect as possible too.

Different from Aristotle, Hegel argues that God is not Spirit contemplating itself in a completed perfection from the start and in all eternity, but Spirit that has to go out of itself into the world in order to come to know itself. For Spirit only comes to know itself in the other. It returns to itself in the other, to which it is similar and from which it differs. In this sense, God needs the world as the other in which God can come to knowledge of Godself. The implication then is, of course, that the world itself is not alien to God but stands in a relationship with God as the other of God. The whole world process, with all its oppositions, distinctions, limitations, and aggregations, can be understood as one great passage in which God (Spirit) comes to knowledge of itself. God comes to know Godself in human beings (spirits), and human beings realise that they are not separated from God.[13]

The appearance and realisation of Spirit

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel describes how Spirit makes its appearance in the world and develops in it.[14] The *Phenomenology* has often been compared to a bildungsroman or an odyssey. In the bildungsroman we follow the development and selfhood of the protagonist, whose later traits can already be discerned in the early years when we know who that person will eventually become. Similarly, the *Phenomenology* shows us how Spirit appears and develops in what are at first only rudimentary forms. Spirit appears in humans, who come to know themselves in the otherness of the natural and social world. The human mind or spirit (as an instance of Spirit) thereby understands that the world and the social world are themselves already forms of Spirit. In this understanding, the Spirit comes to itself, in that the human spirit recognises (the divine) Spirit and (the divine) Spirit is known by the human spirit. Precisely then, the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* appears in full maturity: the Spirit who is known by spirit, and only in knowing and being known has really become Spirit, and also knows itself to be Spirit. At that point, the divine Spirit reaches its goal on its long journey through history as it both reveals itself and becomes known.

13 The distinction between Spirit and a spirit is somewhat artificial and was not made by Hegel himself, who naturally speaks only of *Geist*. Where human spirit is meant, I omit the capital letter, although it is clear that the human mind or spirit is an agency of the Spirit, through which the Spirit in the human mind comes to knowledge of the Spirit and thus to knowledge of itself.

14 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 27.

At that point, the human spirit comes to the realisation of being a part of the divine Spirit, notwithstanding its finiteness and limitedness, through which it reconciles itself to its finitude.

The appearance of Spirit in the world is shown by Hegel in tracing the development of consciousness and its knowledge. In human beings' "knowing consciousness," the Spirit actually appears. Knowing consciousness is not something fixed but mutable since its subject is in a dynamic progression. The subject changes because the knowing subject and the known objects determine each other reciprocally in an interaction. For example, I see "something," which turns out to be something "round and cylindrical with a cap on it," namely "a bottle." So the same thing turns out to be different objects as it changes according to the way it is known. At the same time, the knowing subject changes because of the things it knows and the concepts in which it knows them. This reciprocal change comes to completion when, as Hegel argues, truth is grasped. We grasp the truth when we grasp what phenomena essentially are, and essentially, they are a form of Spirit. Truth is grasped or understood at the point where that which something is in itself coincides with that which it is for us. In the example of the bottle, this is relatively simple. What the thing is in itself—namely, a bottle—is also for us as soon as we recognise the "something" as a bottle. When the bottle is known as a bottle, the truth is seized, and the reciprocal determination of subject and object comes to a conclusion.

In the case of Spirit instead of a bottle, the process of grasping the truth turns out to be a bit more complicated. The truth of an ever-evolving reality is grasped only as soon as we realise that reality is Spirit, both in itself and for us. Now, Spirit may very well be Spirit in itself without even a single mind already recognising it as such. Spirit in that situation, though, is actually Spirit in itself but not yet Spirit for us. And as long as Spirit is not yet Spirit for us, it cannot be Spirit for itself because, in that situation, there is no spirit recognising Spirit. This means that Spirit is not yet known by itself and thus, according to the definition in the wake of Aristotle, not yet really Spirit. Indeed, Spirit becomes Spirit only when it is known by itself. This only happens to humans who come to self-knowledge. Such a human being recognises Spirit and simultaneously knows itself to be Spirit. Spirit that knows itself to be Spirit in its relation to the other in which it comes to itself is really Spirit, namely in and for itself.[15] In humans, the Spirit comes to know itself. This happens when humans come to self-knowledge. Self-knowledge will develop only through knowledge of the other.

15 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 25.

As already mentioned, in the *Phenomenology,* Hegel shows how Spirit appears, develops, and realises itself. The realisation proceeds along the development of human consciousness, which unfolds along various stages from "knowing consciousness" to "self-consciousness" and "reasonable self-consciousness" to "knowledge of Spirit." This development of human consciousness proceeds along various stages in the progress of history, which include politics, philosophy, and culture. With this, Hegel pulls off a stunning philosophical tour de force. The unity of Spinoza's one substance is retrieved through the human mind. According to Kant, the human mind has its own representation of the world. According to Hegel, in its representation of the world, the human mind (spirit) comes to know Spirit, which gives unity and coherence to the world. Thus, he finds a unity of reality and representation after Kant again. "Substance is subject," Hegel can therefore say.[16] What was substance according to Spinoza is Spirit in Hegel, which comes to knowledge of itself in the human representation. Kant's distinction between the world as it is in itself and the way in which our mind shows us the world disappears again in Hegel because the mind comes to know itself in the world and sees that the world itself is already a form of Spirit.

From knowing consciousness to knowledge of Spirit

Human consciousness begins as a knowing consciousness that places itself against the world outside itself. In that position, subject and object stand opposed to each other, like independent instances. Because of this opposition, the subject knows that it is a self in opposition to the other.

On reflection, however, this opposition cannot be maintained, and consciousness consequently makes the transition from knowing consciousness to self-consciousness. Indeed, the subject comes to realise itself as a consciousness that knows the object. It has absorbed the object, as it were, into its own consciousness, so that it no longer relates to something foreign outside itself but to something else that, in knowing it, has become part of itself. Knowledge of the object is thereby accompanied by self-knowledge because the object belongs to the subject itself. The relation to the object therefore implies for the subject a relation to itself as well. Simply put, the world is in the mind of the subject, which also has an awareness of this internalisation, so that in its relation to the world, it also finds a relation to itself. Even so, the subject still has to relate to the harsh reality outside itself, but reality is no longer separate from itself. Subject and object belong together. Knowledge of reality and self-knowledge are intertwined. Only

16 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 17ff.

when I know objects do I know that it is I who knows. And when I know this, objects are not alien to me but have become part of me while still remaining something else.

The relationship between subject and object becomes truly interesting and important if the object is not a thing but itself a subject. In that case, self-consciousness does not relate to an object but to another self-consciousness, which also unfolds and wants to develop. Self-consciousness is therefore no longer surrounded by a world of things but becomes part of an intersubjective community. In this context, Hegel speaks of self-consciousness as an "I that is we and we that is I."[17] The I is we, because it is part of a community. It internalises the patterns of that community from the outset and incorporates them into itself. We is conversely also an I, because the commonality of the community manifests itself in the individual, who can develop for the benefit of the community. In the social framework of the intersubjective community, however, conflicts inevitably occur between subjects, and subjects can develop precisely through conflicts. In Hegel's thinking, the relationship between master and slave or lord and servant and the emergence of the unhappy consciousness (see below) occupy an important place in the development of subjects. Both of these themes are important because they shed light on Hegel's social and religious conceptions.

In the relationship between lord and servant, the lord is an independent individual (an I) who uses the servant as an instrument (an object) to enjoy the world.[18] As a result, the servant is not recognised as a person (or a subject). Consequently, the lord does not receive real recognition from another person but only enforced obedience from the servant. In many ways, the lord is better off than the servant, but in order to become a person, the servant's position is more favourable than the lord's. The servant, in fact, must develop through his work and is forced to come to terms with the otherness of a strange and harsh reality that eludes his will. As a result, the servant has the possibility of coming to himself in the other, whereas the lord only makes use of the other for himself. The servant thus makes a transition from singularity to communality. He learns the importance of obedience, learns to subdue his selfishness, and thereby gains an eye for the common good, through which he understands that his self must be a "we." The servant recognises something common that is beyond him, to which he belongs, and through which he can grow. In this, he has an advantage over the lord for his personal formation, as the lord remains only a selfish individual.

17 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 177.

18 On lord and servant see Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 189–196.

Individuals who want to actualise themselves as self-conscious subjects, like the servant, can adopt different attitudes. Hegel emphasises three of them. In a so-called stoic attitude, the individual withdraws to itself in order to be inwardly free and unaffected.[19] However, this results in a kind of lifelessness in which the individual does not really move outward, remains locked inside itself, and does not participate in some sort of we. In a "sceptical" attitude, the individual doubts every otherness.[20] As a result, it is unable to find a relationship with the other. Consequently, it cannot find a relationship with itself since self and other interact with each other. The individual may, as a third possibility, also take solace in God, a transcendent being that exists purely for its own sake. In that "solace-seeking attitude," however, a so-called unhappy consciousness arises. The ideal of self-consciousness—namely, to be a being for itself—is found and placed outside the self and outside the world, namely in God, in whom the ideal is realised. As a result, the ideal is maintained, but it has also become an unattainable ideal for all eternity, as it stands outside the world and cannot be realised in the world. The unhappy consciousness has placed the happy state of selfhood outside itself and thereby made it unattainable for itself.[21] It is an inwardly divided consciousness, which itself will never be what it wants to be.

According to Hegel, the individual only takes a real step forward when it comes to terms with harsh reality. It can come to the insight that reality may be different from itself but not alien to itself. Self-consciousness thereby makes the transition to a reasonable self-consciousness, which can find reasonableness both in itself and in the world. In this perspective, the world and the individual are no longer opposed to each other but appear to be related to each other since reason expresses itself in both. The subjective spirit, as Hegel calls it, now gains the ability to realise itself in the social world of institutions, laws, and morals. The social world has come about in history as the product of subjective minds, constituting the sphere of the objective spirit. The objective spirit is not the subjective spirit of some "I," but the spirit that has emerged in history and objectified itself in the rules and customs of a community at a given time. The subjective spirit of the individual mind learns to see itself through law, morality, and habit as part of the objective spirit, which belongs to the communities of family, civil society, and the state. The subjective spirit wants to maintain these communities

19 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 198–201.
20 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 202–206.
21 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 207–230.

and thereby elevates itself to generality. It understands itself no longer as a strictly private subject but learns to know itself as part of the generality or communality of the objective spirit, which enables the subjective spirit to be a subject in the first place by shaping its subjectivity. As part of the generality of the objective spirit, the individual can assert itself in order to contribute to the greater whole of the generality.

In the development from knowing consciousness to self-consciousness and reasonable self-awareness, Spirit (which is actually *knowledge* of Spirit) gradually emerges in a process that has psychological as well as social and political aspects. However, Spirit only truly appears as itself in art, religion, and philosophy. The Spirit that appears there is not the *subjective* spirit of the individual human subject, which comes to self-awareness and self-realisation. Nor is it the *objective* spirit of law, morality, and custom that has realised itself in the social world with which the subjective spirit is interwoven. Art, religion, and philosophy are all about the *absolute Spirit*, which has always been Spirit in itself but is now, in art, religion, and philosophy, also known by us as Spirit and consequently becomes Spirit for us as well. In art, religion, and philosophy, we learn to know Spirit. In these fields, we also come to know ourselves as spirits in unity with Spirit. So, in these spheres, Spirit is known by Spirit and knows that it is Spirit. The Spirit, which has always been Spirit in itself, now becomes a Spirit in and for itself and only thereby really realises itself as Spirit. Spirit as known object and spirit as knowing subject thus merge into the higher unity of the absolute Spirit, which realises itself in the whole of reality, which comprises both the subjective knowing and the objective world, and realises itself by coming to itself. The absolute Spirit is the Spirit that does not depend on the whole but realises itself in the whole. It is Spirit that comes to knowledge of itself in human beings, through which they understand that they themselves are Spirit.

The Spirit in art, religion and philosophy

The Spirit is known as Spirit in the works of art, religion, and philosophy, but even in these fields there is a development. In art, an experience of totality, or an experience of unity, is gained through intuition (*Anschauung*). Humans behold a work of art and perceive that harmony has been achieved. The matter or raw material of the work of art is modelled in such a way that it is in complete unity with the intention or meaning of the work. It expresses the intention itself. By seeing in the work of art a unity of matter and meaning, which is a unity of nature and spirit, human beings are enabled to understand themselves as a unity of nature and spirit. Nature is no longer

opposed to spirit, and spirit is no longer alien to nature, but the separation between nature and spirit is dissolved. In the work of art, humans see the unity that they themselves are. In the aesthetic experience, as an experience of totality or unity, the separation between nature and spirit is dissolved, or, in Hegel's language, "sublated" on a higher level, and the distinction between the perceived object and the subject that perceives falls away. Humans see themselves in the work of art and understand themselves as the spirit expressed in the work of art.

In religion, the same experience of unity is involved, but this unity is not perceived in the contemplation of a work of art but expressed in the religious representation or imagination (*Vorstellung*). Of course, religion itself has undergone a long development in the history of religions, but according to Hegel, this development comes to completion in Christianity, and it is on the Christian religion that he concentrates. God and humans seem to be opposed to each other, but the imagery of the Christian representations of faith expresses that they are reconciled to each other because they belong together as absolute Spirit. According to Hegel, God does not appear to be an objectively existing being separate from the world, nor are human beings self-contained entities opposed to God or the world. God realises Godself as Spirit in the world. Humans come to self-realisation when they realise that they themselves are spirits that are able to obtain knowledge of Spirit. God and human beings thus belong together in that God as Spirit is known by the spirit in people who know or recognise Spirit and, precisely because of this, come to the realisation that they themselves are Spirit. In this way, God does not stand as an external object—a substance, being, or entity—opposed to human beings, but realises Godself in human beings.

God is Spirit. Spirit then includes not only the Spirit on the objective side, the Spirit that is known (whom we usually refer to as God), but also the Spirit on the subjective side, the one who knows (the minds of human beings).[22] The human side, that is, the mind that understands Spirit and knows itself to be Spirit, therefore must be included in the understanding of God. After all, it is essential for Spirit to make itself known to Spirit and to be known by Spirit. This happens in the human spirit. The very fact that God is known, according to Hegel, precisely makes God truly God.

22 Cf. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1824), according to the edition and the translation by Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel*, 174: "To the extent that God is grasped as a being of the understanding, God is not grasped as spirit; to the extent that God is grasped as spirit, however, this concept includes the subjective side within it, the side that is introduced into this concept when it is defined as religion."

The concept of God consequently includes humans, through whom God is known. "God is only God insofar as God knows Godself. God's self-knowing is furthermore God's self-consciousness in humans and the knowledge that humans have of God, which passes into a self-knowing of humans in God."[23] In this way, then, one should not understand God as a being outside of us, an entity independent of us, or a substance of which we may or may not be a part. God is the Spirit in God's community.[24] The latter is probably the most fundamental description Hegel gives of God. He thereby does not argue that God is Spirit first and that God is also Spirit in community. He states that God is Spirit in community and thus only really becomes God through the community, which knows, acknowledges, and recognises God as Spirit.[25]

Just like Hegel opposes the idea of God as an object—a being, entity, or substance—he also resists the idea that we can only have subjective imaginations, impressions, or feelings of God. The subjectivity of the human mind is very much part of God, insofar as it is a mind (spirit) that *knows* Spirit and does have real knowledge of God, who is known as Spirit. The claim that we may form subjective imaginations of God but can never really know God does a disservice to both humans and God, who is absolute Spirit and as such related to the human mind in a differentiated unity.[26]

Spirit known by spirit is neither the objective nor the subjective, but the absolute Spirit, which includes God and human beings. In Christian imagery, the unity of God and human being is expressed first of all in the image of the incarnation, which says that God is not opposed to the world or to human beings but has entered into them. By entering into human being, God also enters into death. This image or representation (*Vorstellung*) expresses that the other or the opposite of God, namely death and finitude, are not opposed to God but belong to God. By means of the representation or image of the crucifixion and Good Friday, the Christian imagery refers to the death of God, which allows for the transition to a better understanding of God, namely of God as Spirit in God's community, as it comes to expression in the Christian imagery of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

23 *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, § 564, section translated in Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel*, 144.

24 *Encyclopaedia …*, § 554, section translated in Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel*, 138.

25 There is an interpretation to this view. The question is whether the absolute remains absolute if it needs recognition. I think Hegel's philosophy is at least open to the idea that the absolute depends on recognition. The concept of the logical idea (see below), however, also allows for the idea that the absolute actualises or realises its own recognition and remains absolute in it.

26 Cf. *Encyclopedia* …, § 573, section translated in Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel*, 147.

In Hegel's philosophy, the representation or image (*Vorstellung*) is, simply put, the packaging of the concept (*Begriff*). Art and religion work with concrete pictorial or mental images, in which truth presents itself. Philosophy abstracts, i.e., gets rid of the packaging and focuses on the content expressed therein. Once detached from the imagery, philosophy understands the deepest thrust and truth that are expressed in the artistic image and the religious imagery, and philosophy understands them in the form of the concept, which according to Hegel represents a purer and better articulation of truth. What is perceived in the *Anschauung* of art and expressed in the *Vorstellung* of religion is caught in the *Begriff* of philosophy and only thereby really known. The concepts of philosophy allow for the Spirit to know that it is Spirit that is known by Spirit.

The unfolding of the idea

The Spirit that comes to know itself attains an absolute understanding. It "sees" itself not only in the intuition (*Anschauung*) nor "imagines" itself only in the representation (*Vorstellung*), but fully understands itself. It understands itself absolutely, that is, not in this or that form but as it is itself in truth and in reality. In the *Phenomenology*, this absolute understanding marks the completion of Spirit's appearance. Hegel's intention, after all, was to describe the appearance of Spirit, which shows up in humans and finally fully emerges in the human spirit's understanding of Spirit. In *Science of Logic,* he describes the same process of development, not as an appearance of Spirit this time but as an unfolding of the logical idea. The logical idea must be understood as a spiritual principle that thinks itself into reality.[27] The absolute, which is called Spirit in the Phenomenology, or God in theology, is described from a different perspective as the logical idea in *Science of Logic*. This idea unfolds in a movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Hegel argues that the logical idea constitutes an absolute beginning. That is, so to speak, the thesis. In theology, one might see such an absolute beginning as God before God began creation. Hegel calls this absolute beginning a "first" or "initial generality." The initial generality, which resembles, for example, the One in the philosophy of Plotinus, encloses and encompasses everything. Everything is, as it were, folded into the first. Such an initial generality, however, cannot remain with itself and is thus forced into unfolding because it negates or contradicts itself. It encloses everything, but in order for it to be something, it must exclude what is different, whence it can no longer include everything.

27 *Encyclopaedia ...,* § 554, section translated in Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel*, 139.

The second moment, of antithesis, occurs after the initial generality has become something through the exclusion of its other. The initial generality now stands as something indefinite in opposition to the particular, from which it differs. The initial generality is thereby dissolved. One might say that it dissolves itself in all the "somethings" that "are something" *and* in the indefinite from which these "somethings" are separate. In theological language, one could say that God thereby comes to be opposed to creation and that creation falls out of unity. Indeed, the particular and determinate "somethings" posit their individuality as something independent in opposition to the indefinite. This creates an opposition between the general indefinite and the private definite. The initial generality has thereby dissolved itself into a distinction between the indefinite and the definite. In other words, under the separation of the indefinite and the definite lies the unity of the initial generality, which is now no longer there because it has dissolved itself in the distinction but can theoretically be reconstructed.

Next, the antithesis of the general and the particular, or the indefinite and the definite, is dissolved again in a synthesis or a reconciliation, because the general is not opposed to the particular, the private, or the individual, since it is *in* every particular and all individuals. The particular does not stand in opposition to the general, but as an individuality, it is a particularisation of the general. The initial generality (thesis) has developed itself through the opposition of the particular and the indefinite (antithesis) into a matured unity (synthesis). In theological terms, this means that an abstract God, who is supposed to exist independently and prior to creation, abandons itself—empties itself or crosses itself out—by beginning with creation in order to become God in unity with the world through the contradictions of the world.

4.3. The Death of God Is Not the End of God

According to Kuitert, humans are for a time a place of God because the Spirit emerges in them, enabling them to create a world of meaning by means of the imagination. The imagination begins with us realising that we are being addressed by people who need us. Kuitert, however, denies that the religious imagination contains knowledge. Hegel, on the other hand, pointed out that there is a form of knowledge and, thus, truth in the imagination or representations of religion. Admittedly, the truth of religion is only properly grasped by philosophy because philosophy peels the concept out of the representation, but this does not thereby cease religion's

representational truth. Religion therefore leads to true knowledge of God, who is Spirit. The Spirit must reveal itself to come to knowledge of itself. The dynamics of Hegel's thought are determined entirely by the idea that God understands Godself as Spirit in humans, who realise that they are not separated from God.

Not surprisingly, Hegel's philosophy gave rise to very diverse interpretations and questions. Is it even possible to grasp all of reality in one concept? Is reality really as reasonable as Hegel believes it to be, and can reason fully fathom and illuminate it? Has Hegel actually defended religion, or, on the contrary, does he declare it obsolete? Hegel's philosophy so much intends to unite opposites that his deepest intentions can also always be explained in opposition, after first having them extracted from his inaccessible writings with great difficulty. In the context of this book, he is primarily read after Kuitert. Kuitert ended with his thoughts on Spirit. With Hegel, it can be argued that Spirit primarily shows how God and human beings should be thought of in unity. In this respect, Kuitert and Hegel agree: a God outside of us, above us or without us, is over and done with—emptied, crossed out, dissolved, sublated, *dead*—but the death of God is *not* the end of God. It is precisely with this assertion that Hegel has eloquence after Kuitert.

According to Hegel, the core of the Christian religion lies in the representation that God became human, underwent death on the cross, and thereby effectuated atonement. At heart, this representation contains the whole truth about the Spirit, or God (the creator), who enters into the world process and manifests Godself there as the other (the creature).[28] This other first sets itself up against God or the transcendent to emphasise its individuality, but then understands that it is in unity with God as an instance of the transcendent. This unity, according to Hegel, is already provided by the Christian conception of the incarnation, which refers to a union of God and human. The unity, however, is expressed especially in the representation of the death of the human being, in whom God has become human. Hegel understands the death of Christ, in accordance with Lutheran theology, as the death of Godself. The fact that God enters death makes it clear that the finite and mortal are not opposed to God but are incorporated into God. The finite and mortal are thus not opposed to God but are part of God. A

28 Hegel connects the idea of God as spirit with the Christian conception of the Trinity. For example, in the Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion, "Verhältnis der Religionsphilosophie zur positiven Religion*," ed. Suhrkamp 1969, 38: "Ohne diese Bestimmung der Dreieinigkeit wäre Gott nicht Geist und Geist ein leeres Wort" (without this determination of the Trinity, God would not be Spirit and Spirit would be an empty word).

reconciliation of God and humans and a union of the finite with the infinite present themselves therein.

The death of Christ and the death of God imply that the Christian religion becomes a religion of the Spirit. God as an abstract, independent being outside of us is dead, is not there, and is an obsolete, or, in Hegel's language, sublated, idea.[29] Hegel calls this the "speculative Good Friday."[30] The death of Christ on Good Friday symbolises the disillusionment and mental collapse of the world after the death of God. However, the death of God is not the end of God. Through Good Friday and the death of Christ, humans realise that they are not facing an abstract God outside the world but are themselves spirits who have come to know Spirit.[31] They know God, themselves, and the unity they form together as Spirit. They understand themselves as god-humans. This god-humanity is thus not limited to the single divine human being Jesus Christ but continues in the community of the church, which receives the Spirit at Pentecost according to Christian representation. What was above us and opposed to us as God is now among us as Spirit.

Hegel's thought thus implies a reformulation of the Christian faith, which had a great impact on theology. Its influence has been felt by very different theologians, such as Troeltsch, Barth, Tillich, and Pannenberg. Not one of them adopted Hegel's body of thought unchanged, as it was too time-bound. Because of its creativity and sheer power of thought, however, it never quite became obsolete. Yet Hegel's thinking was speculative to a high degree. It had to be speculative, of course, in order to think of the world as a whole. In his speculative thinking, Hegel argues that God and humans belong together in a differentiated unity, in which the divine and the human merge and remain distinct. Moreover, he argues that religious imagination contains truth, through which humans can come to an understanding of themselves. God and humans are not opposed to each other, but God is Spirit in the minds of humans, who themselves are instances or agencies of the Spirit.

Hegel after Kuitert

Hegel's philosophy contains the important idea that Spirit realises itself by coming to itself in the other. In abstract, philosophical language, Hegel thus states that God needs human beings in order to be God. Indeed, the concept of God does not only include the concept of a first principle or an initial

29 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 752, 785.

30 See the conclusion of *Faith and Knowledge*, translated in Hodgson, *G.W.F. Hegel*, 83–84.

31 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 785–786.

beginning but also its recognition and understanding by human beings. It belongs essentially to God or Spirit to be known by the human mind or spirit. God and humans are related to each other in a differentiated unity that does not constitute an identity, as with Spinoza, nor an antithesis, as with Kuitert. In history, God comes to the knowledge and completion of Godself in humans, and humans gain insight into God's true nature.

This comprehensive vision came under strong criticism in the twentieth century, for example from postmodern philosophers who rejected the totality claims of Hegel's philosophy and the central place of human cognition in it. Hegel resembles, as it were, a colonialist going out into the world and history, appropriating it all and using it for the sake of understanding himself. Real attention to what is really different seems to be absent. Moreover, he sets himself up as an omniscient who unlocks reality's intentions in the course of history and unravels the plan by which the intentions are realised. He is thus considered an important spokesman of modernity, regarded by postmodern thinkers as primarily a white Western philosopher seeing through reality's master plan and knowing himself to be the end of it. This criticism surely has a point. Still, it seems unjustified to cast Hegel aside or dismiss him just like that.

His insight that God is God in such a way that God must be known by humans as that which they themselves are at their deepest level, namely, spirit, still seems to be useful and fruitful for theology to me, even after his philosophy has been subjected to criticism. This insight makes him valuable for a theology after Kuitert in any case, because it opens a way in which the opposition between God and humans is overcome by means of the concept of Spirit. That this path is not the only possibility is shown by the work of Heidegger, who does not focus on the concept of Spirit, but on Being, and thus reveals yet new perspectives for thinking about God after God.

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5. God Does Not Exist but Happens: Heidegger on Being

Abstract: Heidegger focuses on the question of Being, which in theology was often equated with the question of God. He argues that enigmatic and elusive Being shows itself in beings but does not constitute their foundation or fixate their being. It lets things be and grants beings the possibility to be, but it is itself unfounded and ungrounded. Being is not, but happens in beings. If Being is interpreted as an equivalent to God, God becomes the mystery of reality, its baseless ground or unground, which happens because beings are, even if Heidegger did not mean it that way. In this way, Heidegger helps theology move away from theism. He sharply distinguishes himself from Hegel's philosophy of Spirit as well.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, onto-theology, metaphysics, unground, mystery

As described in the previous chapter, Hegel argued that God and humans are not opposed to each other. With the help of the concept of Spirit they can be conceived in conjunction. The Spirit, or God, unfolds in reality and comes to know itself in the human mind. Beneath the surface, then, reality appears to be driven by reasonableness in a dialectical process in which the Spirit arrives at its destination following a kind of zigzag course. Because of this, the philosophy of Hegel can be counted as the culmination of modern thought, which is defined both by the idea of progress and its turn toward the subject. The subject comes to realise that it is Spirit itself, which unfolds in the world process and makes the world a meaningful whole.

On the basis of the philosophy of Heidegger (1889–1976), this chapter does not reflect on God as Spirit, but on God as Being.[1] The shift from Spirit to

1 From an abundance of literature, I have drawn mainly on the following works: Samuel IJsseling, *Heidegger: Denken en danken, geven en zijn* (Vantilt, 2014), originally 1964; Otto Pöggeler,

Benjamins, R., *Formerly God: Rethinking God after God*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2026.
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Being represents an important philosophical turn with which Heidegger fundamentally contributed to the transition from modern to postmodern thought. Indeed, in his opinion, thinking should not begin with the subject or the mind, as has been common since Descartes' "I think," but with Being, to which humans as beings belong. Human thought cannot count as an absolute starting point for philosophy because it is situated. It always occurs in a context and comes up from a living environment in which the world already has meaning before human beings actually reflect on it. The human mind has its existence and its place in Being, to which it belongs and which characterises its thinking. Not the human mind or human thought should therefore be central, but the question of Being, which precedes human beings, to which they belong, and which defines them.

Heidegger's turn in thinking was influenced by social change that led to another era. Hegel still believed that the bourgeois culture of his time offered possibilities for development and completion. Citizens who take responsibility for themselves and their society can come to recognise one another and build a spiritual community in which history comes to its end. However, this high-minded idea was criticised in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time when the industrial revolution enabled not only the unfolding but also the dehumanisation of human beings. People could indeed develop themselves by means of industrialisation, but industrialisation also reduced them to means of production. In philosophy, human beings came to be viewed with suspicion. Their great ideas do not testify to the loftiness they have according to their self-understanding but are the product of economic relations (Marx), a will to power (Nietzsche), or a hidden drift life (Freud). In the early twentieth century, the nineteenth century's high ideals and ideas of progress and human development received a major blow, especially from the First World War.

In the period between World War I and World War II, Heidegger developed the core of his philosophy. He held that the question of what a human being is cannot be argued in advance on the basis of religious views or philosophical thoughts. A human being is *Dasein*: a being that is "*da*" (there), which finds itself in a living world and belongs to Being. Such a human being should try to live authentically, according to its own decisions, and not in accordance with mainstream views. Human beings

Der Denkweg Martin Heideggers (Neske Verlag, 1963); Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (Fordham University Press, 2001); Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

can only find authenticity if they come to see their existence as a part of the being that surrounds them, carries them, and manifests itself in and through them. But what exactly is Being that appears in the being of their living world and in their own existence, of which they themselves are a part? Only an original answer to that question can lead to an original and authentic existence.

A question about God

It is not eccentric to conceive of Heidegger's question of Being as a question about God. In pre-modern theology and philosophy, God was conceived of as Being itself, so an equation of the question of God with the question of Being was, in fact, easy. In order to understand the theological impact of Heidegger's philosophy, it is therefore important to picture how God and Being are related in the traditions of philosophy and theology. Such a connection was articulated in very different ways by the thirteenth-century philosophers and theologians Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, who left their stamp on later Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Heidegger was very familiar with the pre-modern connection between God and Being and its religious and theological impact. He came from a conservative Roman Catholic milieu, studied temporarily at the seminary, wrote a dissertation on Duns Scotus, and became familiar with Protestant theology in Marburg through close contact with Rudolf Bultmann. A close connection between God and Being, which is presupposed in reading Heidegger theologically, was also thematised by the liberal Protestant Paul Tillich, a contemporary, who was partly influenced in this by Heidegger and existentialism but elaborated the connection in his own way.

Although the theme of Being in pre-modern theology and philosophy was frequently discussed and usually connected or even identified with God, Heidegger wanted to move away from that tradition and ask the question of Being in a new way again. To his mind, the question of Being was always wrongly asked in the history of Western thought and answered improperly, so much so that there was in fact an oblivion of Being, as he called it. In his view, the question of Being had fallen out of the picture because Western thought had actually set out to take control over Being and master it with the help of metaphysics, ever since Plato and especially in the thoughts of philosophers like Spinoza and Hegel. Human thought had taken control over Being and dominated it to the point of disregarding it. Thinking structured the world with its own concepts that were meant to indicate the ultimate nature of reality. These concepts could be Plato's ideas, the idea of God or nature, or the concept of Spirit. As a result of the conceptual control over

Being, a more contemplative way of thinking had been lost, which was much more receptive to enigmatic and elusive Being.

Broadly speaking, Heidegger discerned two cardinal errors in the philosophical approach to Being. First, the distinction between Being and beings was constantly neglected. The question of Being was always posed as if Being were a being, but it is precisely not. Being allows beings to be, but it is not itself a being. Because it is not a being, it even *is* not at all. Being is not, but happens in the beings in which it manifests itself. A reflection on the distinction between Being and beings is necessary, according to Heidegger, for it can lead to an understanding of Being that respects its enigma. The second error in the philosophical approach was the connection or identification of Being with God. When that happens, a blending of ontology and theology occurs. Ontology wants to inquire into the nature of beings as beings. Theology asks about God, who is traditionally understood as the highest being that disposes of the fullness of Being. The mixing of ontology and theology in a so-called onto-theology leads to a situation in which the nature of beings is derived from a supreme being, as a result of which the highest being dominates Being. Heidegger wanted to radically get rid of such an onto-theology in order to arrive at a new understanding of Being.

It may seem paradoxical that Heidegger's philosophy contributes to a conception of God as Being, whereas he, on the contrary, wants to separate the question of Being from God as a supreme being. Yet it is possible to conceive of Heidegger's question of Being as if it were a question of God.[2] A new conception of Being might result in a new conception of God. Indeed, Heidegger's conception of Being which lets beings be but cannot be said to be itself, still pretty much looks like what we refer to as God in theology. However, this conception of Being no longer involves a being that is linked to God as the highest being, but an intangible Being related to God after God. Such a God is not a supreme being that embodies the fullness of Being in itself, but a God that happens unfounded or groundless—just like Being appears and happens in beings—without any reason or cause for its appearance. Even if Heidegger wanted to take God and Being apart, his

2 I interpret Heidegger's question of Being as an implicit question of God. Cf. Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 25: "[Some are convinced] that 'being' is Heidegger's postmodern pen name for God. But Heidegger denies this and supports his denial by pointing to his consistent refusal to equate being with any being, even the Highest Being. But (…) we can read Heidegger's talk about being as a merely formal indication that can be filled in, contrary to his intentions, with such beings as God and neighbor." I do not claim that Heidegger identified God and Being, but that his question of Being can be understood as a question about God, which is relevant to the theme of this book, namely, God after God.

renewed question of Being can still be read as if it were a renewed search for God after God.

To clarify the topic of Being and God, and God as Being, I will first present this subject by showing how it has been addressed by Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Paul Tillich. Next, I will elaborate on the philosophy of Heidegger. Finally, I will highlight how his philosophy of Being can contribute to contemporary thinking about God.

5.1. God as Being in the Tradition of Theology

An identification of God with Being can certainly seem strange to Protestant theology. After all, the theology of the Reformation wanted to get rid of scholastic, philosophical conceptions of God and focused entirely on the Bible. Ontological language about God as Being was thereby pushed into the background. Where it nevertheless raised its head, it had to be justified biblically. According to Protestant views, God is a personal God to whom humans relate through the biblical narrative or the Word that comes from God, in which God speaks or brings Godself up. God is associated with the Word and the Bible, not with Being and ontology, or metaphysics. In Roman Catholic theology, however, it is much more natural to speak of God as Being or Being itself. From that difference arise important distinctions between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies. I will comment on both traditions in the following pages, and as far as Protestant theology is concerned, I will also discuss liberal thought.

Thomas Aquinas

In Roman Catholic thought, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) occupies a central place. He described God as *ipsum esse subsistens*.[3] That is Being itself (*ipsum esse*) existing in itself (*subsistens*). Because God is Being itself, all other beings derive their existence from God. What exists, exists because it participates in God. God should therefore not be thought of as a being but as Being in which every being participates insofar as it is, that is, as far as its "being" is concerned, not the quality of its being. God is Being that grants beings their being through participation in itself. As Being itself, God is not merely an abstracted, unspecified, shared characteristic that beings have in common with each other. The addition that God "subsists" precisely indicates that God exists in itself and specifies that God is Being in an independent and

3 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.4, a.2.

actualised existence. That God has an actualised existence as *actus purus*, or pure act, expresses that in God there is no difference between essence and existence. Humans can incompletely realise or even neglect the essence of their existence. They are not what they could or should be, according to their essence. God, however, exists every moment perfectly as that which God essentially is. God is pure, rich, perfectly realised Being in the act of existence. God, then, is not Being shared by all beings in such a way that we can speak about it by abstraction as a derivative of the beings that have a "real" existence, but God is the really Existing One, who is Being itself, from whom the beings derive or receive their existence. As Being itself, existing fully realised in and through itself, God grants the beings their being. Thus, God transcends creatures, while creation shares in God insofar as it is.

In this school of thought, there is no radical divide between God and the world, as it is taught in traditional Protestant theology. Indeed, what exists, exists because it participates in God. Therefore, it is also good insofar as it exists. That is, it is good as it exists, concerning its existence, not concerning the way it exists or the qualities it exhibits in existing this way or that, but in existing as such, insofar as it exists apart from all the qualities it can assume as existing. Of course, a creature can do evil and have bad qualities, but as an existing creature, it remains good because it derives its existence from God, who is Being itself. Protestant theology, however, emphasises a fundamental difference between God and creation. In the Bible, God is often presented as an independent actor separate from human beings. This makes it natural to think of God as a separate entity. Therefore, an ontological connection between God and humans is generally not assumed in Protestant theology. Creation exists because God wills it to be as a creation that is separate from God. Creation can and should relate to God, but it does not participate in God. The fallen creatures, who have become disobedient to God's will, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, can be said to be "unable to do any good and inclined to all evil." In the line Thomas of Aquinas, such an assertion would be more difficult. Fallen creation, too, though it has evil qualities, is still good as a creation because it participates in God, from whom it receives its being. In the Protestant line, on the other hand, creation has become unworthy because of disobedience to God, who is presented as a separate entity from whom, moreover, creation has always been radically different.

Duns Scotus

Although Protestant theology wanted to rid itself of philosophical notions in order to rely solely on the Bible, it was indeed influenced by philosophy in the background. Duns Scotus (1266–1308) developed a view of Being

opposite to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. His views worked their way into Protestant thought. In Scotus' philosophy, the univocity of being is paramount. That is, the being of all beings can be spoken of in unison because their being is identical. All beings, including God, have their own being, and in this respect, God's being does not differ from a human's being. God is, and a human being is. The word 'is' means exactly the same thing in both statements. According to Scotus' view, the created beings therefore do not participate in God as Being itself, but God and human beings rather find themselves, so to speak, as detached beings in the same space of Being.

Scotus' philosophy, as opposed to Thomas' thinking, implies a greater independence and freedom of created beings as individual entities separate from God. Their individual independence is further emphasised by what Scotus calls their "thisness." In addition to general characteristics that determine "what" an entity is (a tree, a human), individuality is also important as it determines their "this" (of this tree, that human being). The flip side of individual selfhood is that God, as an individual entity, also becomes separate from human beings. According to Thomas, humans can have an idea of God and God's will because they participate in God, who, as Being itself, is at least comparable to the human way of being. Scotus, however, believes that humans cannot know anything about God's will. The beings of God and humans may be similar, yet they are so differently qualified that human beings have absolutely no insight into God's will. God is separated from creatures in sovereign autonomy, and God communicates God's will through God's commandment, which is good because God wills it but is not willed because it would be good by shared standards. Humans do not participate in God but must obey God.

The appreciation of Thomas and Scotus among current thinkers plays out quite differently, but it is widely recognised that their philosophies represent an important crossroads at which various turns are taken. Roman Catholic thinkers tend to follow in the footsteps of Thomas and assume an inherent bond between God and humans, through which human beings are oriented toward transcendence and ask after God. They are already inclined to perceive a beginning of secularisation with Duns Scotus because the ontological bond between God and the world is abandoned with him, thus creating the theoretical possibility of thinking the world apart from God and eventually without God. This view is echoed, for example, in the work of French philosopher Marcel Gauchet and Anglican theologian John Milbank.[4]

4 Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton University Press, 1997), originally 1985; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1990).

Protestant theologians, on the other hand, may tend to emphasise that Scotus' philosophy establishes and affirms freedom and independence of creation—and thus the inalienable value of this world—as a world that may or may not conform to God. The Dutch theologian Antonie Vos, for example, has argued in this vein that Scotus breaks through the ancient idea of necessity.[5] A postmodern philosopher like Gilles Deleuze has great appreciation for Scotus, because with him—just like the Roman Catholic thinkers above feared—a denial of transcendence would already be present in principle, ultimately providing space for the contingency of the occurrence of being.[6]

Paul Tillich

Remarkably, the theme of God and Being also appears prominently in the work of Paul Tillich (1886–1965). As a liberal Protestant theologian, Tillich was very familiar with the thinking of German idealism. He lived through World War I as a chaplain and was the first non-Jewish scholar to receive a professional ban from the National Socialists. In America, he developed into a leader of theology in the twentieth century and reflected on the "shaking of the foundations."[7] By this, he referred to modern society and human existence that had been robbed of their solid foundations. He articulated the Christian faith for modern, Western humans who had lost faith and made it clear that faith does not consist of fixed beliefs that must withstand doubt but has a deeper dynamic that affirms existence in spite of doubt.[8] Faith has to do with having the courage to be.[9]

In Tillich's theology, God is the ground or the power of Being. He thus identifies God with Being, but he does not conceive of Being as *actus purus*, as Being that wholly and completely realises itself. Being is Being that overcomes non-being. So there is a dynamic of self-affirmation in Being, which continually re-establishes itself by overcoming non-being.[10] Non-being, with Tillich, is the designation for everything that impairs or harms existence: finitude, doubt, sin, and death.

Even though this language is abstract, Tillich knew how to move his contemporaries using it. He saw that modern humans were leading a contested

5 Antonie Vos, *The Philosophy of John Duns Scotus* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994), originally 1968.

7 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948).

8 Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper & Row, 1957).

9 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952).

10 For this conception of Being, Tillich relies extensively on views of Schelling, which can also be found with the Dutch nineteenth-century theologian J. H. Gunning.

existence, manifesting above all the fear that life is ultimately empty and meaningless. In the age of doubt about the value of life, even the old religious notions no longer provided a foothold and lost their value. Humans had lost their faith in God. To them, Tillich now says that they should not imagine God as an independent being of a supernatural nature. There is no such thing. God is of a different order. The creator is not on the same plane as the creatures; Being is not a being; God is not an existing being, but Being in which everything that exists participates. God is the power of Being or the ground of Being, which operates in human beings in such a way that they find the courage to take their existence upon themselves and to affirm it, despite temptation, doubt, and futility. If humans have lost faith in God, it is because they have the wrong idea of God. Tillich wants to correct the idea of God with what he calls a "God above God."

If God is the power of Being, the subject participates in God and has an immediate, unmediated awareness of God. God is, simply put, present in the depths of human beings, or rather, humans are rooted in God. The God of the depths reports itself, so to speak, in human being's consciousness as a matter of ultimate concern. A matter of ultimate concern is something that matters to humans with absolute importance. It is not something they attach to by choice but what grasps them, drives them, and matters to them without ifs or buts. An ultimate concern is present in the field of morality, where a person becomes aware of the requirement of the commandment: there are things that are pertinently forbidden under all circumstances or, on the contrary, must be done under all conditions. An ultimate concern is also present in the field of knowing, as an irrepressible desire to know in what reality we live and who we are. It is likewise present in the field of art as an urgent need to express oneself and even depict the undepictable.

The symbol "God," according to Tillich, is an interpretation of the unconditional or absolute that grasps us as a matter of ultimate concern. This unconditionality or absolute can only be indicated symbolically because the absolute shows itself only in the relative, just like the infinite communicates itself only in the finite. Symbols present that which is absolute or infinite without being themselves absolute or infinite. They participate in it, allowing them to refer to it, but they do not coincide with it.

Tillich thus argues that we should speak of God or the absolute symbolically. In some places, however, he also argues that the conception of God as Being itself should not be taken symbolically.[11] That is contradictory,

11 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (The University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963) Vol. 1, 238–239; cf. Vol. 2, 9.

of course, but points out that the philosophical language of Being, according to Tillich, is the primary language for speaking about God. This does not mean, however, that biblical language about God can be dismissed, because in religious and biblical language, Being is given a tangible form in a symbolic way. God is the symbolic designation of Being itself, just as Christ is the symbol of the new Being. Although philosophy and religion speak in different terms, there is ultimately no difference between the Being itself of philosophy and the God of religion. Religion must realise that God is Being itself, otherwise it will remain stuck in a mythical or supernatural understanding of God, in which God is understood as an existing being in the midst of other beings.[12] Philosophy, by contrast, must realise that God can be spoken of in personal terms. Indeed, justice is not done to the depth of Being with symbols from the sphere of the impersonal. While God is as much "It" as "He," if we omit the "He," the "It" transforms into something sub-personal, which can no longer overcome our fear and despair and heal us.[13] Tillich's view can therefore be understood as follows: God is an important symbolic designation for Being itself, which can be spoken of in personal terms.

In an important essay, Tillich distinguishes two ways of approaching God.[14] In Augustine's way, one can come to God by removing alienation. In that case, humans find themselves when they find God. According to this view, humans' being coincides with the being of God, who is Being itself, even though God infinitely transcends humans. The being of human beings is so connected with the being of God that they cannot deny God any more than they can deny their own existence. They have an immediate and unmediated awareness of God, even though they are alienated from God by sin. To come to God, therefore, they must enter into themselves and come to themselves.

The other way of coming to God is the way of Thomas Aquinas, in which God is met as a stranger. According to Thomas, in fact, God is the only one who has immediate knowledge of Godself. Humans only have mediated or indirect knowledge of God; that is, knowledge that must be derived from other knowledge. This derived knowledge has no immediate certainty

12 Since God is not a being but Being itself, Tillich can also emphasise that God does not exist, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 237.

13 Tillich contrasts this with Einstein, who rejected the notion of a personal God. Paul Tillich, "Science and Theology: A Discussion with Einstein," in Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1959). See also Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (University of Chicago Press, 1955).

14 Paul Tillich, "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion," in Tillich, *Theology of Culture*.

and must therefore be acquired and assured by the external authority of revelation.

Tillich argues that Thomas breaks the direct connection between God and humans, which was still there with Augustine. Even though Thomas continues to argue that God is Being itself, he thereby takes a first step toward the separation between God and humans, which was carried out in full by Duns Scotus. Tillich does recognise the value of Thomas' approach, which he calls "cosmological," but believes that this approach is only helpful on the basis of Augustine's "ontological" way to God. The ontological way assumes that a human being is immediately aware of something unconditional that precedes the separation of subject and object. The unconditionality underlies both subject and object as a ground in which everything is rooted and of which we have an immediate awareness.[15] The ground and the unconditional are referred to as God or Being, of whom philosophy of religion with an ontological approach can clarify their coincidence.

It is remarkable that the liberal Protestant Tillich bends back to pre-Reformation Christian thought, in which God is conceived of as Being.[16] He needs do to so, simply put, in order to clarify to modern human beings that even in their fear, doubt, and unbelief they are still connected to God, who gives them the courage to be. Those who believe make contact with this courage in the depths of their existence. They can accept their fear in faith and affirm things of ultimate concern despite their fear. There is indeed fear, because something essential is in danger, but fear also points to the essential that can be affirmed amidst the danger. Thus God works in people as Being that overcomes non-being, in which human beings participate.

5.2. Heidegger on Being

In the wake of classical theology, Tillich conceived of God as Being itself. He distinguished himself from classical theology by not thinking of God as Being that exists fully realised in and through itself but as the ground of Being that overcomes non-being. Heidegger, however, wanted to think through the question of Being all over again, and quite differently this time.

15 This conception of the unconditional plays an important role in the background of chapter 6, in the interpretive theology, which holds that the subject can see the world as a unity, which shows that it has a divine quality in it.

16 Tillich relies heavily on Schelling, who belongs to German idealism but criticised Hegel and became important to philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Western philosophy, according to him, always tried to understand Being and control it thereby. It had come to look at Being as if it were the highest being from which beings could be deduced. Precisely because of this, however, Being had escaped philosophy. Philosophy had tried to frame Being, provide it with a ground, and set it down as a principle in order to master it by calculation and measure its consequences. Just because of that, philosophy had forgotten Being, over which people have no overview or control because they are in the middle of Being from birth onwards. Despite its break with ancient ideas, modern philosophy did not offer new perspectives or bring about any change with respect to Being. In fact, it had only continued the old mastery of Being by new means. With Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, the subject, reason, or mind came to the fore as a principle or a starting point for thinking in order to get grip on the world and on Being. Not God, but the subject had come to function as the highest being, as the ground and origin of knowing, and as the bearer of its own world. But whether one starts with God or reason and mind, whether one starts with the highest being or the subject, in either case one disregards Being, of which one is a part, which one cannot control, and of which one cannot find a beginning nor an end.

Heidegger did not want to grasp Being with an attitude focused on control but rather approach it in a new, contemplative way. His attempt to find such an approach led him to believe that Being is contingent and without ground. It is not grounded but appears in beings without ground or reason. The implications of this, of course, are considerable. There is no supreme being, nor is there a principle or order that frames or structures beings. Being just manifests itself in beings. It discloses and reveals itself there. What it is itself evades articulation. It is not a specific "something" behind reality that provides for order and structures beings as their principle or origin. Being only happens in the being of beings. The mystery of Being, to use that term, is present *in* the being of beings, which might as well not have been there or could have been different. It is consequently not located behind, beyond, or underneath their being. Heidegger, one might say, was especially interested in cautiously addressing the secret of Being and tracking it down.

Basically, Heidegger's philosophy is defined by the difficulty of finding a new approach to Being. Indeed, the search for Being begins with beings, for there it shows itself, but there it also hides itself. Being is supposed to be different from beings, but it manifests itself only there. It seems natural, then, to ask, "What is it? What kind of thing?" But asking the question this way is already asking the question wrongly and steering toward the wrong

answer. For Being is not "something"—as if it were a being—but differs from beings. The approach to Being is therefore extremely difficult, and this difficulty, according to Heidegger, is the exact reason why philosophy has forgotten Being.

However, if it is so difficult to ask the question of Being well, does the question make any sense? After all, one could say that there is nothing else but beings, so it makes no sense to ask about Being. In that case, Being is only an abstraction, an empty and general concept that we have invented and only use to denote what all beings have in common. But why spend time on this and pretend it means something when we are actually just creating mistakes and illusions? Yet Heidegger asked about Being, primarily because the question stems from a certain mood, a certain amazement or wonder, or even a kind of anxiety.[17] "Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?"[18] There are all kinds of beings, but what makes them actually be here? We can rejoice in all that is as a pure gift, or everything can oppose us and arouse our revulsion, or we can fear that everything is floating and will fall down tomorrow. From there, we ask the question of Being. What makes beings actually be, and what does it mean to be?

If you don't ask these kinds of questions, things will go wrong. According to Heidegger, things had indeed gone wrong in technological society because, as mentioned earlier, the question of Being had been forgotten. Modern people use the world, which they, especially in modernity or the *Neuzeit*, see as a collection of beings available to them. They conceive of the Rhine as a waterway for transportation or as a power station with which to generate energy, but no longer as the river that belongs to a world to which they themselves belong and by which they are affected.[19] According to Heidegger, Western thought was deeply involved in a controlling view of Being. It had come to see the world as a whole, in which everything stands in coherence, in a more or less ordered way under the rule of an overarching agency that sets everything in order. In modernity, the subject had come to assert itself as the overarching agency that learns to know the world and structures it with its thinking. Such a subject can feel legitimised to shape and use the world to its own ends. Yet the Western fallacy of domination did not start with modernity's subject but went deeper and was older than modernity,

17 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell, 1962), originally 1927, § 29.

18 See Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge University Press, 1998), originally 1929, 96.

19 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Garland, 1977), originally 1953, 16.

as it was actually as old as metaphysics since Plato. Indeed, metaphysics attempted to grasp the essence of Being and, precisely because of that, got it wrong. Therefore, Heidegger tried to detach himself from metaphysics in order to arrive at a new understanding of Being.

Being and Dasein

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger attempts to find access to Being from *Dasein*, which is being that is there, specifically human being. He asserts that people always speak about the world and Being from a certain perspective. Only when it is clear that *Dasein* is a part of Being, which is entirely determined by its being in the world, is there a sound basis for speaking about Being. With that, Heidegger does not actually say much at all about Being in itself yet, but makes the preparations for that. First, the entanglement of humans with Being must be properly portrayed in order to prevent us from misrepresenting Being.

With the term *Dasein*, Heidegger refers to human beings and human existence. He deliberately omits terms like subject or consciousness as characterisations of human beings because these expressions would position them in the wrong way. A human being should not be conceived of as a subject standing over against objects. Nor is a human being a consciousness that is aware of the world while it is separate from the world. A human being is *Dasein*, which is an integral part of Being. Yet it is a peculiar part of Being, in which Being appears in a particular way, from which Being can be approached.

Dasein can best be understood as an opening of Being. It is not a closed form of Being, which is simply what it is, like a piece of wood or stone, but it is open. This means mainly two things. First of all, it means that *Dasein* can perceive. Heidegger, however, describes this perception in his own way, to indicate correctly what perception really is. That *Dasein* perceives means that beings appear to *Dasein* (i.e., the human being), which are understood "as something" by *Dasein* and thus acquire meaning for *Dasein*. What "is there" thus appears to *Dasein* in a particular sense. But since *Dasein* is itself a being to whom beings appear, one can say that Being in *Dasein* is opened to itself. It is no longer blind to itself but appears to itself and acquires meaning for itself. That *Dasein* is open, means, secondly, that it possesses freedom. Being opens itself in *Dasein* in order to find a relation to itself and give form to itself. This relationship is not fixed, for *Dasein* has the possibility to decide whether it wants to exist this way or that. Its freedom can be understood as an opening of Being, in which Being is engaged with itself and determines itself. By speaking of *Dasein* as an opening of Being

in which Being is unlocked and opened up to itself, Heidegger positions human beings in Being and not opposed to it.

That *Dasein* is placed in Being does not make it easier to speak about Being, but rather more difficult. It actually prevents human beings from looking at the world in a detached, objectified, or scientific way and from speaking about things as if they were ready-to-hand (*vorhanden*).[20] In a world that is available, we perceive objects, to which we relate, which we name and use. In such an attitude, we can classify and arrange the objects around us and remain in control of them. However, Heidegger considers that as an artificial, "secondary" way of looking at the world. He believes that such a perception is preceded by a much more original relationship to the world, in which things are not opposite to me, but surround me and even direct or determine me. In such a world, things are present-at-hand (*zuhanden*). They are not available at will, but are made available to us. In such a world, the carpenter, for example, is not a subject who stands in opposition to certain objects, namely his tools, and is in charge of them, but he is a being that is intertwined with his environment. He uses a hammer for carpentry, but it is not only the hand that directs the hammer because, conversely, the hammer also directs the hand to hammer. By this, Heidegger means to say that people belong to their environment. They are part of it, they are determined by it, and they are even directed by it. People fly airplanes, but airplanes fly people too. I send an e-mail, I say, but conversely, my e-mail also directs me.

If we take a closer look, we see that people are not opposed to the world but belong to it. This, as I said, does not make it easier to talk about Being. Indeed, Being never becomes transparent to *Dasein*.[21] It remains hidden because Being always precedes *Dasein* in an untraceable way. *Dasein* always finds itself in Being, in a world that is already there and already has meaning, so that it can never reach anything like Being itself, which would lie beyond it. Scientific thought and philosophical traditions—Platonic, Aristotelian, Hegelian, or whatever—that thought they could say something about the world and Being, mainly constitute abstractions of the living world, from which Being has already disappeared. Being has already withdrawn itself from the being that we objectify and about which we think in a conceptual and framed way. It reports itself primarily in the living world, where it shows itself in beings while always remaining elusive.

20 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 15–16.

21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 4.

In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger mainly develops extensive analyses of *Dasein* as a place where Being opens itself up to itself. *Dasein* is thrown into existence, into a world that is already there and supplied with meaning. It can partially design itself in the world because it has different possibilities to exist, over which it decides in its own existence. Most importantly, *Dasein* can either go along with the masses or choose its own way. In order to find its own way and to arrive at its own actual, authentic existence, it must free itself from average thinking about the world and from the ordinary way in which people take their view of the world.[22] Such a liberation succeeds pre-eminently in awakening the awareness of death.[23] The awareness of the possibility of no longer being there detaches *Dasein* from the world more than anything else and disconnects *Dasein* from the world as "one" experiences it, with which one is attached. This detachment from the obvious opens up the possibility of becoming an authentic self in a world that is limiting while also offering possibilities. In the awareness of death, *Dasein* comes to a proper understanding of itself and to authenticity, so that a human being does not live the life of the masses but the life of itself. Heidegger thus argues, rather radically, that *Dasein* only gains a proper view of its own being once it realises that it could also not have been there. Not in the presence of God or in the light of eternity, not as an agency of the Spirit, but in the realisation of its own finitude, *Dasein* comes to itself.

Onto-theology

In his later work, Heidegger shifted his attention from *Dasein* to Being.[24] He now regarded Being as an event (*Ereignis*).[25] Being is not, but happens by revealing or exposing itself in beings. In this sense, Being reveals itself. Being allows things to be but is itself ungrounded. Consequently, we should not associate Being with some highest being but consider Being as the occurrence of being. With these views, Heidegger developed a sharp critique of so-called onto-theology. This was not only a critique of theology that regarded God as Being itself, existing in itself, but also a critique of

22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 27.

23 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 46ff.

24 In literature on Heidegger, this is considered as a turning (*Kehre*). Heidegger himself explains the turning in his "Letter on Humanism," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 250.

25 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy* (*From Enowning*), trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Indiana University Press, 1999), originally 1989, is considered the second main work of Heidegger, representing his later philosophy. The book was written between 1936 and 1938. It is hardly readable, if at all, because of its obscurity.

the tradition of metaphysics, with which Heidegger upended the whole of philosophical thought.

The term onto-theology was introduced by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant used the term to refer to a theology that based itself on pure reasoning detached from experience to substantiate the existence of an independent primordial being. According to Heidegger, an onto-theological way of thinking had defined the whole of Western metaphysics.[26] It had adopted a way of thinking about Being that was common to theology by presupposing a supreme being providing all other beings with a basis for their existence. Western thought thereby provided Being with a foundation. Being is not just there, but has a cause or a reason formed by the highest being. The highest being has a ground or a reason as well, but its reason is formed by itself. The highest being is *causa sui*, the cause of itself and therefore exists in and out of itself, as expressed by the term *aseity*. As such, the supreme being is turned into a principle from which philosophical thought can derive inferences. Heidegger argued that an onto-theological way of thinking dominated metaphysics since Plato. He had designated the *eidos*, or idea, as the essence of being.[27] The beings that humans perceive in the world of becoming are merely a depiction of ideas, and it is the ideas as principles of being that bring about a proper understanding of the world of becoming.

According to Heidegger, the consequences of the onto-theological way of thinking are disastrous. An onto-theological way of reasoning can only explain and understand beings as caused-beings, which ultimately depend on a higher being that causes itself and constitutes the first cause or the ground of the being. Once thinking finds itself on this track, it can very easily take possession of the world as a whole. Assuming a highest being as the ground of Being, reason can capture the world and understand it as a unity and a structured coherence in which beings have to take their place and are available as objects. Such a controlling view of Being, however, has always stood in the way of its proper understanding.

In opposition to a controlling and calculating way of thinking, Heidegger was searching for the so-called essential thinking, which observes the truth of Being in a contemplative way.[28] The truth of Being cannot be grasped

26 On onto-theology, see Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?'," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*; Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Harper & Row, 1969), originally 1957.

27 Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 164.

28 Martin Heidegger, "Postscript to 'What is Metaphysics?'," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 236.

metaphysically or conceptually, but refers to the way Being shows itself and is brought to light through speech. This, however, poses an enormous task. A new understanding of Being is actually never given but must be won by overcoming metaphysical thinking. It must think through metaphysics in order to think against it and find another way of thinking. In doing so, Heidegger upended the entire philosophical landscape.

This already begins by asking what metaphysics actually is.[29] In an onto-theological manner, metaphysics searches for the essence of being under the assumption of a highest being mistakenly understood as "something." The sciences, on the other hand, merely study beings from different points of view and do not suppose the existence of anything but these beings. Metaphysics, in this situation, should not, on the one hand, assume an onto-theological Being itself as if it were something, but neither should it, on the other hand, forget the question of Being, as the sciences do, supposing that apart from beings there is nothing. Heidegger argues that metaphysics should focus precisely on this "nothing," apart from Being, which is not there and consequently resides outside of Being. Conceptually, we will never get a grip on nothing or nothingness because a conceptual description would turn it into something, which it is precisely not. In our moods (*Stimmung*)—in the way we are "mooded" (tuned, *gestimmt*)—we do catch nothingness, however, especially in fear. In pure fear, when the solid ground slips away from under our feet and the world threatens to vanish, we are suspended in a vacuum and experience nothingness. When fear is over, we say we were afraid of nothing. But meanwhile, this nothingness acts and works out something, even though it is nothing, because it "nullifies." It takes down and nullifies the world as a matter of course, as well as the coherence we ascribe to its beings according to our everyday sense. It is through the nullification of the self-evident that beings themselves really strike us, and we become aware that there is indeed something and not nothing, which allows them to light up new and different. Nothingness thereby makes it possible for beings to become revealed and for Being to show itself in beings. Nothingness thus turns Being into an event—not into something, but into an event in which beings are and appear to us. Metaphysics should focus on this.

Consequently, the appearance of beings must be separated from their being caused.[30] Whoever understands beings as caused in fact always

29 Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*.

30 See Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Ground," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*; Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Indiana University Press, 1991), originally 1957.

ends up in an onto-theological pattern of thinking that presupposes a first being as the primary cause of all that exists. Admittedly, it is not easy to escape this pattern of thought. Indeed, the so-called principle of sufficient reason, which says that nothing happens without a cause, is not nonsensical. It becomes nonsensical, though, when it is seen as the only way to treat beings. In opposition to an explanatory way of thinking that clings to causes, Heidegger introduces another mode of reflection, which, as it were, escapes the principle of sufficient reason's omnipotence. He finds this mode of contemplation in the lines of poetry by Angelus Silesius: "The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms. It pays no attention to itself, asks not whether it is seen."[31] In this phrasing, Silesius says that the rose is there without a cause or reason. After all, it knows no why and is not familiar with such categories. Yet Silesius does provide the ground for blossoming. The rose blooms because it blooms. So the reason for its blooming is in the flowering itself. Likewise, the reason for being is in the beings themselves. Being, therefore, can be said to be in beings as their ground, staying ungrounded itself. Heidegger says that Being has no ground, but *is* ground. "Being 'is' in essence: ground/reason."[32] Being thus allows the rose to bloom, and Being exposes itself in that blooming, but it does not allow itself to be further questioned about the causes that precede it. Thinking should not want to control Being—showing itself in beings as the ungrounded ground of being—with causality but become receptive to it.

The truth of Being, of which Heidegger wanted to become aware, should also be understood in a new and unusual way.[33] Truth is generally understood as correspondence. A statement is true if it corresponds to reality. Gold is only real if it corresponds to the definition of gold. Heidegger, however, describes truth not as correspondence but as unconcealment, namely the unconcealment of beings that emerge from their hiddenness and show, manifest, or reveal themselves. Heidegger argues that the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, originally referred to such an unhiddenness (*a-letheia*), to which *Dasein* is opened up. *Dasein*, however, can only approach the truth of Being if it is free for what shows itself and for the way in which it shows itself and is not trapped, for example, in average thinking or fixed prior definitions. If *Dasein* focuses on what shows itself, everything else naturally remains hidden. What Heidegger refers to as a "challenging-forth" or an "unconcealment" (*entbergen*) of beings (that is, their revelation or emergence

31 Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 35.

32 Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 51.

33 See Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*.

from hiddenness) is thus inescapably intertwined with the concealment of beings as a whole, which remains hidden, because beings only partially emerge in unconcealment. Yet the concealment of beings, which can only be partially unconcealed, precisely constitutes the possibility of an ever-new appearance of what is. Just like nothingness can cause beings to appear anew through nullification, concealment implies the potential of ever-new truth, which is understood as the unconcealment of beings.

To uncover the truth of Being, language is important. Indeed, language is the intermediary through which Being shows itself to humans. The new understanding of Being that Heidegger was after therefore requires a new language. Thinkers and poets in particular should develop this language in such a way that Being is not squeezed into a schema or shielded by a grid of words but can be apprehended truthfully. Heidegger therefore reached back to poets, especially Hölderlin, and his own language too became increasingly poetic, up to the point of being utterly obscure. As Being should come to light in language, language should distance itself from metaphysical conceptuality and use new expressions for the purpose of unconcealment. Heidegger claimed that language is the house of Being. Humans dwell in its enclosure. Thinkers and poets should be its guardians.[34]

The new understanding of Being that Heidegger developed after onto-theology saw Being as an event. Being is not an actuality, nor Being itself that fully realises itself and exists in itself, but potentiality.[35] Being allows beings to be and gives them the possibility of being, but without being the sort of Being that grounds itself. Being is ungrounded Being, which occurs as an event (*Ereignis*) people belong to. Being is contingent, not necessarily as it is. It manifests itself, but it can always show itself quite differently. The contingency of Being is exemplarily expressed by the German phrase "*es gibt*," which literally says "it gives" and means "there is." There just is, without a reason, without an "it" as giving agency, it actually being no agency at all. This line of thought creates a great contrast to the metaphysical way of thinking, which has always been in search of a foundation and a ground of Being causing Being to be what it is.

34 Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, 239, 274–276.

35 Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy* (Duquesne University Press, 2014) shows how postmodern philosophers after Heidegger develop an ontology that is no longer concerned with the unity of being but with plurality. In their efforts, the event plays a central role, which, as an event without a cause, breaks the principle of sufficient reason and opens the closed nature of causality. The event brings in contingency, and contingency implies pure potentiality, which constitutes the absolute of the new ontology.

5.3. Heidegger and Theology

With his search for a new understanding of Being, Heidegger had a major influence on theology.[36] His thinking is significant for theology in relation to three points in particular.

First, he subjected modern, scientific thought to a strong critique because it aimed at control and use. In doing so, he played into the hands of theology, which often felt pressured by modern, scientific thinking. Second, Heidegger pushed theology to get rid of metaphysical thought patterns. This implied, of course, a serious critique of the Christian theological tradition, which had too often used God as a metaphysical first principle from which all of reality was derived, leading to both a distorted view of reality and a contested concept of God. Third, Heidegger's approach to Being, the world, and human beings appeared downright religious, even though this religiosity shifted over the years. During his time in Marburg, where he put up with Bultmann, he was particularly interested in Paul and Luther, who testified to a particular Christian sense of life, which was interesting to him. In subsequent times, however, he focused more on Nietzsche, the death of God, and the mythology expressed in Hölderlin's poetry.

Although Heidegger had a great influence on theology, his own attitude was interested but always ambiguous. He was involved in an indirect way in which criticism often prevailed.[37] In an important article, Heidegger argued that philosophy as an ontological discipline had nothing to do with theology as an ontic science.[38] According to him, theology is concerned with a particular, i.e., religious understanding of reality, trying to make this understanding explicit.[39] Philosophy, however, asks more fundamental questions than theology does. It does not ask about a particular aspect of reality or its appearance from different points of view; it asks about reality's being.[40] Heidegger thus claimed that Being functions as a broader or greater

36 A good overview of Heidegger's relationship to theology is provided by J. Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology*. In his introduction to Peter Jonkers and Ruud Welten, eds., *God in Frankrijk: Zes hedendaagse Franse filosofen over God* (Damon, 2003) Peter Jonkers identifies postmodern French philosophy and its alleged turn to theology as an exposition with "both the mysterious attraction and repulsion produced by Heidegger's thought," 18.

37 See Martin Heidegger, "A Retrospective Look at the Pathway," in Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

38 Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," In Heidegger, *Pathmarks*.

39 This view of Heidegger is closer to Schleiermacher than to Barth.

40 Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen II* (Mohr Siebeck, 1965) argues that the question of God is ultimately a question of one's own being, which is guided by an implicit knowing of God.

category of understanding that exceeds beyond God, who is linked to a particular understanding of reality but not to its understanding as such.

Heidegger's distance from theology is quite understandable from the perspective of his own philosophy. He was searching for an authentic relationship of human beings to reality, in which humans are receptive to the kind of Being in which the gods can appear and humans can walk with God, to put it biblically. This authentic and original relationship of humans to reality, however, has been lost by an objectifying, controlling way of thinking that frames the beings in the world by adapting them to a whole. In such a whole, humans give God an important place as the highest being, as the ground of Being, and as *causa sui* (cause of itself). This typically modern and onto-theological way of thinking has made the original relationship to God impossible. Human beings cannot pray or sacrifice for a highest being which is *causa sui*. They cannot bow before it, make music, or dance in its presence.[41]

According to Heidegger, a renewed thinking about Being might allow for a renewed engagement with God and the gods, but such thinking and engagement do not yet exist. The question of God—and this is not the question of whether God exists, but the question of whether God is approaching or withdrawing—must therefore be suspended. It can only be answered when humans first think about the dimensions within which the question of God will make any sense at all. For this, humans must first properly place themselves in Being; next, they must understand the sacred as the space in which the gods can appear; and then they must have received clarity about the question of what can or cannot be said about the being of the deity.[42] Only then will it be possible again to say something about God.

Heidegger sought the impetus for a new understanding of Being from the pre-Socratic philosophers and from Hölderlin. With a certain amount of despair about the present time and a hint of hope for a new understanding of Being, the late Heidegger spoke of a last God, with a vague reference to Hölderlin. In doing so, he expressed his feeling that the present time is stamped by the absence of the gods; therefore, we can only wait for the return or arrival of the last God. This last God seems to be the metaphor for a new opening up of Being and a new thinking, which cannot be enforced nor allow themselves to be forced but must present themselves of their

41 Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 72.

42 Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 267.

own accord. Until then, we have nothing left but to wait and to stand the present god forsakenness.[43]

Heidegger's distance from theology is understandable on the basis of his critique of onto-theology and his search for a new understanding of Being. He expected very little from theology for the arrival of a new understanding of Being and God. On their part, theologians did engage deeply with Heidegger. Bultmann argued that theology should focus on humans' being in the world in order to ask about God from there. He considered Heidegger's philosophy of great importance for the elucidation of human existence, from which to ask for God. Hermeneutic theologians after Bultmann mainly focused on the biblical language event, which allows for the proper understanding of Being's occurrence.[44] The Roman-Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion tried to think of God without Being.[45] These different theological designs show the impact of Heidegger's philosophy on theology. His philosophy invites or compels us to stop thinking of God as a supernatural entity or a supreme being that is separate from human beings and sustains a predetermined order they have to conform to. Moreover, it opens up ways to arrive at a new understanding of God. God is related to Being, but, according to Heidegger, can only be spoken about when Being is newly understood first.

The expression of a sense of life

In his philosophy, Heidegger expressed a certain sense of life. Its value has often been questioned because of his engagement with national socialism in the 1930s. This engagement was not the right way to achieve an authentic existence, but an aberration that he never accounted for. The sense of life expressed by his philosophy can be described as follows: We have no solid ground under our feet; we float on nothing. Church and theology have presented us with a rock-solid foundation due to their concept of God. Modern thought has given us an anchor point in mind and reason with which we ground ourselves. In these various ways, Western thought has always tried to find or construct solid ground but thereby overlooked what

43 Compare Rudolf Augstein's famous interview with Heidegger that appeared in May 1976 in *Der Spiegel*, a few days after Heidegger's death: "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten." The last God and the God who can save us refer to the bringer of an "other beginning," which Heidegger himself sought in his other beginning of thinking.

44 For that, see chapter 6.

45 For similar thinkers, see chapter 7. For the theological reception of Heidegger, see the review by Jean-Yves Lacoste, "Heidegger among the Theologians: Preface to the 'Quadrige' Edition of Heidegger et la question de Dieu," *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 2, no. 2 (2020).

unsteady ground we do stand on, namely that of Being, which is baseless and unfounded and manifests itself in and through us.

Heidegger's sense of life can be compared to that of his contemporaries, Paul Tillich and Alfred North Whitehead, the father of process philosophy. Tillich, too, was fascinated by Being's depth and darkness, for which he had developed a sensitive antenna through the study of Schelling and his experiences in World War I. Unlike Heidegger, however, he referred to God as the ground of Being, who provides Being with the power to overcome non-being. In Whitehead's philosophy, Being became becoming. There is no determination and no ground, but a vast and infinite process in which partial processes interact. What is, becomes, and actualises itself in a continuous process of becoming. The entities that emerge undergo the influence of the past, build themselves up from it, and transmit new impulses. In the process of their becoming, God awakens the desire to bring forth novelty and complexity.

Heidegger, Tillich, and Whitehead belong together in this respect: they face the predicament of Being. According to them, Being is not guided by an all-overseeing agency. There is no God as power and will behind reality. There is no Spirit coming to itself. Their mutual agreement on this does not erase their differences, though. Whitehead acknowledges a certain adventurousness of Being, which moves in an open process seeking novelty and complexity, risky as it may be. In this perspective, Being is not the overcoming of non-being, as Tillich took it, for such an overcoming is neither guaranteed by some ground of Being, nor can it be at issue in the open process of becoming that Whitehead advocated. For Tillich, on the other hand, the idea of God as the final ground of being was fundamental. God is not a player in an adventurous process of Being in becoming, but the power of Being that overcomes non-being, that can carry us through doubt and despair.

Compared to Tillich and Whitehead, Heidegger is deeper, more obscure, more mystical, and more alienating. Humans have fallen into the sin of the mundane and must repent in order to arrive at existential authenticity and hear Being speak into their being. The kind of Being that speaks to them is not an adventure of novelty or increasing complexity. Heidegger sees human being, simply put, not as an adventurer in a process but as a guardian of Being. Being is not equipped with a ground that bestows the ability to overcome non-being, as with Tillich. It is based on nothing and relies on nothing in order to come to light. In Heidegger, Being is something like God, and at the same time, surely is no God that calls for something or incites to something, as with Whitehead and Tillich.

Thomas Aquinas predicated God as Being itself which exists on its own. Heidegger saw a blending of ontology and theology in this. He made the

existence of beings depend not on God but on Being. This raises the question of whether God has thereby vanished away or whether, on the contrary, Being has become God. Heidegger's philosophy gives no final answer to that.

Heidegger after Kuitert and Hegel

Heidegger's philosophy, like Hegel's, can be helpful for a theology after Kuitert in rising above the opposition between God and human beings. Humans belong to Being, just as they, according to Hegel, participate as minds in Spirit. By reading Heidegger and Hegel after Kuitert, possibilities are offered for a new understanding of God after God. Heidegger's question of Being can be understood as if it were a question about God. This God is not a supreme being or first cause anymore but should be understood as the mystery of reality, its unfounded ground or unground, which neither is nor exists but happens because beings are. Receptivity to God requires a new approach to Being, which must be approached not with an eye to calculation and mastery but in a manner of contemplation. Such a receptivity to Being or God is helpful to exist in an authentic way.

Heidegger's attempt to arrive at a new understanding of Being opens up new ways of thinking about God after God, but also complicates that thinking. On the one hand, Heidegger offers new possibilities to conceive of God as Being, as was done before by Thomas Aquinas and taken up by Tillich. On the other hand, Heidegger also put the equation between God and Being under sharp criticism. According to him, since a new understanding of Being still has to come about, it is better to keep silent about God for the time being and await Being's new appearance. Likewise, Heidegger not only problematises thinking about God as Being, but also rejects Hegel's thinking about God as Spirit. That thinking implies a view of the whole, which human beings never have. The possibility to think of God as Spirit and Being thus offers new and helpful perspectives but cannot lead to unambiguous conclusions. The possibility to think of God "this way" is proven to be limited by the possibility of thinking God "that way," which obviously does not alter the possibility to think of God either way.

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Part Three

Theology after Kuitert

In this third part, three contemporary forms of theology are discussed in which God is no longer thought of as a separate being apart from humans or the world. These three forms are in line with the preceding discussion of "Hegel and Heidegger after Kuitert" and contribute to a theology of God after God. These three forms or styles of theology were briefly mentioned in the second chapter and can be characterised as follows: An *interpretive theology* (see the following chapter) assumes that the meaning of being, the world, and humans is not fixed but calls for an ongoing interpretation. In many variations, this theology focuses on human beings who interpret in order to understand themselves and the world and thereby arrive at an interpretation of God. A *deconstructive theology* (chapter 7) also assumes that interpretation is fundamental. However, it places great emphasis on criticism of theology because it wants to get rid of the mistaken patterns of thought and ideological biases that are almost naturally attached to the concept of God. A more *constructive theology* (chapter 8) absorbs and processes this criticism of theology but still wants to stick with God after God.

Theologians who are collected under the same heading in the following overview are admittedly different from one another and could be supplemented by other names. Nevertheless, the theologians discussed below have been chosen deliberately. Despite their differences, they show the specific commitment and approach of a particular direction in theology and make clear how that direction contributes to a theology of God after God. Interpretation, deconstruction, and construction each have their value for a theology of God after God.[1]

1 Therefore, this part is not a textbook overview, as, for example, can be found in Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theolo*gy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), which contains a wide range of theologians and themes discussed in distinct contributions that come under the name of radical theology. This book is not about an encyclopaedic or lexiconic overview but rather about the contribution that is offered for a theology of God after God from three distinctive perspectives.

6. Religion and the Interpretation of Life

Abstract: Interpretive theologians argue that we live in a world of meaning but differ in its elaboration. The theologians of the subject argue that the subject seeks to understand itself and produces a representation of God in the process of understanding. Theologians of the transcendent also start with the subject, but they argue that the subject, in its interpretation of the world, encounters something other than itself, which is more fundamental than the subject itself. Although the subject produces religion, it is invited to do so by something other than itself. Hermeneutic theologians emphasise the understanding of God. These positions are illustrated by the work of Ulrich Barth, Dietrich Korsch, Jörg Lauster, and Hartmut von Sass.

Keywords: subject, transcendence, meaning, hermeneutics, self-understanding, God

6.1. A World of Interpretation and Meaning

The theologians discussed in the first chapter of this part focus on interpretation and signification. They assume that we give meaning to the phenomena of the world thereby. Because we always conceive of something "as something," the phenomena are always charged with meaning. So we add something to things when we understand them, namely a meaning, making them meaningful to us and bringing them into coherence. It is, simply put, the work of the imagination to do so. Such an imagination is explicitly not a transformation or distortion of reality but its formation, without which we would not have a world at all. Our world exists through interpretation and meaning.

Through interpretation and providing meaning, people produce culture and cultural goods like ideas, moral rules, forms of political organisation, and social institutions. These originate in the human mind but, once established, also act upon the mind as independent dimensions outside the mind that shape and determine it. As a result, people come to live in a world of their

Benjamins, R., *Formerly God: Rethinking God after God*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2026.
DOI 10.5117/9789048571734_CH06

own making, which is organised by symbol systems. Language, myth, art, science, and religion, for example, constitute such symbol systems, each of which structures a different domain of reality and provides access to a specific area of culture. Interpretation is necessary for the formation of a cultural world and to enter such a world. Meaning thus becomes the central concept for interpretive theologians, replacing Hegel's Spirit or Heidegger's Being.

In a world of signification, interpretation, and meaning, the subject as signifier plays a major role. Therefore, the interpretive theologians attach great importance to the subject but do not make it absolute, as in modern philosophy with, for example, Descartes and Kant. The subject is not an absolute starting point of thought because it depends on symbol systems in order to interpret the world. Only through these symbol systems does the subject gain access to the world and itself, as a consequence of which the subject is neither autonomous nor an absolute starting point for its own knowledge. Instead, it is completely interwoven with culture and the symbol systems it is using.

For the interpretive theologians discussed here, religion is important because it constitutes an essential symbol system that enables the individual to interpret itself adequately. As will be explained in this chapter, religion traditionally functioned as an overarching symbol system that provides coherence among the subsystems. Moreover, it forms the system in which interpretation itself can be interpreted and founded. The individual gains insight into itself and becomes empowered to freely express and understand itself through religion. Doing so, the individual can invoke its special status as an image of God in order to evade social pressure or cultural coercion on its freedom of thought and expression.

The interpretive theologians discussed in this chapter mostly start from a shared background. They share the conviction or program that religion is important for the interpretation of life.[1] However, they are elaborating this view in different ways and can therefore be distinguished as interpretive theologians focusing on the subject, interpretive theologians focusing on the transcendent, and hermeneutic theologians focusing on God. Although these designations are not perfect, they indicate essential differences, which can be formulated as follows: The interpretive theologians of the

1 An overview of interpretive theology is provided by Gerson Raabe, "Religion als 'Deutungs-Kultur': Kasualien als Entdeckungszusammenhang," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008): 23–34, and Jiří Šamšula, "Religion as Interpretation of Life: Contemporary German Liberal Theology of Ulrich Barth and Dietrich Korsch," *Communio Viatorum* 60, no. 2 (2018): 171–198.

subject argue that the subject seeks to understand itself and produces a representation of God in the process of understanding. As theoreticians of subjectivity, these theologians begin with a philosophical reflection of the subject and want to expose for what reason the subject produces religion as an important cultural product. Theologians of the transcendent also start with the subject, but they argue that the subject, in its interpretation of the world, encounters something other than itself, which is more fundamental than the subject itself. Although the subject produces religion, it is invited to do so by something other than itself. In religion, the subject puts into words what transcends the subject. Finally, the hermeneutic theologians emphasise the understanding of God. They argue that the subject can only properly understand itself if it has a proper understanding of God. So they reverse the direction. Understanding oneself does not bring the subject to a conception of God, but a proper understanding of God leads the subject to a good understanding of itself.

The different positions taken by interpretive theologians are successively illustrated by discussing the work of Ulrich Barth, Dietrich Korsch, Jörg Lauster, and Hartmut von Sass. There is a certain logic to this order. Whereas Ulrich Barth emphasises the subject that produces the representation of God, Hartmut von Sass emphasises the understanding of God, through which the subject can come to an understanding of itself. The theme thus shifts in the course of this chapter from the subject to God.[2]

The German interpretive theologians discussed in this chapter stand largely in the tradition of modern, liberal theology, which runs roughly from Schleiermacher to Tillich and is defined by theologians such as Ritschl, Harnack, Herrmann, and Troeltsch, with in the background a strong influence of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling. The German theologians are discussed in this chapter precisely because of their background in or knowledge of the liberal theological tradition.[3] Their background brings with it a specific perspective, which does not necessarily occur in the same way with other hermeneutically oriented thinkers. Liberal theologians have wanted to understand the changes and developments of modern society and tried to adapt to it, albeit in a critical way. The German interpretive theologians of this chapter continue to move

2 Although the designation is imprecise, interpretive theologians especially emphasise the subject's interpretation, whereas hermeneutic theologians want to reach an understanding of something. Theology of interpretation is used as an overall term for both approaches.

3 Consequently, the important work of Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, and Gianni Vattimo in the fields of hermeneutics and religion is left out.

within modern frames of thought provided by the liberal tradition and see postmodernity generally as a radicalisation of modernity rather than as a break with it. Therefore, interpretive theologians offer a perspective that contrasts with the viewpoint of the deconstructive thinkers from the next chapter and makes an important contribution to the discussion of God after God because of this contrast.[4]

The liberal signature

The specific nature of the liberal theological tradition can be characterised as follows. In this tradition, it is strongly emphasised that our consciousness mediates our knowledge from outside. We get into contact with the outside world only insofar as we have an awareness of it. Likewise, in matters of faith, the emphasis for liberal theologians has traditionally fallen on the faithful's awareness, not on any realities on the outside. In this sense, Schleiermacher spoke about the feeling of dependence as the core of religious consciousness and called God the "whence" thereof. He was emphasising the feeling of dependence as a phenomenon of consciousness without wanting to define or focus on a specific reality outside of consciousness. The German interpretive theologians adopt the emphasis on consciousness, but with the difference that our consciousness is not in our individual heads, so to speak, but is stored in language and in symbolic forms.[5]

Liberal theologians are and have been sympathetic to the emancipation of citizens and individuals in modern society as it took place after the French Revolution. They could also agree with the fact that important areas of life, such as law, politics, economy, and the arts, were moving away from ecclesiastical patronage. Religion used to be central in that it prohibited usury, granted authority to the monarch and the law, and provided art with its themes, and suchlike. In modernity, however, subfields like economics, politics, law, and art separated themselves from religion and developed within their own domains according to their own logic. Liberal theologians agreed with this emancipation, or secularisation, because it allowed people and their cultures to freely develop.[6] However, they also saw the downside.

4 The "modernity" of German interpretive theologians is found in their attention to the subject, to Letztbegründung, and an overarching coherence of meaning, which is criticised by postmodernity.

5 The philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, which influenced the work of Susanne Langer and Clifford Geertz among others, is of great importance in the background.

6 The difference from an orthodox approach in the Dutch context becomes clear through a quote of Abraham Kuyper, who advocated for religious dominance in all areas of life: "There is not an inch of the yard of our human life, of which the Christ, who is sovereign of all, does not

The differentiation of the various domains brought the so-called unity of life to an end. In business, there is profit maximisation; in the legal sphere, justice applies; in art, beauty; in science, truth; in religion, communion with God; but the coherence is lost.[7]

The disappearance of religion as an overarching system of meaning left society with a philosophical and ethical void that worried theologians and religious scholars. According to liberal theologians, that void could still be filled by religion, but in such a way that free individuals come to understand their condition, dignity, and responsibility with the help of religion and, thus equipped, contribute to the various spheres of society independently. In this way, the so-called neo-Protestantism of liberal theologians still assigned an important task to religion because of its importance for the individual. Freed from Roman Catholic church authority by Protestantism, the religious sphere offered the individual an opportunity to reflect on itself, to orient itself in the world, and to work on the world.[8]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the conciliation of religion and modernity that neo-Protestantism advocated for was sharply rejected by the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and his kindred spirits. Neo-Protestantism was considered to be too human-centred and in lack of focus on God. The dialectical theology of Barth and others concentrated again on the Word of God, revelation, and the kerygma but thereby isolated itself inevitably from culture and cultural developments. Opposed to dialectical theology, which they regard as neo-orthodox, German interpretive theologians again try to clarify the cultural importance of religion. For that purpose, they align themselves with the liberal tradition, which they do not continue uninterrupted because of the changes that occurred concerning the place and function of religion in late modernity. Religion, as a source of meaning, has to compete with interpretations of self and world in different areas of

cry out, 'Mine!'" Whereas Kuyper wanted to implement a dominance of Christ in all spheres of life within his own circle, the so-called ethical theologians, his contemporaries, were looking for a unity of life, despite its fragmentation, intended for the entire society, based on their understanding of Christ. Cf. Benjamins, *Een en Ander*, 161ff., specifically 237–238.

7 Hegel's philosophy can be seen as a grand attempt to bring all these fields into coherence under the concept of Spirit. The disintegration of these domains indicates in a certain sense that the facts have turned against Hegel's philosophy. By modern thinkers such as Max Weber, the differentiation and disappearance of an overarching system of meaning was understood as a social problem; postmodern thinkers, on the other hand, conceive of an encompassing unity as an impossibility and think of a desire for it as problematic.

8 Neo-Protestantism mostly emphasised a protestant sense of freedom given to the individual by or before God, opposed to an enslavement under the authority of the pope or the Bible, the so-called "pope of paper."

all kind and no longer has a strong, self-evident, or institutionalised place anymore. Yet interpretive theologians still think that religion is important for the interpretation of life and hold that individuals should never be subjected to church, scripture, or confession, even though these bodies can contribute to an interpretation of self and world.

6.2. The Subject Produces Religion

Ulrich Barth (b. 1945) gave a new impetus to liberal theology from the theory of subjectivity. In his book *Religion in der Moderne*, he gathered fundamental reflections on religion, in which the theory of the subject and subjectivity play an important role.[9] This theory of the subject draws on the philosophy of Fichte and idealism, which played an important role in German philosophy. The theory of subjectivity belongs to the typical modern turn toward the subject, which holds that all knowledge starts with the human being that views the world. The subject and subject theory, however, became an object of postmodern criticism. According to postmodern critique, the theory of subjectivity places the subject in opposition to the objects of the world and ignores that the self is as much a part of the world as the objects it perceives. A separation of subject and object absolutises the subject and elevates it above the rest of the world. In response to this critique, the theorists of subjectivity argue that subject and subjectivity continue to be fundamental because we only gain knowledge of the world through them. The subject, as the bearer of consciousness, must be central, for all we can say about the world and ourselves starts there.[10]

According to the theory of subjectivity, the subject unites all our knowing, experiencing, wanting, and acting in all contexts.[11] We experience the

9 Ulrich Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003. Regarding the theory of subjectivity, the work of Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank is of great importance. Henrich argued that self-consciousness cannot be thought of self-reflexively, as does Kant, but presupposes a pre-reflexive familiarity with oneself, as recognised by Fichte. Cf. Dieter Henrich, "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," in *Subjektivität und Metaphysik: Festschrift fur Wolfgang Cramer*, ed. Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner (Vittorio Klostermann, 1966). Manfred Frank sharply opposes postmodern subject criticism, for example in *Die Unhintergehbarkeit von Individualität* (Frankurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986).

10 Ulrich Barth interprets Heidegger mainly as a correction to Descartes' concept of the subject and not as a fundamental criticism of the subject. Cf. "Cartesianische oder hermeneutische Subjektivität: Heideggers Beitrag zu einer Theorie der Selbstdeutung," in Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*.

11 Cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth in *Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen* (Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 240.

world as a unity because the world is assembled into a unity by the subject's consciousness. That is what makes the subject special. We do not know whether the world outside our consciousness forms a unity indeed, for we only know it through our consciousness, in which it is united. However, a reflection on self-consciousness clarifies that the subject is not just special but also complicated. Humans have knowledge of themselves. That is, they can perceive themselves as beings who walk around in the world, experiencing and undertaking things. This simple observation, however, implies that the "I" is both knower and known, observer and the one observed, which makes things complicated. In observing myself, I am in front of the camera, so to speak, and come into the picture as someone who walks around in the world, but at the same time, I am the one behind the camera perceiving myself. So the subject falls apart. There is an "empirical self" that appears to consciousness, but also a "transcendental I" holding the consciousness to which I appear.

The transcendental self is actually the part of the subject in which subjectivity theorists are most interested, since that is the place where my knowing, experiencing, wanting, and acting are structured. It is letting me see myself and bringing unity to all I know, want, and do. Moreover, the structure it offers me in structuring the world is not just my structure, by means of which I experience the world in a private way, but a general human structure, which is universally available to all human beings. Subjectivity, in the theory of subjectivity, therefore, is not simply referring to the individual impressions of each individual human being but to the most general way all people get their impressions instead. Subjectivity constitutes the structure by means of which all human beings gain access to themselves and the world. Because we are subjects, we get impressions of ourselves and the world around us and process them into unity. Our subjectivity determines that we do so and structures how we do so.

Subject criticism counters that, in this way, the subject becomes something metaphysical that must actually pre-exist the world since it constitutes the structure through which the world appears to humans. According to the critics, there is no such primordial self or subject. It only exists when humans formulate such a self or subject themselves. The subjectivity theorists thereupon do admit that the subject is not a metaphysical, primordial entity, but they still hold to the idea of a subject or a self because we are immediately familiar with ourselves. When I see someone walking outside, I can recognise that person by his or her posture, clothes, or book bag. I saw the same figure five minutes ago in the store and I know it is the same person by tracing his or her appearance. But when it comes to myself, I don't need

such a secondary, indirect derivation from external features since I know myself immediately and directly. I know it is me without having to recognise myself by my clothes, posture, or bag. So, simply put, I am familiar with a me in a relationship that cannot be reasoned away as merely a construct of language or an illusion of my brain and deserves to be at the centre of philosophical attention despite the philosophical critique of the subject.

Interpretation in the perspective of the absolute

The theory of subjectivity forms an important background for Barth's view on religion, as it helps to understand that the subject develops a religious consciousness and engages in religion.[12] According to Barth, religion is a product of the human subject and a cultural good, comparable to other cultural goods that humans produce, in which they express themselves and by means of which they arrive at an understanding of themselves, roughly like Hegel believed that in religion the human spirit comes to the understanding of itself as Spirit. Because of his emphasis on religious consciousness rooted in subjectivity and the production of religion as a cultural product by the subject, the concept of revelation does not play a major role for Barth. In his view, God is primarily a concept of interpretation, without itself being an entity or an independent reality at the beginning of all that exists. Barth develops a consciousness-theoretical description of religion that is based on the general structure of subjectivity without being primarily interested in a particular human subject or the existence of God.[13]

According to Barth, religion is about our relationship to the unconditional or absolute. These two words refer to what is first, last, or final that carries and grounds everything. The absolute is the final ground of all there is. Everything depends on it, but it is not dependent on anything itself. Therefore, it exists without conditions and is unconditional. Because the absolute carries everything, it places everything in unity and coherence. Everything is being held together because it rests on the absolute as its final ground. It seems that Barth is thereby engaging in old-fashioned metaphysics and foundationalism (*Letztbegründung*) in a way that was sharply rejected by Heidegger. Barth, however, holds that the absolute corresponds to a legitimate need of thinking itself, which simply asks for grounds and would deny itself if it did not also ask for a final ground. Philosophy therefore rightly asks for such a final ground. According to Barth, however, such a

12 Ulrich Barth, "Was ist Religion?," in Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 5.

13 Ulrich Barth, "Theoriedimensionen des Religionsbegriffs," in Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 77–79.

final ground always remains a conceptual construct, an idea of reason, and thus an abstraction: an interpretation, albeit a legitimate one. The final ground constructed by philosophy resembles but is not simply the same as the representation of God in religion. In fact, the religious representation of God does not come from abstract reasoning but emerges from the human life-world, is affectively charged, and is based on experience. Yet the difference between religion and philosophy is not absolute. Religion is not simply based on experience but on "experience with experience" and thus on a lived, thoughtful experience in which experiences are reflexively incorporated. In that composed experience, religion hands down an awareness of the divine and numinous that carries all of reality. Precisely in this respect, it is no different from the unconditional or absolute in philosophy.[14]

According to Barth, in religion, the idea of the unconditional is applied to experiences. In his view, religion is "the interpretation of experience in the horizon [i.e., from the perspective] of the idea of the unconditional."[15] Obviously and firstly, a determination of the absolute is difficult because it eludes conceptual rendition. The only way to denote it is by means of negative terms as something that differs from all phenomena in the world that are conditional, limited, bounded, and dependent. The absolute can therefore be identified as their opposite and is thus referred to as *infinite*, as a *whole* and a totality, as *eternal* and exempt from time, and as *essential*. Secondly, the connection between the idea of the absolute and our experience needs explanation. If we interpret our experiences "in the horizon of the idea of the unconditional," we use the idea of the absolute to interpret our experience. The idea of the absolute sheds light on our experience in that it brightens up certain aspects of it. In the light of the absolute, the religious consciousness perceives the infinite in the finite and sees the world of endless differences and distinctions as a unity and a whole. It gets an awareness of the eternal in the temporal. It realises that we can see and accept all contingent and accidental events as arrangements of a higher necessity.[16] In this way, religion is an interpretation of the world in the light of the unconditional that is as much a production as an interpretation. In Barth's own wording, the subject produces religion by seeing and interpreting reality in a certain way that results from relating the idea of the unconditional to the experience. Such a production is not an individual, private, or subjectivist colouring of the world, reading something into its

14 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 5–10.
15 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 10.
16 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 10–15.

experience. It is an entirely reasonable consideration of reality, enabled by human subject-ness. Every experience is constituted by interpretation, and religious experience is constituted, or produced, by the subject that links the idea of the unconditional to experience.

So, the subject develops a religious view of the world by relating the idea of the absolute to its experience. However, that is only the first step in Barth's explanation and defence of religious consciousness. The religious interpretation of the world subsequently leads the subject to a religious interpretation of *itself*. The subject links the unconditional to experience and thereby learns to understand itself as a synthesis of the phenomenal world and the unconditional. That is, the subjects comes to understand that it belongs both to the world of phenomena and to the ground on which that world is based. Since the human being experiences itself as a living being that is undertaking things in the world, it belongs to the empirical world of phenomena and experiences. Yet the human being can also view the world and itself, reflect upon them, and conceive their unity. It can only do so because it is itself a manifestation of the unifying ground that provides coherence to all there is.

In creating unity and coherence in its view of the world, the subject does what the final ground does, namely provide unity and coherence. The subject can therefore itself be seen as a manifestation of the final ground. That human subjects themselves are instances of the absolute precisely provides them with the ability to view the world in the light of the absolute. Humans should thus be conceived as a synthesis belonging both to the world of phenomena on the one hand and to the final ground, the absolute, or the unconditional on the other hand.[17] The subject is a unique synthesis of the phenomenal and the unconditional, different from anything else in the world. It constitutes a differentiated unity that can distinguish itself from itself and therefore relate itself to itself and reflect on itself.

With dignity and freedom

Barth's theory of the subject that can look at the world and itself in a religious mode of contemplation emphasises human dignity and human highness.

The last ground that provides unity to the world is giving humans, or the subject, the ability to see the world as one. This human capacity indicates human's high dignity. This dignity allows them a sense of self-esteem that is both independent of other people's judgment and of the roles they play

17 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 18–24, 64–72. This notion of the subject originates from German idealism and can also be found in the works of Kierkegaard.

in society. A religious contemplation of the world and themselves elevates humans above the world and gives them the opportunity to reflect on themselves.

In this way, Barth's philosophy of religious consciousness expresses a typical liberal religiosity in that it emphasises the importance of the subject.[18] In his perspective, religion does not emanate from God but centres on the question of how we relate to ourselves and to the unconditional that is implied in our relation to ourselves. In religion, I can understand myself as an I, which constitutes an inexplicable unity of the phenomenal and the unconditional, even when I am risking to lose myself in the turmoil of the world. There is a final ground that makes me say "I" and gives me a feeling of foundation and support. The heart of religion is about this feeling of being safe and secure, which no agency in the world can offer me, which the subject can find in the depths of itself because it is rooted in God. This rooting constitutes the ultimate condition for the possibility of unity (to coincide with oneself), of freedom (to be able to separate oneself from one's environment), of meaning (to find significance within incoherence), and of confidence in reality (to face it self-assured). According to this religiosity, the great wonder of existence is not located in the world allegedly made by God but in our mind and subjectivity, which allows us to look at the world as a coherent unity and can itself be interpreted as a manifestation of God. God, so to speak, is the bottom of my subjectivity, which makes me a subject capable of perceiving the world and acting in it while knowing to be carried.

The religiosity to which Barth gives voice is strongly influenced by Kant and German idealism and is typically modern because of its turn toward the subject. This turn to the subject, however, does not imply that this religiosity is about the ego, the I, or even an inflated ego, as it is sometimes accused of. Although the modern religious view of the subject is about a secured self, it is not self-made because the self is ultimately given to itself by a final ground that makes it free and responsible. From here, it also becomes clear why this subject-centred religiosity has great difficulty with postmodern subject criticism. It is not language and social codes that produce an I as the accidental product of power relations—to which the postmodernists tend—but the "I" is (conversely) given the freedom to critically relate to the codes because of its rootedness. The individual should not be subordinate to the codes.

18 Such a liberal religiosity has been developed in various writings by Wilhelm Gräb, among others. See, for example, Wilhelm Gräb, *Lebensgeschichten, Lebensentwurfe, Sinndeutungen: Eine praktische Theologie gelebter Religion* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998).

Actually, Barth does partly deal with subject criticism. He admits that the self is a social product, made by the language, circumstances, and codes in which it finds itself. The I, or self, is therefore not autonomous but constituted in a context and is a mediated self because of that.[19] Barth, however, maintains that the subject has a primordial familiarity with itself and must therefore be seen as a unity, which is, in that respect, a representation of the unity of the absolute.[20] Although I do not know or comprehend myself, nor how the self is formed and constructed, I am familiar with it and can reflect on it.[21] Because of this familiarity with itself, the subject retains the ability and freedom to either recognise itself or not in a particular role or description. Thus, the subject is a social product, but there is something inalienable about it, namely its familiarity with itself, that allows it to accept or reject roles, descriptions, and interpretations of itself, and in this sense, the subject is free.

For Barth, the freedom of the subject to interpret itself is the crown jewel of religion, which makes religion essential for humans even in modern society.[22] Modern society is characterised by the aforementioned differentiation of subsystems that develop their own subfield according to their own logic. Economics, politics, law, art, science, and religion organise themselves as efficiently as possible in the pursuit of their own targets. In this force field of differentiation, the individual constantly plays different roles and thereby differentiates itself as well. It continually has to behave differently according to the rules and expectations that prevail in the domain in which it currently finds itself. In religion, however, the subject comes to an interpretation of itself as a unity and a whole, namely as a manifestation of the absolute. Therefore, the basis for an identity formation that is not bound to a sub-domain and its associated role is located exactly in the field of religion. Even the reverse contains truth. There is religion where such an identity formation takes place. Identity formation prevents the subject from being extradited to the various roles it has to play and thereby becoming

19 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 50–62.

20 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 65–69. Hence the subject is "spirit" that cannot be reduced to matter, cf. Ulrich Barth, "Gehirn und Geist: Transzendentalphilosophie und Evolutionstheorie," in Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*.

21 This understanding of the self is different from Descartes, according to whom the cogito is transparent to itself, and Freud, for whom the subject is unrecognisable to itself because of the subconscious.

22 In this respect, Barth is indebted to the work of Falk Wagner, see Ulrich Barth, "Die Umformungskrise des modernen Protestantismus: Beobachtungen zur Christentumstheorie Falk Wagners," in Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*.

depersonalised.[23] However, there is just this irresolvable problem of religion in modern society. Religion claims to be about the whole of humanity and the world, but because of modernity's differentiation, it nevertheless always speaks from the religious subsystem that exists alongside other subsystems. Despite its own claim, therefore, it cannot escape the fragmentation and differentiation of modernity.

According to Barth, the Christian religion contributes to the identity formation of humans by teaching them to see themselves as creatures redeemed from sin that receive salvation. A human being that understands itself as a creature can understand itself as created in the image of God. As an image of God, humans understand that creation serves a purpose and that they themselves should participate in that purpose. This understanding implies that humans are subjected to a standard by which they can judge themselves. The awareness of being an image of God therefore leads to the insight of being a sinner, since a person that judges itself is distinguishing itself from itself, as this person is both the judge and the one being judged, and because of this differentiation, the person comes into conflict with itself as soon as it becomes aware of its deficiency and failure. At that moment, the judge and the judged are opposed to one another, and precisely in this conflict, sin resides, which causes human beings to be divided and in conflict with themselves. A redemption from such sin must consist in the removal of the division between judge and judged in the subject. A human being receives the salvation of such a redemption if it learns to see itself as a differentiated unity, a synthesis, participating both in the world of experience and in the sphere of the unconditional.[24]

The Christian religion helps humans develop their identity and thereby brings them to themselves. Through a kind of (Hegelian) development course or a (pious) path of salvation, humans are passing through stages in which they are shaping and finally understanding themselves as humans in the world of experience and phenomena that participate in the absolute. This shows once again how closely related Barth's view of the subject and his view of religion are. His theory of the subject clarifies why the subject produces religious views. In religion, the subject comes to clarity about itself through interpretation and learns to understand itself as a manifestation of the absolute. Its absolute ground of unity—that in which it is rooted or

23 Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 52–54. Cf. Ulrich Barth, "Säkularisierung und Moderne: Die soziokulturelle Transformation der Religion," in Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*.

24 Ulrich Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 19–22.

of which it is an appearance—is "expressed by the religious consciousness in the form of the representation of God."[25]

6.3. The Subject and the Transcendent

In *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube* from 2005, Dietrich Korsch (b. 1949) places great emphasis on interpretation, like Ulrich Barth but with different accents.[26] Korsch puts the understanding of life at the centre and pushes the theory of subjectivity to the background.

According to him, life is sustained in culture in a struggle against chaos and death. In order to sustain life, culture is using symbol systems that need interpretation. An interpretation of that interpretation takes place in religion, which reflects on the ground of interpretation and thereby exposes the foundation of cultural work. Because of its competence in the interpretation of interpretation, theology remains important to culture.

Korsch thus begins his theology of interpretation with life. For him, life and consciousness are core concepts that are complex even though they are basic. Indeed, life and consciousness have a composite structure because they are both self-involved and directed outward.[27] Wherever life occurs, organisms have to organise themselves into an internal structure versus an external environment. However, to replenish themselves and maintain their internal structure in the face of the external environment, organisms repeatedly need matter from their external environment. Therefore, life forms a unity of inner and outer worlds, while inner and outer remain irreconcilably different.[28] Next, consciousness is likewise involved in itself and directed outward.[29] Consciousness is always directed to something else and always has to know something else in order to understand itself as a self. I only realise that I know something when I know something else. So, life and consciousness have a complex structure and constitute a differentiated unity of inner and outer worlds.

25 Ulrich Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 68.

26 Dietrich Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube: Dialektische Theologie als Hermeneutik der Religion* (Mohr Siebeck, 2005). A good introduction to the work of Korsch is provided by Cornelia Richter, Bernhard Dressler, and Jörg Lauster, eds., *Dogmatik im Diskurs: Mit Dietrich Korsch im Gespräch* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014).

27 This conception was previously expressed by Hans Jonas in his philosophical biology, cf. Benjamins, *Een zachte soort van zijn*, 140ff., and Pannenberg in his anthropology, cf. Benjamins, *Een en ander*, 577ff.

28 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 228ff.

29 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 230–231.

Just as the organism at the level of life maintains an internal structure against the external world on which it nevertheless depends, culture maintains life against chaos and death through internal organisation. Culture is "work against death."[30] At a very basic level, cultural work requires the cohabitation of the family and the cooperation needed for food production. Just as the organism is constantly taking in new matter in order to maintain its own structure in face of the outside world, cultural institutions such as family and labour organisations maintain themselves, simply put, by constantly taking in new people, like offspring. Cultural institutions perpetuate the lives of individuals by means of the permanent structure into which the individuals are inserted. Such an ordering needs symbol systems in which interrelationships are expressed and regulated.[31] With these symbol systems, the individual interprets itself and others in order to determine its own place in society. Interpretation, meaning, symbol systems, and culture are thus inseparable.

Symbol systems and structures providing order tend to refine and expand themselves through continual differentiation.[32] The symbol and order system "economy," which regulates food production, and the system "family," which regulates the relationship with offspring, for example, facilitate the development of a legal system in which mutual claims on one another in economy and family are formalised. From here, new interpretations and regulations emerge, concerning, for example, the person as the bearer of rights and duties. In this way, an ongoing differentiation of life areas into different segments emanates, together with their accompanying symbol systems and institutions. The task of interpretation thus becomes more and more complex. In the field of interpretation, religion as a basic form of interpretation occupies an important place.[33]

Religious representations are pre-eminently products of interpretation that help to understand the world as a whole. They arise because in life, consciousness, and culture, oppositions belong together. For example, life and consciousness are compositions of inner and outer worlds, which religion interprets as part of an original unity. In the interpretation, the differentiations are revealed as differentiations of an assumed unity. Religion thereby provides the idea of unity and coherence, in which the

30 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 236.

31 For his symbol theory, Korsch falls back on the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, cf. Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 335ff.

32 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube,* 241, 243ff.

33 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 233–235ff.

differences are understood as related to each other. Such an interpretation is fundamental, and because of its fundamental nature, religion constitutes a symbol system that arranges the relationship between the various symbol systems (such as, for example, "family," "labour," and "law"). However, as soon as the development and complexity of society increase, symbol systems become more branched and sophisticated. This ramification enhances the possibility to view the whole of life and society no longer from the religious symbol system alone but from other symbol systems as well. An interpretation of the whole in a highly developed society can come from economical or medical perspectives, for example, that compete with the perspective of religion. In such a case, prosperity or health are put to the fore as the highest goal, which other domains should serve.

Thus far, Korsch has shown that cultural work sustains life and uses symbol systems, which come into coherence through the religious symbol system. Starting from there, he takes a closer look at the phenomenon of interpretation.[34]

Although life and the preservation of life give rise to interpretation, interpretation cannot come from life itself. Interpretation constitutes a reflection on life that presupposes another agency than life itself, like mind or consciousness. Such a prerequisite for interpretation can only be found in interpretation itself. So, interpretation has to focus on itself—it must interpret itself—in order to examine its own prerequisite. This prerequisite can only be an independent ground that can neither be derived from life, as life cannot account for interpretation itself, nor from interpretation, as it has to precede interpretation as a condition of its possibility. It cannot be derived from anything else. Therefore, the ground of interpretation must be independent, but at the same time, it must be present in interpretation itself because it appears only in and by interpretation. "In the interpretation directed at itself, therefore, the ground of interpretation opens up: that is the elementary form of religion as interpretation."[35]

In religion, the ground of interpretation comes to light. Religion is thus concerned with the foundation of culture, for culture as a work against death depends on interpretations and thus on the ground of interpretation made explicit by religion. Religion, then, is not the opposite of culture but rather has a cultural function. It is culture itself in that it uses available material to express how it imagines the last ground and relates to it. Religion is the area of culture where the ground of interpretation is thematised.

34 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 248ff.

35 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 251.

Of course, religion can manifest itself in culture in different ways.[36] In Europe, it used to be fundamental to the shaping of a worldview encompassing all from beginning to end, from above to below, including social structures. In modernity, consciousness was placed centre stage. Consciousness focused on itself, and, as a result, religious attention shifted from the worldview to the inner self and to conscience, while religion consequently tried to fund ethics. During late modernity, economics became central. The economic handling of a subjugated nature became dominant, and human beings were inserted into economic processes to such an extent that little remained for religion other than an aesthetic shaping of the self that was limited to private life.[37]

Religion in contemporary culture

Korsch showed that religion as an overarching symbol system is of great importance to culture. He has also shown that religion, as a product of interpretation, emerges from the unlocking and thematisation of the ground of interpretation. In a third step, he clarifies that religion is still important for the interpretation of life, even in today's culture, in which religion is no longer dominantly present.

In today's culture, religion has to recognise the autonomy of diversified symbol systems that regulate life. Its former function, to provide consistency among symbol systems, thereby lapsed. As a result, Christian religion and ecclesial theology are easily tempted to withdraw into isolation on their own territory or in their own language as a subfield alongside others. According to Korsch, this happened to dialectical theology as it focused on God and kerygma again and thereby retreated into its own domain. By contrast, he is advocating that theology will make use of its own interpretive competence. Because of its insight and competence in interpretation, theology can show in what way cultural phenomena—for example, the economy, science, or the media—have taken over religious functions. Such an interpretation does not have to reclaim all religious functions for religion but can shed light on culture and make it transparent to itself. Thus, theology can show culture where or when it plays for God or what it worships as ultimate. Such exposure can help to strengthen the place of the individual in culture and enforce its autonomy. At the same time, theology can make use of its competence to interpret the religious contents of Christianity in such a way that their meaning and relevance to culture are clarified.[38]

36 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 252–255.
37 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 255–259.
38 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 262–263.

According to Korsch, the most important contribution theology can make to culture and society is situated in an interpretation of Christian faith that clarifies in what way this faith fulfils interpretation. To fulfil interpretation means to provide it with a ground and to make it meaningful in such a way that interpretation becomes more than "just interpretation." Such a fulfilment of interpretation follows from the essence of Christianity, in which the incarnation of God is central, which presupposes a trinitarian concept of God and implies the concept of reconciliation, as God bridges the gap between God and human beings.[39]

The essence of Christianity implies a twofold interpretation of God. On the one hand, God should be understood traditionally as a creator that exists independently of the world, from whom all distinctions among creation emanate, and to whom they return again. On the other hand, from the point of view of incarnation and reconciliation, God is thought of as the one who leaves the distinction between Godself and the world behind in order to entrust Godself to human beings. Korsch's unique point of view consists in linking this concept of God to interpretation to the effect that God as creator corresponds with the ground of interpretation, whereas incarnation and reconciliation imply God's presence in the interpretation. That God becomes human indicates that the self-determination of God and the self-determination of humans do not compete with each other but go along: because God determines Godself to become human, God comes to God's purpose when humans come to their purpose. In terms of interpretation, this means that the intention of interpretation is realised if humans come to an appropriate expression of themselves.[40] They come to an appropriate expression if they are directed to God, whose intentions according to God's own self-determination are realised if people realise themselves. This theological interpretation of Christian faith is intended to make clear that Christianity can contribute to the interpretation of culture by means of religious representations. In religious representations, Christianity deals with the ground of interpretation, which is God, and formulates a goal and a norm for interpretation, namely that people interpret and express themselves in an appropriate way. Christianity thereby fulfils interpretation.

In the past, neo-Protestantism, in particular, has made an important contribution to the interpretation of culture.[41] In the nineteenth century, after

39 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 263–266.
40 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 269.
41 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 273–281.

Schleiermacher, it tried to participate in civil culture, in which religion and science directed economy and law. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, when economics and technology had taken the lead in culture, it tried to adjust modernity by emphasising values and culture. The work of German theologian Ernst Troeltsch bears witness to this. However, this task was no longer continued after the Second World War, as Korsch makes clear by citing the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Graf. After national socialism had forced a unified culture with archaic mythology and rationalising technology, the postwar era with the *Wirtschaftswunder* put great emphasis on the economy as a unifying factor, exchanging the civil subject for an economic subject.

In this situation, a new form of neo-Protestantism should focus on the problems caused by the economy as the dominant factor in culture, which culture cannot solve itself. The first of such problems is, simply put, the depersonalising effect of the economy on humans. Whoever is "inside" is, in fact, inserted and absorbed. Those who are "outside" are less and less supported in their livelihood or even are obliterated. The human being is compromised in both cases. An important issue next is that the economy in so-called post-industrial societies is demanding culture or content for itself. Instead of providing direction, the dominant power is demanding substance. A Christian theology that is competent for interpretation can reflect on this as well. In doing so, it can continue the approach of neo-Protestantism's cultural Protestantism under changed circumstances as a cultural hermeneutic.[42]

It is remarkable that Korsch declares Christianity to be interpretationally competent and wants to continue cultural Protestantism with the significant contribution of Karl Barth, who is usually seen as its opponent par excellence.[43] For the view that God determines Godself to a free self-determination of human beings, meaning that the ground of interpretation is present in the interpretation, Korsch depends on Karl Barth, who argued that God is God only in God's Word, which is spoken in human words. God, according to God's revelation in Christ, has chosen not to be God without humans. According to Korsch, these theological views of Barth should not give rise to a theology of revelation in ecclesiastical isolation—by which religion would reduce itself to one subfield among others—but be involved in the theme of interpretation, which is important for the whole of culture.

42 Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 273–281.

43 For Korsch's interpretation of Karl Barth see Korsch, *Religionsbegriff und Gottesglaube*, 191–217.

Barth's theology clarifies in theological terms that the basis of interpretation (God, the Word) is present in the interpretation (the word) and that through interpretation, human beings can come to an appropriate expression of themselves. In this way, Karl Barth appears to follow in the footsteps of Hegel and is giving rise to an interpretive-competent Christianity that can continue cultural Protestantism by means of a new cultural interpretation.

The difference between Dietrich Korsch and Ulrich Barth, who both qualify as theologians of interpretation, can be illustrated as follows: According to Ulrich Barth, it is through interpretation that the subject becomes aware of a final ground. In light of this, the subject sees the world as a meaningful whole in which the eternal and the infinite are lighting up, and the subject can regard itself as a manifestation of the last ground. According to Korsch, however, the subject does not coincide with the ground of interpretation. The subject encounters, as it were, a ground of interpretation that transcends the interpretation and discloses itself in the interpretation. This disclosure does not ascertain the subject of being rooted in God but fulfils the interpretation. Interpretation, as the basis of culture (which is work against death), is not Sisyphean labour but meaningful work because the ground of interpretation is present in the interpretation. Religiously speaking, this work may be understood as God's work that leads human beings to their destiny in interpreting and expressing themselves.

Of great importance to both forms of theology of interpretation is the idea that interpretation, life, the world, and human labour are ultimately meaningful. This meaningfulness primarily comes to the fore in the realm of religion, which is therefore of great interest to culture. Ulrich Barth anchors the meaningfulness of interpretation in the subject as the manifestation of the unitary ground. Korsch relates meaningfulness to the self-disclosure of the ground of interpretation within the interpretation. Lauster (see below) in turn associates the meaningfulness of human beings and the world with the experience of transcendence, in the light of which existence can be interpreted.

Religious interpretation and the experience of transcendence

In *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, Jörg Lauster (b. 1966) is also starting from the idea that religion is a way of interpretation.[44] More than Ulrich Barth and Dietrich Korsch, however, he emphasises that religious interpretations are tied to a reality outside the human mind. They do not merely add meaning

44 Jörg Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung: Theologische Hermeneutik heute* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005).

to reality but are induced by it. Therefore, religious interpretations are not just constructions of consciousness but constitute responses to the experience of reality.[45]

Lauster presents his theology as a middle ground between the theology of revelation and the theory of subjectivity.[46] He bases his theology of interpretation on a hermeneutical theory and is therefore updating theological hermeneutics, which, especially after the 1980s, lost popularity. Yet his reliance on theological hermeneutics does not make him a hermeneutic theologian like Ingolf Dalferth or Hartmut von Sass, whose work will be discussed in the next section. He is first and foremost a theologian of interpretation who focuses on transcendence and relies on a hermeneutic theory for that purpose.[47]

In his hermeneutic theory, Lauster meets a number of objections. According to critical voices, hermeneutics still assumes metaphysical presuppositions that require deconstruction. It still seems to focus on the subject, which, according to structuralism, is produced by codes and systems and cannot count as a genuine starting point for reflection. Moreover, hermeneutics still asks how people make sense of the world in texts, while reception aesthetics shifts attention to the question of how people receive meaning through them. In an attempt to overcome this criticism, Lauster recognises the role of the cultural, social, and anthropological embedding of human understanding more than was previously done in hermeneutics.[48] Based on his updated hermeneutical theory, he highlights that the Bible is a literary expression of religious experience, which in turn facilitates experience by nurturing and expanding the human potential for interpretation. Religious experiences are mediated by tradition, which constitutes a complex process of transmission in a great diversity of forms. Religious experience is not only literarily mediated by the Bible but is also transmitted musically, pictorially, or architecturally in forms that have developed themselves in the field of rite and cult. Scripture and tradition thus provide a diversified amount of material that can be used to make sense of contemporary life.

With the help of transmitted material, the Christian religion interprets life. It does not do so in the light of the idea of the absolute, as Ulrich Barth

45 Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, 14. Lauster presents a view that is similar to the aforementioned Dutch theologian Dingemans.

46 Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, 27.

47 Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, 11, indicates that he belongs to the interpretive theology of e.g., Ulrich Barth, Wilhelm Gräb, and Dietrich Korsch, and implicitly indicates that the theology of Ingolf Dalferth is related to such an approach but "with slightly different emphases."

48 Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, 95.

is saying, but in the light of the experience of divine transcendence in the world.[49] In religion, then, it is not the idea of the absolute but the experience of divine transcendence that is central, and in Christianity, this experience is most importantly related to Jesus as Christ. However, an experience of transcendence should definitely not be understood as the experience of a transcendent or metaphysical object as such. Whenever we experience transcendence, reality impresses us to such an extent that we interpret the experience as the unlocking of a transcendent, divine, or transcendental dimension of reality. So, an experience of transcendence takes place within consciousness as an experience of the subject that feels itself invited from outside, that is, from the outside of the subject, to interpret the experience as divine, sacred, or supernatural. The experience of transcendence, therefore, is not the experience of an object outside of time-spatial frames, which, of course, could never be experienced as such, but a kind of self-experience in which we experience ourselves as affected in such a way that we use transcendence to interpret the experience.

We come to interpretations of life in the light of experiences of transcendence, since these experiences shed light on ourselves and the world and lead to new perspectives on occurrences, life events, our individual biography, our collective history, nature, or the overarching coherence of what happens in the world. In this respect, they show the world to be "more" than just flat reality by opening up a higher or deeper dimension. Because of this, experiences of transcendence are formative for worldviews and fundamental to the interpretation of life.

Meaning is made meaningful by experiences of transcendence

Obviously, experiences of transcendence are complex. A transcendent dimension unlocks itself in the experience, but vice versa the experience takes shape only through an interpretation on which the experience depends. As a consequence, a religious experience becomes a religious experience only if it is interpreted in religious terms. Such an interpretation, however, cannot be tacked to every experience, for the interpretation of an experience as religious is appropriate only if a transcendent dimension discloses itself in the experience. By experiences of transcendence, Lauster specifically refers to a particular kind of experience of beauty, happiness, or fulfilment, which can be gained in art, nature, or shared life.[50] These experiences refer to the moments that a person feels included in a meaningful whole

49 Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, 7.

50 Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung*, 172–175.

without being able to explicitly express the meaning of this meaningful whole. In such a moment, the world is experienced as something good without a possibility to formulate what it is good for. All that is present in such moments of bliss is experienced as good and having an ineffable meaning. Moments and experiences like that cannot be enforced but can only overcome a person. In the event of such an experience, humans do not give meaning to something but receive an exceptional sense of meaning that transcends the ordinary and consequently cannot be defined but can only be interpreted religiously.

Experiences of transcendence are complex and basic at the same time. The experience of transcendence needs an interpretation before it is constituted as an experience, but as an experience of ineffable meaningfulness, it also signifies that interpretation is not an empty or idle game but really concerns a meaningful whole that can be interpreted as meaningful indeed. In this respect, the experience of transcendence gives sense to sense, in that it confirms the sense of conferring meaning to the world. Thus, the experience of transcendence needs interpretation but also reveals that interpretation makes sense by receiving sense. In this way, Lauster asserts, like Barth and Korsch, that interpretation is ultimately meaningful and that its meaningfulness is primarily offered and thematised in the field of religion. According to Lauster, however, the sense of sense is not anchored in the subject as a manifestation of the absolute, as Barth claims, nor in the presence of the ground of interpretation, as Korsch argues, but is unlocked in the experience of transcendence as a special kind of experience.

6.4. Hermeneutic Theologians and God

In *Gott als Ereignis des Seins: Versuch einer hermeneutischen Onto-Theologie,* Hartmut von Sass (b. 1980) advocates a distinctive theology of interpretation, which is sharply opposed to liberal theologies of interpretation.[51] According to Von Sass, theology is not about religion or interpretation but about God. Using this term, he does not refer to God as a concept of the unconditional, by which the subject interprets its experiences and produces religion, like Ulrich Barth, or to God as the ground of interpretation, like Dietrich Korsch, but to God as a reality. Von Sass interprets this reality of God as a hermeneutic event. In other words, he is saying that God happens, but God

51 Hartmut von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins: Versuch einer hermeneutischen Onto-Theologie* (Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

"really" happens, to say so in a rather plump manner. More sophisticatedly, Von Sass is speaking of a hermeneutical ontology.

Von Sass positions himself in the tradition of hermeneutical theology, which originated with Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, was given shape by Ernst Fuchs (1903–1983), Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001), and Eberhard Jüngel (1934–2021), and was continued by Ingolf Dalferth (b. 1948). This tradition depended more on Heidegger than on Hegel. A hermeneutical theology acknowledges the role of the interpretive subject but does not emphasise it. It is still a theology that wants to understand God. According to Von Sass, such a theology should not try to understand God hermeneutically, for even then, God remains an object, mistakenly understood as something or someone to which we gain access in an interpretive way. A hermeneutical theology needs to understand God as a hermeneutic event. By this, Von Sass points to the view that in faith, we see all things new and different, but we do not perceive an additional thing: God. God is not an object that we can see, know, interpret, or understand, but the reality in which we understand ourselves and the world anew.[52] For this view, Von Sass relies on the work of Ingolf Dalferth, who described faith as an *Orientierungswechsel*, which is a change of perspective and of the horizon of understanding. For this, Dalferth joined in with Barth and Bultmann.

In their own time, Barth and Bultmann represented quite different approaches within dialectical theology, but according to Von Sass, in the wake of Dalferth, they must be read together. Barth and Bultmann both focused on the Word of God as something that cannot be incorporated.[53] The Word of God does not fit into our worldview or self-image. It invades and interrupts us. Because we cannot incorporate the Word of God, we cannot complete our world and self-image into a coherent whole. The Word speaks to us as a foreign word that disturbs, questions, challenges, or commands us without our being able to trace it. Barth particularly emphasised that the Word is God's word, whereas Bultmann underlined that it must be received and processed by human beings in their existence in order to count as a revelation. Still, it was true for both that God coincides with God's revelation. God is God's revelation, Barth said, so we are really dealing with God in revelation. Revelation has to be received by human beings, Bultmann said, and only takes shape in their reception as they respond to it. It only becomes Word in human beings' responses to it. Von Sass merges both viewpoints. God is God's revelation received by human beings. God is what God does,

52 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 11.

53 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 92.

and what God does is what human beings perceive from God. According to Von Sass, this means that God coincides with God's revelation, which also includes a new understanding of ourselves. God being God's revelation implies that God is God in God's Word and that there is no other bearer of the Word behind the Word.[54]

After Barth and Bultmann, Fuchs and Jüngel emphasised the reality of God as a language event in which reality comes to light. This view reflects Heidegger's idea that Being is brought to light through language. Because in language, Being can appear in different ways, it can always be more than we now understand or different from what we are able to express at present. In this situation, the Word of God gives us a proper and new view of our reality. Through objectifications, shortenings, and attempts to take control, we no longer understand Being as it wants to speak to us. The biblical word-event, however, provides us with both an actual understanding of ourselves and of Being by showing us that we are sinners who are justified by God. Moreover, the biblical word-event does what it says, as is exemplified by the parables of the Gospel. The hearer is placed into a new reality by the way the parables speak about the kingdom, which turns the kingdom into a reality. The parable thus makes its own speech come true and thereby becomes a realisation of the kingdom for the one who listens well, in which the listener itself is involved. According to the notion that God is what God does, Fuchs explained that God is the rule of God as being wrought by the parable. Jüngel, however, rather interpreted the parables as metaphors speaking analogically about God, which keeps the possibility open that God is an entity behind the language used, about which we can speak analogically and metaphorically.[55]

Ingolf Dalferth elaborated that the language of faith makes us attentive to God, who wants to communicate Godself to us through Being. In this world, God is present in and with everything.[56] So, God is not separated from the world as an object aside, but is present "in, with, and under" all things of this world. When we see it this way and perceive God's co-presence with us in all things, we see the whole world in a different light, which is the light of God. In faith, the objects, events, or people in the world are no longer stand-alone beings or happenings anymore, which we try to get a grip on, but things or affairs in which, with which, or under which God communicates Godself to us. In this perspective, our loved ones, for example, are the way in which

54 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 128–129.

55 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 168–208.

56 Cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Peeters, 2006).

God communicates God's love to us, not as if they were given to us by God's love as an external agency, but in such a way that God's love is given to us in our loved ones and is giving itself to us in, with, and under them.

That we dare to state God's presence in, with, and under all there is rests on the event of Christ, in which God addresses us. After Easter, the disciples are convinced both that Jesus was killed and that he appeared. From there, they draw the conclusion that God has acted. God raised old life to new life, or created "being with God" out of "being far from God," and as a result, God turned out to be exactly as God was preached by Jesus, namely, as a God who is near and is bringing salvation.[57] So, God identifies Godself with Jesus' characterisation of God as merciful love, giving us the courage to believe that not sin and death but God's love and nearness are the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality of God's co-presence is invoked or addressed to us through the resurrection, enabling us to live anew in the awareness of God's co-presence with all there is. After all, if God was even with Jesus when he felt abandoned by God on the cross, it is evidenced by the resurrection that God is absent nowhere.[58]

In line with hermeneutical theology, from Barth and Bultmann to Dalferth, Von Sass argues that God is a hermeneutic event. God is the event of our new self-understanding, which we can only attribute to God's operation. God is that event because God coincides with God's revelation received by humans. So, God does not exist behind God's revelation, nor does God exist—the same put differently—behind God's attributes, for example, God's love or God's grace. God is the reality in which love and grace operate. From this viewpoint, God has no love but is the event of love that can benefit people. Speaking about God, then, is not speaking about an object but about a reality that concerns, touches, and changes us so that we understand ourselves anew.

God as the event of new self-understanding

The fact that God is not an object does not mean that God ceases to be an opposite of humans.[59] After all, humans can make anything into something

57 Cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Der auferweckte Gekreuzigte: Zur Grammatik der Christologie* (Mohr Siebeck, 1994).

58 Although Von Sass strongly relies on Dalferth, he does not explicitly discuss his theology, which also means that differences between them are not highlighted. More than Von Sass, Dalferth wants to rise above the statement "God is what God does," because that statement alone does not yet account for the fact that we are really talking about God. Von Sass accepts the statement because he understands God as a hermeneutic event.

59 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 60–67.

opposite, about which they think and speak. For example, when we study language, we make language into an opposite without thereby turning it into an object that is independent of us. Moreover, there are opposites that we can place over against us but that never exist in themselves and only appear through something else. Beauty is an example of something that needs other objects to manifest itself. There are even opposites that do not appear through anything but to which we ourselves belong. The world is an example of this, for we are part of it while it still remains an opposite for us. God remains opposite in a similar way, even though God is not an object but a reality that appears to us, in which we can find ourselves.

According to Von Sass, God is the event of a new self-understanding. The schemes, models, and narratives by which we interpret ourselves and the world can conflict, start to fray, or fall short, requiring us to understand ourselves in a new and different way. Simply put, we sometimes do not turn out to be who we think we are and cannot sustain the story we tell about ourselves. In that case, we need to find a new relationship with ourselves and develop a new understanding of who we are. According to Von Sass, faith consists in such a new self-understanding, which means that I give up an old self, which was interrupted and disturbed, in order to interpret myself in a new way. God is the accomplishment of the reality of a new self-understanding.[60] As mentioned before, this means that God is not understood as an object but as a reality in which a new understanding occurs, and therefore as a hermeneutic event.[61] This new understanding is not just any understanding but explicitly a qualified understanding in which we experience ourselves as justified, our fellow human beings as neighbours, and the world as creation.[62]

The nature of the new self-understanding in God reveals an important difference between Von Sass and the theologians of interpretation. For Von Sass, theology is not about the subject interpreting itself as a representation of the absolute or understanding God as a ground of interpretation, but about God giving a well-defined new self-understanding and being a reality therein. Still, the human self remains of utmost importance to Von Sass. God appears to the self and thus cannot be there without such a self. Yet God does not become a reality through humans, as Ulrich Barth wants to

60 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 77–91, 237–240, 304–310. Von Sass distinguishes between *Gehaltsinn*, *Bezugsinn*, and *Volzugsinn*, identifying God not with *Gehalt* or *Bezug* but with the *Vollzug* of a new self-understanding.

61 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 242.

62 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 307.

have it, but to humans.[63] This means that religion is not a product of the subject. Faith consists in understanding oneself in a new reality, namely God, of which the one who is in that reality can only say that it is God-given.

In line with his views, Von Sass clarifies his understanding of God as an event while still engaging in onto-theology. For postmodern thinkers, the event is an important theme because it opens up a closed world. The event introduces something new that cannot be anticipated, controlled, or calculated. According to Von Sass, however, such an event, introducing something unexpected and irreducible, must be without context. But what is outside a context cannot be grasped hermeneutically, since all thinking takes place within the context of a horizon of understanding.[64] This, then, establishes a hermeneutic objection to the postmodern idea of the event. Von Sass, now, attempts to think hermeneutically of the event and of God as an event.

For that, it is important to see what Von Sass means by Being. According to him, Being is the totality of all possible descriptions of the real. This turns reality, simply stated, into the sum of all interpretations of reality. Thus, Being is not a closed whole since new interpretations are always possible, and everything always occurs within a certain horizon of understanding and description.[65] Within this field of concepts, an event is the transition from one way of understanding to another, or from one interpretation to another. In this way, the event always falls between the horizons. It cannot be described as a phenomenon. As a transition from one horizon of understanding to another, the event is a gap, a nothingness, or an interim, which we can either approach from the preceding horizon or reconstruct from the new horizon, but never grasp as such.[66] God can consequently be understood as an event of Being in that the subject makes the transition from an old understanding to a new understanding of itself and the world. This remains onto-theological in that Being is the region in which God can possibly be experienced by human beings. God is a possibility of Being—namely, the possibility of understanding Being in a particular, new way—that belongs to Being as its possibility.

This view can be augmented as follows. God is a possibility of Being, that is accessible to humans, but humans cannot give themselves a new understanding. A new understanding must be disclosed and depends on

63 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 245.
64 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 247, 267.
65 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 294.
66 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 270–271.

the event that can only occur to a human being. In this sense, God is an impossible possibility for humans that can only be disclosed by itself.[67] When the subject comes to a new understanding of itself and the world, it can attribute the understanding only to God, who has given it its understanding. In this way, God as a possibility and event of Being does not constitute a rejection of onto-theology but an improvement of it.

Whereas the theologians of interpretation emphasise above all that interpretation takes place as an activity of the subject, Von Sass emphasises that the new self-understanding of humans is to be understood as revelation. For him, the new self-understanding remains cast in traditional Christian terms. People understand themselves as justified sinners, their fellow human beings as neighbours, and the world as creation. The innovative part of Von Sass's view is that he does not understand God as an object but as the event by and in which we come to a new self-understanding. His view is both more substantive and more normative concerning the content of the new human self-understanding than the theologians of interpretation want to have it. They do not so much describe how the subject is supposed to understand itself anew, but rather state that it can understand itself through interpretation because it is rooted in God. In this regard, an important difference remains between a theology of interpretation and a hermeneutic theology, although both put interpretation at the centre.

God is revealed through interpretation

Theologians of interpretation argue that humans create a world of meaning through interpretation. Through interpretation, they create a world in which the phenomena that present themselves to them form a cohesion in which they acquire their meaning. Imagination is a necessary tool for the creation of such a world. Thus, it is not an imaginary figuration of reality without informative importance, as thought by Kuitert, but it is fundamental for having a world at all.

For the theologians of interpretation in this chapter, God is not an object. God is not something or someone the interpretation is focused on or that appears by way of interpretation, but God is conceived of as related to interpretation. Yet, as we have seen, the theologians of interpretation speak about God differently. God is the ground of the subject, in which the subject is rooted, so that the subject can be seen as a manifestation of the absolute, which produces representations of God (Ulrich Barth). Or God is the ground of interpretation present in human interpretation (Dietrich Korsch). Or

67 Von Sass, *Gott als Ereignis des Seins*, 309.

God is the name that the subject uses for the transcendent when it is so seized by reality that it feels invited to use this name in interpretation (Jörg Lauster). God can also be understood as the event in which humans come to a new understanding of themselves (Hartmut von Sass). Admittedly, these are quite different conceptions of God, but in none of them, God functions as an object from above. God comes to light as that which makes interpretation possible or gives humans a new understanding of the world and themselves.

The theologians of interpretation intend to show that we can speak meaningfully about the world by means of religion. The world is constituted by interpretation, but interpretation is not baseless, arbitrary, idle, or empty. This is not to say that every interpretation is meaningful, adequate, or constructive, but to claim that interpretation as such is meaningful because it is, simply stated, carried by God.

There is a meaning of meaning that gives meaning to interpretation, and this meaning of meaning is founded on a final ground. With this view, theologians of interpretation expressly want to contribute to a culture in which the subject can interpret itself in an appropriate way. In general, they are concerned with affirming and strengthening subjects who find themselves inserted in a culture in which they can easily lose themselves. It is precisely in religion that the inalienability of the subject is thematised, and it is precisely with the help of religion, therefore, that the subject can come to interpret itself as an inherently valuable person.

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7. The Deconstruction of Christianity

Abstract: Postmodern deconstructive theologians and philosophers criticise Christianity for being attached to the idea of a transcendent principle or a supernatural God. Western and Christian interpretations of the world should be unmasked and dismantled, but a deconstructed Christianity can be a source of incentives for a different way of thinking that rids itself of dominant Western views. Christian notions are used to dispose of Christianity and counter theology theologically. This is done in various ways, as exemplified by Frits de Lange, Carl Raschke, Thomas Altizer, Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben. Generally speaking, God is invoked as an entity that does not exist and as a principle that is intended to dissolve every principle.

Keywords: postmodernism, religion, death of God, Žižek, Nancy, Agamben

Theologians of interpretation argue that humans create a world of meaning through interpretation and that religion matters for that reason. In the previous chapter we have seen that for them interpretation is not "just interpretation," since interpretation is meaningful because of an interpretive ground, which is thematised in religion and provides the meaning of meaning. It is precisely in the field of religion that humans can reflect on themselves as interpreting beings and get empowered to critically and freely relate to all the roles they have to play socially in order to stand strong against social coercion and externally imposed self-descriptions.

Philosophers and theologians of deconstruction also accept that everything relies on interpretation, but they emphasise that meaning and interpretation always involve constructions that can be deconstructed as well. They bring to the fore that interpretations contain contradictions. In interpretations, displacements are at work and hidden assumptions, or strategies play a role that make the interpretation problematic. Interpretations always require new interpretations. Whereas the theologians of interpretation are focused on the meaningfulness of interpretation—that

Benjamins, R., *Formerly God: Rethinking God after God*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2026.
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is, not specifically this or that interpretation, but interpretation as such—deconstructionists are critical toward interpretations, including the interpretation that interpretation is meaningful. They argue that each and every interpretation is always a fixation that pins meaning down and thus robs the world of the possibility to appear yet again in a different way.

Theologians of deconstruction are critical of both religion and the subject that interprets itself with the help of religion. They consider Christianity problematic because of its intertwinement with God as a transcendent principle or supreme being. Such a principle or being easily legitimises a structuring of the world that does not suit it. The subject that structures the world through its thinking deserves to be criticised as well if it imagines itself to be an "I think" allowed to organise the world on its own account. The structures that are thought to rule the world—indifferently, whether they depend on God, the subject, or both—must be deconstructed or opened up to get rid of radically wrong interpretations of God, human beings, and the world.

Deconstructionists are postmodern in their attempt to deconstruct Christianity. They want to detach themselves from the Western and Christian interpretations of the world in order to allow for the possibility of a new perspective on reality. Yet their critique of Western thought, which puts God at the top of the universe as its first principle or places the subject at its centre as the designer of its own world, partly picks up Christian notions again. Christianity, which made a major contribution to Western thought, can, in a deconstructed form, also be used to get rid of it. As a result, the relationship of deconstructionists to religion is critical and complex. Their critical and complex relationship will be examined in this chapter on the basis of six very different philosophers and theologians.

According to Frits de Lange and Carl Raschke, theology has come to an end. After theology, they seek a new stance of faith. Thomas Altizer and Slavoj Žižek want to get rid of all forms of transcendence but also turn against the idea that this world is a rational and self-sufficient whole enclosed in itself. After transcendence, they seek what might be called an open immanence. Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben are opposed to Christianity insofar as it posited a purpose and a meaning to the world that can be derived from God. Since secularised thinking continues this religious view of purpose and meaning, they partially reinterpret Christian notions to get rid of that. They want to further secularise secularised thought by means of a deconstructed Christianity beyond Christianity. In all these different ways, deconstructionists develop a critique of theology that wants to get rid of religion and religious forms but at the same time engages with religion

and makes partial use of it. The resulting complexity of their reflections makes these thinkers theologically exciting.

7.1. Beyond Theology: The Complexity of a New Stance of Faith

Frits de Lange

In the Netherlands, Frits de Lange (b. 1955) represents a critical and dismantling reading of Christianity, which is accomplished in the name of faith. In an article in the newspaper *Trouw* of September 17, 2005, *God, maar dan anders* (God, but differently), he expresses his discomfort with the worn-out theology of the past. He distances himself both from traditional, dogmatic theology and the secularisation theology of the 1960s and 1970s, which sought to bring Christian thought up to date. Now something else is needed: "a deconstruction of supernatural theism. A farewell to a God who intervenes. On the other hand, creativity and spiritual practice committed to an intellectual reconstruction of a new, different way of believing." In arguing like this, De Lange goes a step further than theologians such as Kuitert and Dingemans. He is looking for a new form of faith beyond traditionalism and adaptation to the secularised zeitgeist. As a starting point for such faith, he mentions "the attentive devotion to reality that moves, lives, and exists in God."

Eleven years later, on June 11, 2016, in *Trouw*, De Lange writes the essay *En God sprak, "Ik besta niet"* (God spoke, "I do not exist"). In this essay, he no longer talks about reality in God but about reality without an existing God. "I could not do without the word God, but do I believe that God exists?" It seems to be a rhetorical question. With Peter Rollins, Marcel Gauchet, and others, De Lange primarily points out that there is a deeply secularising trend in Christianity itself. God is, after all, presented in a profoundly ungodly way through incarnation and crucifixion, thus negating the idea of an all-governing supreme being.[1] "There is no second world behind or above this one," according to De Lange, and "life has no higher purpose or meaning than this life itself."

1 The idea that God, through the incarnation, empties Godself of power and authority, which causes a deep secularising force in Christianity, has been elaborated especially by Gianni Vattimo. According to Vattimo, the secularising tendency in Christianity corresponds with the weakening of Being. The core of Christianity consequently does not consist in strong assertions but in caritas.

In *Heilige onrust: Een pelgrimage naar het hart van religie* (Sacred restlessness: A pilgrimage to the heart of religion), a 2017 book, De Lange places particular emphasis on spiritual practice to arrive at a new, different way of believing, thereby largely abandoning the intellectual reconstruction of theology that he first asked for. He takes the pilgrim as the paradigm for a new form of theology. The pilgrim wants to keep putting one foot before the other because he believes in a life that is fuller, richer, deeper, and more worthwhile. This opens the pilgrim up to something greater than himself and actually greater than anything.[2] This greatness, however, does not need to be wrapped up in encompassing ideas or elaborate rituals. "Those who are busy putting one foot in front of the other do not need to look for truth and reality. Those are puzzles for metaphysicians that a pilgrim can pass by."[3] De Lange advocates a so-called minimal theology. This theology leaves the big why questions unanswered and does not want to make a project of the self. It is driven by the sacred restlessness of belief in a more true and better life with and for others, which makes us keep on walking.

De Lange tends to replace God with Life. Pilgrimage is "learning to surrender to Life, which is closer to us than we are to ourselves and, at the same time, bigger than we can ever encompass."[4] Sacred restlessness most of all makes us aware "that this delightful and terrible life is not yet true life."[5] Faith, in that perspective, is on the one hand the affirmation of life's value—in the hope of a fuller life, for which there is no ground but only hope itself—and on the other hand the responsibility to care for fragile and vulnerable life. Unbelief manifests itself in those who regard life as worth nothing anymore or in those willing to sacrifice it for a higher purpose, like God or fatherland.[6] According to De Lange, living well is to live eternally: "One lives eternally when one realises to live without ground, living without any other reason for existence than the fact that one is here, unconditionally."[7]

In de Lange's book, important postmodern thinkers are hidden almost unnoticed behind every page. The ambition and scope of the book, however, are to arrive at a stripped-down core of faith, which can serve as a new

2 Frits de Lange, *Heilige onrust: Een pelgrimage naar het hart van religie* (Ten Have, 2017), 33–34.

3 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 33.

4 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 125.

5 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 127.

6 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 130.

7 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 135.

starting point for contemporary spirituality. His theology is a theology that wants to work with a minimum of terms and concepts. "Theology is infinitely richer and more complex than my minimal theology," De Lange indicates, "but it is enough for me."[8]

The difference between the theologians of interpretation from the previous chapter and the deconstructionists of this chapter can be clarified almost exemplarily on the basis of De Lange. De Lange wants to go out of the head and into the body again. The theologians of interpretation argue, however, that we live in a world of meaning, signification, and interpretation, and these things inevitably take place in the head. Life, according to Korsch, is a differentiated unity whose differentiations and assumed unity are revealed by interpretation only. De Lange's assertion that life is nearer to us than we are to ourselves and bigger than we can ever encompass is not aimed at interpreting life but at moving within it.

The difference between theologians of interpretation and deconstructionists is further clarified by the following quote from De Lange: "To pilgrimage is to say farewell to grandstanding ideas and to let go of illusions about the world, about others, about God, and about oneself. Who am I? I don't know who or what I am. Who is the other? A welcoming companion, but also sometimes a painful conundrum. Who or what is God? A voice that calls me away from myself."[9] A sharp difference with the theologians of interpretation occurs from this citation. They try to interpret the world and the self through *Letztbegründung* and with the help of the idea of the absolute, by pointing to a ground of interpretation or by seeing the world in the light of the experience of transcendence. They also value the subject as a manifestation of the ground of unity, through which the subject can perceive the world as a unity, act in it, and know how to behave. From a postmodern or deconstructive point of view, the theologians of interpretation thereby take the risk of ignoring everything that is different from the subject and outside its horizon of understanding. They certainly do not see God as a voice calling us away from ourselves, as De Lange does, but as the very factor that makes us subjects who are able to live and act freely and responsibly and can express themselves in an appropriate way.

A fundamental distinction between a modern and postmodern approach lies in the background of the differences noted. According to liberal, modern

8 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 137. The whole outline of my book illustrates that I myself cannot be satisfied with minimal theology. It seems to me that a conceptual reflection also belongs to an attitude of faith.

9 De Lange, *Heilige onrust*, 137.

theologians of interpretation, religion helps the subject understand and orient itself in the modern world. Religion is important for the identity formation of humans, which is especially threatened by the increasing differentiation of modern society. Traditionally, modern liberal theologians have been especially concerned with the unity of life and the coherence of life experiences threatened by fragmentation in modern society. Postmodern thinkers, by contrast, consider such a unity impossible and are rather fearful of the conception of a whole, a totality, or a unity of life because such a whole is always based on a principle—God, reason, mind, or the subject—providing order. They hold that an oppressive effect arises irrevocably from this order, which denies the uniqueness of each individual, undervalues differences, and disregards otherness.

Yet the differences between modern and postmodern thinkers are not absolute. They are both concerned with the value of human life, and they both oppose the idea that life can be managed as a feasible project. In order to protect the value of life, modern liberal theologians of interpretation want to strengthen the subject in society. The postmodernists, on the contrary, want to remove the subject from the constructions, principles, and orders of society so that it can be itself in all its singularity. Through subject criticism, they want to free the subject from the constructions by which it posits itself as an autonomous subject or a Cartesian cogito, and they deny that the subject is the bearer of higher qualities or even an inner unity.

In a highly schematic way, the difference can also be represented as follows. For theologians of interpretation, Hegel remains of great importance in the background, because of his description of the human mind as an agency of Spirit. The postmodernists particularly oppose Hegel's view that truth is located in the whole, because they take the whole as a totalising construct. For the theologians of interpretation, the early Heidegger of *Dasein* is important because *Dasein* always exists in a world of meaning in which it must interpret and determine itself. In contrast, the late Heidegger and his critique of onto-theology are of particular importance for the postmodernists. On the basis of this critique, the concept of God as the unifying ground of Being is exchanged for an ungrounded plurality.

De Lange does not reflect much on modern or postmodern theological movements, precisely because he advocates a minimal theology, which distances itself from debates about big concepts. In a way, he leaves theology behind in order to arrive at a new stance of faith. He holds that such an attitude of faith should express itself minimally, not for lack of faith or theological knowledge, but by conviction.

Carl Raschke

Whereas Frits de Lange abstains from major theological concepts in his minimal theology, Carl Raschke, on the contrary, is deeply involved with them. In his work, he places great emphasis on semiotics, which is concerned with the reference and meaning of signs and manifestations of language. According to him, religious language does not refer to an external reality, yet this does not make religious language meaningless. In religious language, socially relevant voices are raised, a different and critical perspective on conformity is presented, and trends or developments in society are reflected.

Raschke is an extraordinarily versatile thinker, whose work is not easily captured in an overview because he is constantly concerned with the way social trends and developments are reflected in religion and theology. This often prompts his own reflections. In his 2017 book, *Postmodern Theology: A Biopic*, he gives a fine overview of the developments of postmodern thought with which his own career was intertwined.[10] His book matters to this chapter, because it offers insight into postmodern theology as well as his own views.

Raschke especially links postmodernism to the era of neoliberalism. He connects this era with the generation of baby boomers who turned against the establishment with their criticism of the Vietnam War and did so with the economic wind in their backs.[11] According to him, the unlimited self-creation of the subject was central to both postmodernism and neoliberalism. Postmodernism denies fixed identities. Neoliberalism was based on the self-creation of subjects who used merchandise to acquire an identity. The production of new subjectivities in the 1960s was frequently accompanied by the use of religiosity of all kinds. Religiosity became instrumental to the expression of each person's private and subjective development. Identity formation by means of religion, which was emphasised by the theologians of interpretation, was therefore critically examined by Raschke. According to him, identity formation stood at the centre in and after the 1960s, in a globalising world with explosive economic growth. In an environment of infinite possibilities that awakened infinite desire, people provided themselves with new identities. This project of unlimited self-creation ended, however, with the economic crisis of 2008, marking the end of postmodernism, according to Raschke.[12]

10 Carl Raschke, *Postmodern Theology: A Biopic* (Cascade, 2017).

11 Cf. Rasche, *Postmodern Theology*, 1–3, 10.

12 That end could also be linked to the Corona pandemic or to the presidency of Donald Trump, who trumped postmodernism, grotesquely magnified it, and rendered it defenceless with his

From his philosophically postmodern perspective, Raschke is extremely critical of postmodernism as a cultural trend, and in this he agrees with postmodern thinkers such as Žižek, Badiou, and others. These critical, partly Marxist-inspired philosophers want to undo metaphysics with the help of Nietzsche and Heidegger and put the modern Cartesian subject under criticism. They also criticise the new postmodern formations of subjectivity, which they call "self-creations."

Raschke made his name in 1979 with the publication of *The End of Theology*. According to him, the end of onto-theology after Heidegger also meant the end of theology as a discipline, which can now no longer focus on a highest or most real being (an *ens realissimum*). According to Raschke, Derrida's deconstruction involves a theory that shows that texts and speech acts do not have a fixed meaning or reference. They acquire meaning in their context. Because texts are constantly related to other texts and terms, they always receive new meanings in new contexts. Just as ontologically there is no supreme being, there is semiotically no master signifier, and there is theologically no object God with which theology as a discipline is concerned. Thus, according to the brief description by Taylor and Raschke, deconstruction is a "hermeneutics of the death of God." There is no deepest ground, no ultimate reality, and no final sense ensuring that the world and language are ordered, but there is a constant shifting and branching of meanings through which elements constitute a permanently changing network in which they constantly determine each other differently. The assumed order of this network is always a temporary construction that is naturally deconstructed by shifts that occur in it.[13]

In his account of the development of postmodern theology, Raschke distinguishes three main phases.[14] In the first phase, the philosopher Mark C. Taylor (b. 1945) plays an important part, as he laid an important foundation for postmodern theology in the 1980s. He was influenced by Nietzsche and Altizer, focused especially on Hegel and Kierkegaard, and included the deconstruction of Derrida in his thinking. Taylor elaborated on a so-called

"postmodern" post-truth claims. In general, postmodernism with its opposition to systems and order seems strongly rooted in the spirit of '68, while the current climate is much more strongly defined by a desire for order in order to not lose the gains of the welfare state, capitalism, and neoliberalism.

13 Raschke accentuates that for Derrida, deconstruction does not constitute a politically motivated, "strategic" reading that consciously seeks to deconstruct but rather indicates a more or less autonomous shifting of meanings. Deconstruction says that "shift happens," cf. Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 162.

14 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 25–33.

a/theology. An a/theology is a theology after the death of God that no longer wants to talk or think about God but still does not want to say goodbye to theology. A theology that uses big concepts for God, conceiving God as Spirit or Being, has become implausible, but a direct rejection or simple ignoring of the theological tradition offers no sound possibility either, because the tradition still defines us in sometimes hidden ways. Moreover, God's absence in a certain way is also God's presence again, because it concerns *God's* absence, that, in a reflection on God's absence, is still made present. Hegel's thinking was both theological and non-theological. Kierkegaard advocated either theological thinking or a non-theological approach. Taylor's a/theology, however, seeks to be neither theological nor non-theological, and in this sense represents an a/theology.

The second phase was initiated by John Caputo (b. 1940) with his 1997 book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, with which, according to Raschke, he advocated a new reading of Derrida and came to represent a second generation of postmodern theology. Derrida had published an important text on the return of religion in 1994 and was thereafter seen as someone who had made a religious turn himself.[15] Caputo describes him as a philosopher who most of all wants to break open what is fixed and established in order to open himself up to the coming of the future and future advents. According to this reading, deconstruction is not a nihilistic activity, which tears down the highest being or the master signifier, but a religiously charged activity. In fact, Derrida's deconstruction should be understood as a prayer for an open future. He is shedding tears for what keeps coming out of it. On the basis of Derrida, Caputo developed what he himself calls a "weak theology," which argues that God does not exist but insists.

A third phase in postmodern theology was defined by the incorporation of postmodern thought in evangelical circles and the so-called emerging church. To his surprise, Raschke contributed to this himself with the unexpectedly good reception of his 2004 book, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity.* He argued that deconstruction, precisely because of the postmodern debunking of rational foundations, gives space again to faith as faith. A connection between Raschke and the evangelicals is quite understandable, given the basis of his own theology.

Raschke is extremely critical of the development of a postmodern theology that he actually considers impossible after the death of God. In his opinion, deconstruction emphasises above all the open-endedness of all texts and

15 Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, edited and with an introduction by Gil Anidjar (Routledge, 2002).

the ever-new meaning of signs in an ever-new configuration. Theology, on the other hand, presupposes a solid ground that leads to the articulation of a sort of "here I stand" as the foundation of beliefs and actions.[16] The solid ground, which theology finds in a supreme being, allowing such a stand, however, has disappeared.

The disappearance of solid ground led Caputo to the formulation of a weak theology, which, according to Raschke's argumentation, has to suffer for two reasons: because it still wants to do theology and because it wants to be weak.[17] In his view, Caputo's theology merely constitutes the renewed edition of a theology of secularisation, which is nothing but an extension of a liberal theology that seeks to reconcile Christianity with modernity.[18] The call of a weak God, on which Caputo bases his theology, actually repeats the idea of the *Social Gospel*, an American Christian movement around the beginning of the twentieth century that emphasised social change rather than personal salvation.[19] This movement connected with the call for obedience to the moral law, which has stood at the centre of liberal theology since Kant, Raschke argues.[20] The response to the call of a weak God in Caputo corresponds to Kant's obedience to the moral law, and therefore Caputo continues to move in the wake of liberal theology. According to Raschke, however, this liberal theology is no more than merely the final chapter of a Christian theology that, until the twentieth century, was the purveyor of the value systems and worldview of the West, to which it was subservient. Caputo therefore gets no further than the usual liberal critique of society in the name of a moral Christianity that indulges in jeremiads in favour of progressive politics.[21]

According to Raschke, a postmodern theology like Caputo's completely disregards the strong criticism of Nietzsche, whom he sees as the primal and actual father of postmodernism. Nietzsche denied the existence of a moral law and order. In Nietzsche's perspective, the appeal to a moral

16 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 39.

17 On Caputo cf. Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 102–137.

18 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 119, 163. On Caputo, see the next chapter. Raschke's assessment appears to me to be broadly adequate, but my appreciation of it is opposite to his.

19 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 141.

20 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 120. This claim by Raschke is one-sided to the extent that it neglects Schleiermacher's very differently grounded influence on liberal theology.

21 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 140. Raschke, in my view, does make a good point when he points out Caputo's continuity with liberal theology but underestimates the discontinuity between the two, as it appears, for example, in John Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Indiana University Press, 1993), in which Caputo denies (in a postmodern way) the existence of a (modern) moral order.

law or a call from God is merely the disguised will to power of powerless people who are driven by ressentiment and want to be lords themselves.[22] In Raschke's opinion, a postmodern theology should not invoke moral law to make social changes in the existing order but should critically reflect on neoliberal society. Raschke reverts to the apostle Paul for that reason, who also did not appeal to law or morality but, on the contrary, to righteousness as installed by the singularity of Christ and the event of Easter morning.

After the critique of onto-theology and the approach of deconstruction, theology should no longer engage in theological constructions about a supreme being or an absolute moral law but devote itself to ecclesiology and the embodiment of the gospel.[23] By dying and rising with Christ, as Paul puts it, the believers as sinners are justified in a paradoxical way. An act of injustice, namely the crucifixion, turns them into a new people, prompting them to refuse to conform any longer to any power whatsoever.[24] Christians thereby become non-conformist outlaws, living outside of the established order and outside the law in a community that is inclusive and sides against all forms of exclusion. Their justice does not expect salvation from a moral law or social improvements but consists of communal life in the community of the saints—"just us."[25] Justice is nothing else and nothing more than living in good mutual relationships, practiced precisely in this community, which is only concerned with good mutual relationships.

In a postliberal way, then, Raschke abandons the attempt to provide Christianity with solid ground or to give it a place in modernity. He positions himself antithetically against modernity, as is done—in a very different key—by Radical Orthodoxy and a theologian like Stanley Hauerwas. Unlike Radical Orthodoxy, Raschke does not revert to pre-modern thought in his post-modern theology. Unlike Hauerwas, he does not presuppose a normative narrative that precedes the community and must be followed by this community.

According to Raschke, the embodiment of the gospel has nothing to do with a weak God but represents a power that can be labelled as resurrection power and is derived primarily from the event of Easter morning.[26] The

22 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (C.G. Naumann, 1887).

23 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 57, 61.

24 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 126.

25 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 145ff.

26 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 125ff. In *Postmodern Theology*, Raschke in several passages expresses his own views, whose greater systematic coherence is especially apparent in connection with other books and articles. See, for example, *GloboChrist: The Great Commission Takes a Postmodern Turn* (Baker Academic, 2008) *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal*

event of Easter turns Jesus into a singularity or a one-time event. Such is an event that is inconsistent with the expectations we can have, based on our knowledge, and cannot be inferred from what preceded it. Therefore, it turns us upside down. On Easter morning, such an event occurs, which can be called an event of God. The event of God, however, does not imply a God outside the event. As the event cannot be traced back to anything else, it can neither be tracked down to a God outside of the event. The event of Easter challenges any identity and thus stands in opposition to all formations of subjectivity. The person who believes in the resurrection does not thereby provide himself with a basis for his existence but allows himself to be disturbed and comes to stand against the established order. The resurrection as a one-time event is exceptional, and as an exception, it invalidates the rules in force. At the same time, the exception creates new rules because the exception can be conceived of as a precedent. In this way, the event of the resurrection constitutes a deconstruction of the existing order and the creation of a new community, which seeks to restore the interpersonal relationships that justice is about. In the deconstruction of the existing order and the founding of a new community, God's power is manifest. The power of God is in the event, and the event—with reference to the French philosopher Alain Badiou—can never be an event without our loyalty to the event, and this loyalty precisely makes us true subjects. The loyalty of subjects and their community is thus partly constitutive of the event, making the community itself a manifestation of God's power. "The Christian community is the embodied outworking of God's plan for the ordination of messianic justice."[27]

It is notable that Raschke, like De Lange, no longer wants to engage in theology since it is worn out and finished. The path each of them takes next, however, is quite different. De Lange wants to surrender to the Life that we affirm, using the pilgrim as a paradigm, hoping that life can be fuller and richer than it is now. Raschke wants to be faithful to the event of Easter, which creates a community of contrast that consists of people who turn away from the existing order in order to live in justice. De Lange ends with a minimal theology. Raschke's theology ends in an embodied ecclesiology.

Democracy (Columbia University Press, 2015); *Critical Theology: Introducing an Agenda for an Age of Global Crisis* (IVP Academic, 2016); *Neoliberalism and Political Theology: From Kant to Identity Politics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

27 Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 148. Raschke makes use of Badiou and his interpretation of Paul. For the use of Paul by postmodern philosophers such as Taubes, Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek, see Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Het uitschot en de geest: Paulus onder filosofen* (Vantilt, 2017).

7.2. Beyond Transcendence: The Complexity of Immanence

Whereas Raschke and De Lange leave theology, God, and solid grounds behind them to arrive at very different positions of faith, Thomas Altizer and Slavoj Žižek address transcendence—as a collective term for God and fixed grounds—more extensively and explicitly. They both do so critically, but in different ways and in such a manner that the complexity of postmodern thought exemplarily emerges from a representation of their views. Actually, their critique of transcendence does not constitute a simple denial of what is beyond us but aims at denying transcendence in such a way that we are left with more than just flat reality or the superficial satisfaction of our needs. Altizer, who should still be considered a theologian of secularisation, proclaimed a complete immanence according to his God-is-dead theology, but with the aim of sanctifying profanity. Žižek, who can be considered a postmodern philosopher in spite of his critique of popular postmodern culture, posited a transcendent gap in immanence that we must recognise in order not to fool ourselves.

Thomas Altizer

In the 1960s, Thomas Altizer (1927–2018) was one of the so-called radical theologians who took the death of God as their starting point.[28] The death of God was an appellation for the radical loss of transcendence, which, as a sociological or historical phenomenon, caused modern humans to have no real sense of religion and the sacred. Altizer, however, did not want to abandon the sacred but to give it a place within the profane. He connected the sacred with the apocalyptic. In his opinion, Jesus was an apocalyptic figure who denied the value of this world. In his wake, Christianity has been similarly apocalyptic because it rejected the world in the name of the kingdom of God that is diametrically opposed to it. Yet Altizer did not want to renounce this world and sharply opposed a Gnostic devaluation of creation. In this, he was influenced by Nietzsche, who strongly criticised the world and culture and declared them to be worthless, even though he affirmed life unconditionally. In order to hold together an apocalyptic rejection of the world and an affirmation of life, Altizer turned to Hegel. Jesus' opposition to the world culminated in his crucifixion. The meaning of the crucifixion,

28 On Altizer see Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 43–58. On Altizer's theology see John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970). The God-is-dead theology was associated in Europe primarily with John A. T. Robinson's book, *Honest to God* (SCM Press, 1963), which updated the theology of Bonhoeffer and Bultmann.

however, with Hegel, had a universal scope. The crucifixion signifies the death of a transcendent God who rises or proceeds as pure profanity.

Following in the footsteps of Hegel, Altizer developed a dialectical line of thought in which the opposition between the sacred and the profane is overcome. The profane in the form of an a-religious and flat, secularised sense of life is denied by the sacred. The sacred is the apocalyptic that causes the worth and sufficiency of this world to collapse. However, the sacred also denies itself. Through the crucifixion, which represents the death of God, the sacred in fact empties itself into profanity. The death of God thereby constitutes the salvation of the profane, in this sense that the sacred is present in it by means of kenosis. In this perspective, the death of God no longer constitutes a merely sociological or historical fact but is linked to an act of faith that denies the existence of God as a sovereign, transcendent, fully other being and affirms the spiritual value of profane culture. Faith ignores, recognises, and transforms the profane. It sees that the sacred has entered into the profane and finds the sacred after the collapse of the profane and the death of God in all reality. This, by the way, does not make reality "whole" again, but states that the sacred manifests itself in the fragmentation of reality.

Slavoj Žižek

In Altizer's theology, the death of God constitutes the affirmation that the sacred has become immanent and there is absolutely no transcendence left. Postmodern thinkers subsequently took immanence as a starting point—as, for example, Gilles Deleuze did—but also saw a rupture or a hole in immanence. This can be clearly seen in the work of Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949), a transverse and eclectic thinker whose contrariness turned him into a philosophical cult figure. He criticised postmodern culture from a Marxist point of view.[29]

Dialectical materialism—the Marxist philosophy that holds that the material world determines the mind and develops through contradictions—is

29 On Žižek, see Raschke, *Postmodern Theology*, 63–69. Žižek wrote numerous books that overlap. His main work is considered to be *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2013). On Žižek, see Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A* (*Very*) *Critical Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008); Marika Rose, *A Theology of Failure:* Žižek *against Christian Innocence* (Fordham University Press, 2019); Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Northwestern University Press, 2008); Adrian Johnston, *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism* (Columbia University Press, 2018). See also the critical discussion of Žižek's Hegel interpretation by Robert Pippin, *Back to Hegel?* (Meditationsjournal, 2012), https//www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/back-to-hegel.

still needed, according to Žižek, to criticise today's postliberal society, even though Marxism was politically discarded after the fall of the Wall and the disappearance of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Žižek holds that dialectical materialism offers the understanding that late capitalism is not an end point of thought and raises its own resistance. Dialectical thinking stems from Hegel. Although Hegel elaborated a speculative dialectic within an idealist philosophy, he nevertheless has always been important for Marxist theory. Now Žižek wants to reinterpret Hegel in order to make his philosophy useful for the present, even though it seems utterly outdated. After all, Hegel wanted to show that there is a logical course of Spirit in history, making history reasonable. In his opinion, history's rationality had become manifest in the bourgeois culture of his time, in which people can come to freedom and recognise themselves and each other as agencies of the Spirit. However, Hegel's view of bourgeois culture as the end point of history was a mistake. Marxism recognised this and envisioned not a bourgeois culture but a classless society. Hegel's concept of an end point was more or less restated in the 1990s by Francis Fukuyama's claim in *The End of History and the Last Man* that a global, liberal, democratic, capitalist system would be the logical end point of history. Yet, according to Žižek, development does not stop at bourgeois culture or the liberal, capitalist system, which evoke their own resistance and deserve militant resistance.[30] In his opinion, a reinterpretation of Hegel is needed in order to mobilise a dialectical materialism that criticises the mainstream neoliberal and postmodern management of both society and the self.

For his reinterpretation of Hegel, Žižek takes advantage of the theories of Lacan, a French psychoanalyst. Lacan (1901–1981) argued that the subject forms itself as it learns to use language and thereby becomes incorporated into a symbolic order. By saying "I" and being addressed as "you," and by behaving orderly, the subject becomes someone. Through this formation, however, the subject also alienates itself from itself and its pre-linguistic desire, which causes a division in the subject. The subject becomes someone but thereby also alienates itself from itself. The self from which the subject alienates, however, is something the subject never was, for it becomes someone only through the symbolic order that makes the subject the subject. Simply put, the subject therefore never coincides with itself. There is a gap between the subject and itself, or between me and myself, or between me saying "I"

30 In Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (Verso, 2008), Žižek even defends that there was a moment of progress in Stalin's revolutionary terror and Mao's great leap forward, not to defend their terror per se, but to make clear that there are indeed alternatives to liberal, capitalist thinking.

and me before I did so at a time when I was not yet an I. Once, in a mythical time that was never there, I was whole. The genesis of self-consciousness thus implies a sense of loss and separation and arouses in the subject the desire to return to an impossible wholeness. In this way, the mechanism of the genesis of the subject always supports and maintains an inauthentic and illusory desire to retrieve what was never there.

Žižek makes use of Lacan to newly interpret and update Hegel as follows: According to Hegel, dialectic begins with the logical idea or with Spirit. Such is a positive principle, which next unfolds through negation. The principle begins as a "first" or "initially general" that encompasses everything but is therefore precisely not "something," since that requires something to be distinct from something else. For this, the positive principle (thesis) needs a negation (antithesis). Žižek now argues that a gap or a rupture precedes the principle. Spirit does not begin with itself in order to return to itself, but Spirit is preceded by a pre-transcendental gap, a not-coinciding-with-itself. According to Lacan, the subject begins with a division and a difference, because at the moment that I become me, I alienate myself from an imaginary I that I never was and only exists as a preverbal desire. Similarly, the Spirit is preceded by a gap. Thus, the beginning is not located in an identity, in which the subject or the Spirit is latently itself in order to return to itself ultimately, but the beginning is situated, as has been said, in a basis of difference and distinction. There is no principle that unfolds, but a gap that precedes unfolding. The logic of Hegel's route, by which the principle unfolds in history, also collapses under this view. There is no development in which the principle or the first and initially general unfolds but only a contingent progression in which the gap can never be closed, as a return to itself would bring about. Žižek's reading of Hegel's philosophy, reinterpreted via Lacan, results in a philosophy that puts an end to all traditional metaphysics by means of difference and distinction, positing an original gap instead of a principle, on the basis of which historical constellations and configurations can only be seen as the result of an accidental process. Such a revised Hegelian philosophy helps to make sense of late capitalist society. It shows that the rationality of liberal capitalism is an illusion after all. It helps us to deny its reasonableness, to recognise the gap in our own subjectivity, and to recognise that ultimately there is an absolute differentiation and gap in being.[31] This insight can help us rise

31 The hole or pre-transcendental gap that Žižek posits contrasts with the "differentiated unity" in Ulrich Barth's and Dietrich Korsch's theology since there can never be unity because of the gap.

above our illusionary desires in order to create a human solidarity that, according to Žižek, may be militant and revolutionary in order to break through contemporary thinking.[32]

In Žižek's reinterpretation of Hegel, an interpretation of Christianity has a place.[33] Žižek values Christianity because an absolute transcendence, symbolised as Father, is negated by the incarnation of the Son, as was demonstrated on the cross. The statement of the Son, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" makes it clear that transcendence and supernatural salvation are illusions. But whereas Hegel implies that the death of God is not yet the end of God, and Altizer deduces from the death of God that the sacred is fully immanent in the profane, Žižek argues something quite different. He does not take the Christian language of faith to say that transcendence has become immanent, but he emphasises the hole or the gap that always precedes subject or Spirit. Indeed, he separates God from God, which is evidenced when God the Son is abandoned by God the Father. Thus, God never coincides with Godself. If God does not coincide with Godself, a gap precedes God, and Godself becomes a hole, a differentiation, or an absolute negativity.[34] Such a God does not legitimise anything—no supreme being, no self, no world order, no development, and no capitalism—but rather opens it all.

An absolute immanence, as advocated by Altizer, ignores the gap and the difference, on which Žižek, on the contrary, places all the emphasis. Because of that, Altizer and Žižek testify to a very different mindset, despite a certain affinity. According to Altizer, the sacred, after the negation of the profane and the death of God, is present in broken reality. According to Žižek, God as absolute negativity is precisely the guarantee for utter profaneness, which gets rid of all illusions.[35]

32 Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (Routledge, 2001). In this book, Žižek detaches *agape* from the narcissistic subjectivity that sees in the other only a mirror image of itself, with the result that *agape* as merciless love becomes politically applicable as the basis for a new order.

33 For this, see especially Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank, and Creston Davis, eds., *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (The MIT Press, 2011).

34 By "negativity," the product of negation is meant. The title of Frits de Lange's aforementioned article, "En God sprak 'ik besta niet,'" ("And God spoke, 'I do not exist'") corresponds to this. Such a God can never be turned into a principle or attributed positive qualities because the negation "do not exist" is fundamental.

35 Žižek's thought is closely related to that of the early Derrida, regardless of their differences, who deconstructed Husserl's ideas about the subject and (self)consciousness, introduced différance as a kind of anti-principle, vigorously opposed logocentrism, and was likewise interested in Lacan.

7.3. Beyond Christianity: The Complexity of Secularisation

De Lange and Raschke no longer wanted to engage in theology, even though they are theologians, because the old theological constructs as purveyors of values had become untenable in their view. They seek an attitude of faith beyond theology and do so in different ways. Altizer and Žižek focus on the loss of transcendence, which they thematise as the death of God. The death of God implies for Altizer that the sacred is dialectically immanent in this world. The death of God implies for Žižek that there is no principle and no identity at the basis of the development of human beings and the world, but a gap and a negativity. Religion and capitalist culture are products of the desire to close the gap. Instead, we can relate more honestly to ourselves and others if we understand that the transcendent is negativity, or if we understand, in a religious context, that nothing is God. Now with Nancy and Agamben, we encounter two postmodern thinkers who, again in different ways, engage with Christianity in order to break away from it. According to them, secularisation is not yet complete, or has even barely begun, because even in secularised thinking, a pattern of theological reasoning is still active. Intellectual labour is needed to free us from that.

The work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben seeks to critically examine established patterns that define Western thought. Nancy engaged in a deconstruction of Christianity, which in the past lent itself to the formulation of a closed worldview. However, Christianity also contains unruly incentives that can open up closed worlds. Nancy uses the Christian incentives to arrive at a disenclosed form of thinking and living together. Agamben focuses primarily on the question of what "life" actually is. He argues that life is primarily defined or determined by patterns of thinking that put sovereignty centre stage. This, of course, includes theological patterns insofar as they are determined by the sovereignty of God. In order to find new forms of life, we must break away from the structure of sovereignty, which, politically, still continues even after God as sovereign has disappeared.

Whereas Altizer and Žižek turned primarily to Hegel to interpret the death of God as a salvation of profanity or as the proposition of absolute negativity, Nancy and Agamben rather base themselves on Heidegger. After the destruction of enclosed onto-theological patterns of thinking, they try to arrive at an opening of Being and a new form of existence.

Jean-Luc Nancy

Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–2021) attaches great importance to the uniqueness of humans, who only are what they are as singularities without being the

reflection of a greater whole or the private particularisation of something general.[36] A bigger picture or a generality that defines them would violate humans by ignoring their individuality. On the grounds of this motif, Nancy criticises both monotheism and atheism, which are surprisingly similar.

According to Nancy, Greek monotheism began with Plato, who opposed the mythical gods. They represented the divine in the world. Plato, however, introduced *ho theos* (God) as a principle that is external to the world and functions as the condition for the existence, purpose, and meaning of the world. God is connected to the world in the sense that God is the condition for the world that can be derived from the world, making the world an intelligible and meaningful whole with a purpose, whereas the world itself is empty of God. In this way, there is an atheistic trait in monotheism. Atheism subsequently disassociated itself from God but still adhered to some principle that gives the world direction, a purpose, and meaning, which can be, for example, reason, freedom, or humanism. Thus, atheism maintained a monotheistic pattern of thinking despite the fact that it turned against it. As a result, it paved the way for nihilism, which considers the world meaningless because there is no principle at all that can provide the world with a direction or a meaning.[37]

From Nancy's point of view, Christian monotheism is an heir of Greek and Jewish thought and consequently constitutes a hybrid phenomenon. Whereas Greek monotheism posits a principle as the premise of the world by positing God, Jewish monotheism professes a God of whom nothing is known except the name, which, moreover, shall not even be pronounced. Such a God identifies with neither premise nor principle but constitutes the fundamental negation of every principle, which is so much apart from everything in being the consistent subversion of every principle that God

36 About Jean-Luc Nancy: Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Polity Press, 2012); Alena Alexandrova, Ignaas Devisch, Laurens ten Kate, and Aukje van Rooden, *Re-Treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy* (Fordham University Press, 2012); Rick Benjamins, "The Postsecular and Systematic Theology: Reflections on Kearney and Nancy," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76, no. 2 (2015): 116–128. Reference is made here to Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (Fordham University Press, 2008), originally 2005, and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. John McKeane (Fordham University Press, 2013), originally 2010.

37 For this, see especially Jean Luc Nancy, "Atheism and Monotheism," "A Deconstruction of Monotheism," and "The Deconstruction of Christianity" in Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*. Whereas Nancy criticises monotheism for starting from a first principle, Marc De Kesel, *Goden breken: essays over monotheisme* (Boom, 2010) argues that monotheism also carries within it the principle of religious criticism.

is not something or someone but rather nothing or no one. On the basis of such a concept of God, which is at least latently present in Christianity, Christian monotheism allows itself to be deconstructed and can be released from its closedness by dis-enclosure.

The meaning and scope of Christianity's deconstruction can be clarified by Nancy's explanation of how the theological statement that God created the world out of nothing should be understood.[38] In metaphysics, it is generally assumed that a first principle or a ground of the world can be derived from the world, which is itself external to the world, on which the world depends for its existence. The assertion that the world was created out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), however, disrupts the logic of this reasoning. There is no need for a first principle or a ground from which the world can be derived, for it was created out of nothing. Christianity, however, has fallen into the metaphysical trap of explaining a creation out of nothing by means of God. In that case, a reason for creation is still asserted, namely that God wants it, thereby making God a reason for creation. The very meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*, however, was to express that there is no reason for creation at all. In a deconstructed way, the statement that God created out of nothing means that reason can find no reason for the existence of the world. God is the name for the lack of reason, the absence of a premise, a first principle, or a ground. The proposition that the world was created out of nothing says that it exists for no reason.

In a similar way, Nancy sheds light on the nature of faith.[39] In faith, people relate to the non-principle, the nothingness, or the un-ground referred to by the term God. Faith thus can be described as an act of reason relating to that which infinitely exceeds thinking without constituting the excess as an explanation for its thinking. Referring to the New Testament letter of James, Nancy argues that faith is "in the works," as a conviction that is not connected to any concept, teaching, or alleged truth but is totally absorbed in an act or deed. As stated before, reason can find no reason for the world. Consequently, no reason can be found to assess any particular act in the world as either right or wrong, or even a reason to act in the world at all. Yet humans can act in the belief that they have to do something, and that conviction comes from the outside, as it were, from something other than reason that makes us act, even though we cannot account for it or provide a ground for it. Such a work is a matter of faith that believes nothing but

38 Cf. Nancy, "Atheism and Monotheism," and Jean-Luc Nancy, "There is No Sense of Sense: That is Worthy of Adoration," in Nancy, *Adoration*.

39 Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Judeo-Christian (on Faith)," in Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*.

hands itself over to an action and is absorbed in it. Faith, then, has nothing to do with convictions but is in the works it does without ever being able to justify or substantiate itself. This faith detaches itself from the idea that there is a first principle or ground that explains existence and leads to certain actions.

The dis-enclosure of the world that Nancy envisions introduces a form of transcendence that does not open a world above or outside the world but opens the world "to its own outside."[40] There is nothing but the world, in its own groundlessness, in which the divine does not appear but is only present as absence, as a gap or lack of explanation for the world, which opens the world to itself. The entities in the world can appear to each other in their individuality and uniqueness through dis-enclosure. As a result, those entities are opened up to each other, and the world becomes disclosed to itself and "to its own outside." Nancy arrives at such a difficult formulation because he intends a transcendence that is not of the world but neither exists outside the world. Such a transcendence actually consists of difference and differentiation. This differentiation exists only as a difference between the things that are. By making things different, difference acts, so to speak, as a creator out of nothing, without existing itself. Difference constitutes a rupture and a separation in what had otherwise remained contained within itself and had remained enclosed and unopened. In this perspective, the world does not constitute a whole or total but is "the exposition of what exists to the touch of sense, which opens within it the infinity of an 'outside'."[41] The sole and abundant sense of the world is that all beings are being opened to each other and can appear to each other as the individuals they are. The world is all there is, without the "all," in which everything can appear as it is without having to be homogeneous or uniform, and without the search for a generality in which all are equal to each other.

With the help of a deconstructed Christianity, Nancy wants to arrive at a dis-enclosure of atheistic reason, which has subjected human beings to the rule of a first principle or ground and deprives them of their dignity by reducing them to replaceable and interchangeable elements of a whole. The deconstruction of Christianity thus fits into a complex philosophical program in which Nancy, after Hegel, after the fall of communism, after the implausibility of ideologies, and especially after Christianity, searches for a sustainable form of community and humanity. For this, he falls back, among others, on Hegel, who interpreted Christian doctrines; on Kant,

40 Cf. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 10, 71.

41 Cf. Nancy, *Adoration*, 3.

who argued that an inherent value and dignity have no price since price makes everything interchangeable; and on Heidegger, who argued that being-in-the-world is always being with (*Mit-sein*) others. In this, Nancy repeats Heidegger's attempt to arrive at another beginning of thinking by means of thinking.

Giorgio Agamben

Life, or bare life, plays an important role in the work of Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942).[42] His books centre around this theme while focusing on very different subjects such as aesthetics, language, ontology, ethics, theology, and politics, of which the connection is not always clear. Therefore, the underlying connection in his work has to be uncovered through interpretations. An important central idea in any case is that life is elusive, indefinable, and indeterminate and must be characterised primarily as possibility or potentiality. In this, Agamben is indebted to Heidegger, from whom he adopts the idea that *Dasein* knows no essence but is rather characterised by the pure possibility of being. There are no goals that humans must achieve; there is no calling that they must obey; and there is no fixed being they have to realise. Fundamental to human beings is just the ability to be without having an "actual being" in fact. To bring this fundamentally open possibility of being back into view, human life must be detached from all philosophical ideas and political determinations that prescribe what people must make of themselves. Just because there is no human essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, and no destiny, there is no way to determine what life should be. Precisely for this reason, ethics, philosophy, and politics matter, because only through the absence of a final destination does life become more than the performance of set tasks.[43] "An authentic philosophical vocation is really nothing so much as the revocation of every other vocation," Agamben claims.[44] In following this vocation, he argues for a liberation of life from preconceived ideas and

42 A large amount of scholarly articles have been published on Agamben's work, usually relating to one or a few of his books. I rely mainly on Eva Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* (Junius Verlag, 2005); Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford University Press, 2009); Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben* (Routledge, 2010); Rinse Reeling Brouwer, *Eeuwig leven: Agamben en de theologie* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Sjibbolet, 2016); Igor Jasinski, *Giorgio Agamben: Education without Ends* (Springer, 2018).

43 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Haerdt (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), originally 1990, 43.

44 Hannah Leitgeb und Cornelia Vismann, "Das Unheilige Leben: Ein Gespräch mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben," *Literaturen* (Berlin) 2, no. 1 (2001): 16–21, 16.

gives priority to the possibility of being over the factuality of a such and such-shaped kind of being.

In order to get a good picture of human possibility, Agamben returns to Aristotle's thoughts on potentiality and actuality.[45] Traditionally, the emphasis is always on the possibility of realising something. Once the possibility is realised, it disappears as a possibility since it was realised. Aristotle, however, also counts the ability not to be and not to actualise in the category of possibility, and Agamben elaborates on that. A possibility does not have to be realised, nor does it disappear as a possibility once it is realised. Possibility implies both the ability to do and the ability not to do. According to this view, incapacity, which is the possibility of not doing something, is an ability of humans. Not doing and not realising should therefore not be seen as a deficiency or a deficit, but as an ability and a possibility. A realised possibility can always be made ineffective or inoperative and reduced to its original possibility of being actualised or not.

This insight helps Agamben to focus on alternative modes of human existence and forms of life versus the possibilities that are now realised or "must" be realised. Aimless life possesses the possibility of many more forms of life than the actualised ones, and his concern is with the richness of possibilities in which the value and openness of existence are located.

To shape life, community and language are especially important. According to Agamben, a true community is a community of unique people without nation, race, or religious unity and purity. This is a community in which people are not primarily red, French, or Muslim, but whatever, and are able to communicate themselves to each other in their uniqueness. In being whatever—and Agamben uses the Latin term *quodlibet*, meaning "at will," to denote this—the emphasis is on the human possibility of being either this or that, which any human being can realise this way or that way, just as they want: *quodlibet*.[46]

In his reflections, Agamben likewise emphasises language. The most important thing about language is not *what* we say about a reality that is situated outside of language, but *that* we can say and have the ability to speak in order to communicate ourselves to each other in language. If we consider language primarily as an instrument for making statements about a reality outside of language, language quickly becomes a limitation, a cage, or a prison in which we are locked. We want to say something about reality

45 See especially Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1999).

46 Cf. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 1.

outside of language, but we are stuck in language. Language separates us from reality outside of it and hinders us from putting into words the unspeakable beyond language (the thing in itself, the other, the ground of the world, the subject, God).[47] However, in Agamben's view, language does not consist of representations or depictions of what is beyond, and the idea that in language we depict something unspeakable outside of language leads to misconceptions. The unspeakable or unnameable is just that we have language and can speak in language, as language makes us speak. Thus, language cannot be perceived as a limitation but as a possibility, in which we do not depict but express and communicate. This conception of language accompanies Agamben's great emphasis on the profanity of human life. If the unspeakable outside of language is renounced, which is supposed to be expressed in language, the only thing that matters is what is—whatever it is—which, as a cluster of possibilities and imperfections, can communicate itself utterly profanely as that which it is.

The sovereign power

In his most famous book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben views life from the stance of law and power, criticising Western politics.[48] To do so, he turns to twentieth-century philosophers Michel Foucault, who introduced the theme of bio-politics, and Walter Benjamin, who acquainted himself with Carl Schmitt's ideas on sovereign power. Agamben, moreover, shows himself akin to the ideas of Jean-Luc Nancy. The entanglement of their discourses makes Agamben's own argument complicated.

Agamben is particularly concerned about the totalitarian tendencies in contemporary democracies that determine life down to the private sphere. This is what Foucault referred to as "bio-politics." While laws and regulations determine life, they also isolate intangible, indefinable, and undetermined life as well. They exclude it and imprison it; they give it up and hand it over; they exile it and banish it, making life "bare life."

To shed light on this claim, Agamben reverts to the notion of sovereign power as it was elaborated by the German jurist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt argued that the sovereign is the one who decides about the state of exception. The underlying problem in this involves the question of what actually makes the law legitimate. The institution of law cannot be legitimised by the law itself, which, after all was not in force at the time of its enactment. Schmitt

47 Cf. especially Giorgio Agamben, "The Thing Itself," in Agamben, *Potentialities*.

48 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998), originally 1995.

claimed that the declaration of a state of exception, in which the law is no longer in force, is similar to the institution of the law. The sovereign is the one who determines the state of exception, and that same sovereign power also has the authority to establish the law as something that cannot otherwise be founded or legitimised.[49] However, this gives the law a violent character, as Walter Benjamin argued against Schmitt. Agamben now links this legal and political discussion of sovereign power to the ontological question of potentiality and actuality, which is important to him. "An act is sovereign when it realises itself by simply taking away its own potentiality to not be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself."[50] Sovereign power thus cancels its potentiality, ignores its capacity for otherness, lets itself be what it has to be according to its own judgement, and perseveres in it. Sovereignty is that which is, must be, and realises itself.

According to Agamben, it is part of the logic of sovereign power to always isolate, exclude, exile, or banish something because it cancels something, namely its own potentiality, by providing itself with existence and becoming what it thinks it should be. In order to explain further, he reverts to a distinction between *zoë* and *bios*, as introduced by Aristotle. *Zoë* is the natural life, the life shared by all living beings, which must be counted as belonging to the sphere of the *oikos* or the household. *Bios* is life in a particular mode of existence or a particular form of life that is politically regulated.[51] Western politics, according to Agamben, is, from the beginning, based on what it excludes. It regulates life (*bios*), but isolates natural life (*zoë*) from it and excludes it.

As mentioned, sovereign power establishes itself by excluding, exiling, and banishing. What it excludes, however, is also included, precisely through the exception. The sovereign power excludes life, but it also determines that life by including it in the exception and banishing it. Banished life is therefore not "ordinary life," but "bare life." Bare life is thus produced by sovereign power as a life that is excluded, banished, and rendered worthless.[52] As a symbol or paradigm of bare or naked life, Agamben introduces the *homo sacer*, the "holy human being," a character he finds in ancient Roman law. The *homo sacer* is a human being who is banished and therefore may be killed by anyone. At the same time, this human being shall not be sacrificed to

49 Cf. also Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (University of Chicago Press, 2005), originally 2003.

50 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46.

51 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.

52 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 6.

the gods and is thus doubly exempt, both from the human and divine legal order. For Agamben, this *homo sacer* is of importance as an image of bare life, on which ultimately every political community rests, that is created by sovereign power. Whoever sees that sovereign power always relies on the exclusion of the *homo sacer* sees through the violence of the political community that produces "bare life." Bare life is a life stripped of all quality, which, in the absence of qualities, does resemble the indeterminate life of possibilities but is yet the perverted version of it.

On the basis of *homo sacer*, sovereign power, and bare life, Agamben paints a pitch-black picture of current politics in contemporary democracies. In his view, the state of exception is no longer an exception but rather has become the rule.[53] Democracies are using sovereign power by declaring the state of exception to produce naked life, especially in camps like Guantanamo Bay and other refugee camps, or "shelters." The concentration camp is thus not a place of abnormal horror but the place where habitual mechanisms of power come to light, in the same way Foucault exposed power mechanisms by studying the mad house.[54] According to Agamben, all of us are virtual *homines sacri*, whose lives are used, regulated, and determined but also excluded and rendered worthless.[55] Even though Agamben thereby moves into political territory and exposes himself to sharp criticism of his radical position, he nevertheless emphasises that political change cannot come without a fundamental change in prevailing thoughts on the relationship of possibility and reality, contingency and necessity, potentiality and actuality.[56] After all, the main problem is that the sovereign power believes it must provide existence for itself and produces naked life by cancelling its own possibility of being (and therefore of being different) in its self-realisation.

Forms of life

That life is elusive, indeterminate, and indefinable, even when it is made into bare life by sovereign power, is illustrated by Agamben in his essay

53 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7. At the beginning of the COVID epidemic, Agamben applied this thought to the Corona crisis, in which, according to him, life was destroyed by being supposedly protected. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, "Nach Corona: Wir sind nurmehr das nackte Leben," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 18, 2020, and "Wir sollten uns weniger sorgen und mehr denken," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung,* April 7, 2020.

54 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.

55 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 115.

56 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 44.

Nudities.[57] We have no knowledge at all of bare life, or *das bloße Leben*, as it was called by Benjamin, from whom Agamben adopts the term, for our view of nakedness is theologically determined. In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are naked only after they sinned. Before sinning, they were not naked because they were clothed with grace. After sinning, they are naked, but their nudity is primarily a loss of grace and an exposure to sin. Nudity itself therefore never really comes into view but is merely assumed under the covering or shown in the disrobing as a loss of covering. Just as the sovereign power produces bare life by excluding it, the Western theological gaze produces nudity as a form of disrobing without really paying attention to the imperfect, fragile, aimless physical life that, in all its fragility, possesses possibilities for life. The main question thus becomes how to escape the sovereign power and the theological gaze to find a form of life that does not exempt bare life but is in unity with it.

Agamben has given several incentives to answer that question, and in these incentives, he shows a certain similarity with Jean-Luc Nancy. On the one hand, the theology that determines our view of the law, sovereign power, and nudity is part of the problem. On the other hand, exactly in the field of theology, the ways out are drawn.

In his book *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Agamben reaches back to the letters of Paul, which he believes to constitute a fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition.[58] He reads these letters from the perspective of Walter Benjamin, who spoke of a weak messianic power that is present in history and can redeem us. In any present moment, the Messiah can enter, break through linear and historical time, and be present as the Resurrected. The "present time" in the presence of the Messiah opens the eye to the radical turns and possibilities that each moment holds within it. The gaze then becomes focused not on a distant final destination that we would reach through a dialectic of history or an end-time fulfilment. The messianic "present-time" at any moment constitutes the end of time as it interrupts or interjects time. In the presence of the Messiah, sovereign power is abolished, the law is set aside, and freedom is regained. The effect of this is articulated by Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, where he states that people who have been redeemed live in the world as if they were not there and possess worldly goods as if they did not

57 Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stean Pedatella (Stanford University Press, 2010), originally 2009.

58 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005), originally 2000.

have them.[59] The "as if not" is precisely a breakdown of sovereign power, which must be what it is. It constitutes an opening to potentiality that also honours the ability of not realising or having.

In *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* Agamben outlines the form-of-life of the early Franciscans.[60] Francis recognised no other rule than the gospel, so that life was not governed by a norm or a law but by Christ Himself. The Franciscan life, moreover, was determined by an *abdiciatio omnis iuris*, that is, a renunciation of every right and law, by which also any legal property was renounced. Also, only a *simplex usus facti* was permitted, which is a simple factual use of things that are necessary for daily life, such as clothing, food, and shelter. Moreover, the monastic life of the Franciscans coincided with their liturgy in such a way that the liturgy does not form an external ritual act, but life itself becomes liturgy. In this way, a form of life emerged in which *zoë* and *bios* coincide and no bare life is banished by law and power. The Franciscans thus developed a practice, a habitus, or a form of life that Agamben considers fruitful, although he believes that they articulated that form of life themselves too much as a denial or a renunciation of possession and right, so that they remained attached to possession and right, which is why their views could be condemned ultimately by Pope John XXII. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben continues his thoughts on the form of life as a unity of *zoë* and *bios*.[61] He advocates a modal ontology that does not imply statements of what Being is or should be, but merely notes that Being uses itself. Bodies—think about the inspired, thinking bodies that humans are—use themselves, for example, to make something of themselves. In this way, the essence of bodies is located in their use, one way or another. Similarly, what is true of bodies is true of Being: the essence of Being is *that* it uses itself. This prevents prescribing *how* it should be used, which would impose on Being or on bodies a standard or a task that would automatically lead to the exclusion of some part of life.

Although Agamben draws positive examples of life forms from the Christian tradition by referring to Paul and the Franciscans, he still maintains his opinion that the church disavowed the messianism of Jesus and the

59 In this, Agamben corresponds almost fully with Rudolf Bultmann, who, in his theology under the heading '*Entweltlichung*,' makes exactly the same point on the basis of the same text. See, e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (Kaiser, 1985), 35.

60 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2013), originally 2011.

61 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2016), originally 2014.

importance of the messianic present-time, which interrupts the course of time and opens the eye to the unexpected possibilities of the moment.[62] In fact, the church developed a theology that is very ambiguously related to developments in time and the possibilities of the moment. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben elaborates that the church produced a paradoxical theology that, on the one hand, lets God be savingly present at work in the world, although on the other hand, God is elevated above the world as a transcendent being.[63] Theology thereby involves God in immanent reality on the one hand, but on the other hand, it wants to keep God pure and unstained, out of contact with earthly reality. God's providence does salvific work within the immanent sphere (as it guides human beings to salvation in the ordering, or *oikonomia*, or economy, of this world), but God is also extracted from the economy in complete transcendence. As a result, providence does rule the world with a view to salvation as its final goal, but the economy nevertheless is robbed of its foundation because God's transcendence is separate from it. The idea of an economy of salvation legitimises the incurrence of casualties and the occurrence of collateral damage that is taken for granted by providence in view of its end goal.[64] A genuine connection between God's pure transcendence and God's providence in this world is no longer there in this regard. A genuine connection between the transcendent God and humans can only be made by worshipping God and contemplating God's glory, which, however, is no longer found in this world itself. Agamben argues that modernity does not really constitute a breach of this theological type of thinking but continues to think within the same pattern of thought. The efforts of humans in governments and institutions are purportedly directed toward prosperity and well-being, but these goals remain unfounded, just as God's transcendence is left out of the economy of salvation. Governments and institutions can only operationalise these goals—that is, make them operative without real substance or inherent meaning.

62 See Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye (Seagull Books, 2012), originally 2010.

63 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford University Press, 2011), originally 2007. About this, see also Job de Meyere, "Giorgio Agamben: secularisatie als economische theologie," in *Radicale secularisatie? Tien hedendaagse filosofen over religie en moderniteit*, ed. Stijn Latré and Guido Vanheeswijck (Pelckmans/Klement, 2012).

64 Agamben's analysis strikes me as critical, incisive, and significant, without doing full justice to the theological problems with which early Christian theologians wanted to understand themselves and without honouring that the *oikonomia* of God is essential to an indeed transcendent God. Cf. Hendrik S. Benjamins, *Eingeordnete Freiheit: Freiheit und Vorsehung bei Origenes* (Brill, 1994), especially Ch. IV: "Die *Oikonomia* Gottes bei Origenes."

Just as he exposed a logic of sovereignty in *homo sacer*, Agamben now exposes a logic of economics. Sovereign power segregates bare life, and economics segregates a pure transcendence, which has no real relationship to the world anymore. The sovereign power has to realise itself and cancels potentiality. The economy is managed on the basis of high and groundless goals that are outside its own reality. Against this, Agamben advocates the worshipping of profane existence in all its potentialities and vulnerabilities, from which nothing is excepted or separated, in which all great goals are rendered inoperative, and care for the world springs from the world itself.

Fragile and imperfect life

Nancy and Agamben both attempt to rediscover the fragile and imperfect lives of human beings in their uniqueness and irreducibility. For this reason, they criticise both conventional philosophical thinking and politics, which have subjected life to a principle or a sovereign power that holds life in check or even puts it under a ban. Such power can be broken by exposing a fundamentally wrong way of thinking about being. In their reflections, Nancy and Agamben include Christianity and theology, which have contributed to the establishment of a sovereign power and the end goal of the world. A rehabilitation of fragile and imperfect life requires an ongoing and radical secularisation. This secularisation, however, is complex because it does not simply involve an exodus from Christianity but demands the disengagement from a form of thought that occurs both in Christianity and in modern thought. A thoroughgoing continuation of secularisation can therefore draw on deconstructed religious notions and theological concepts again. Since modernity can be seen as essentially a secularised Christianity, criticism of modernity can take advantage of a deconstructed Christianity.

Along with similarities, differences between Nancy and Agamben also emerge. Nancy especially emphasises the difference that is fundamental to all things that show themselves in their individuality. This difference is a kind of non-metaphysical anti-principle. It makes all things different but *is* not anything itself, although it opens the world to itself. In emphasising differentiation as the unground that opens all beings to one another, Nancy, incidentally, differs from Žižek, who posits a pre-transcendental gap, which is a gap that turns human beings into beings with a fundamental sense of lack and an illusory desire. Unlike Nancy, Agamben does not consider "differentiation" to be the fundamental theme but "possibility." His primary concern is not about the irreducible uniqueness of singular human beings who cannot possibly be summed up collectively as humanity, but about the

possibilities that humans can realise in different ways. These possibilities take shape in forms of life, and precisely with that, Agamben wants to make a positive contribution to thinking and politics that goes beyond criticism and deconstruction. Yet these forms of life remain relatively vague.[65] Agamben's intentions to render sovereign power, vocation, or norms and laws inoperative allow themselves to be more clearly articulated than his ideas about forms of life, which must be profane, must avoid setting goals, and must keep *zoë* and *bios* together.

7.4. The Shortfall of Postmodern Deconstruction

Postmodern thought is complex, as evidenced by the attempts to find a new relationship to faith, transcendence, and secularisation beyond God, theology, and Christianity. De Lange and Raschke seek an attitude of faith that leaves theological constructions behind but is rooted in the Christian tradition. Altizer and Žižek want to distance themselves from transcendence after the death of God, yet they continue to let transcendence play a role in immanence. Nancy and Agamben seek an attitude to life beyond Christianity in a radical secularisation, but can fall back on deconstructed Christian notions in their critique of modernity. Postmodernism proves to be complex because it wants to get rid of Christianity and modernity but does not break free from both. As a result, it is secularised in its attitude toward faith, but it can still fall back on religious notions in that secularised attitude.

Postmodern thinking is not only complex but also critical. It expresses a sharp critique of established patterns of thought and forms of life as provided by Christianity and modernity. Life must be guided out of it, and such an exodus requires a radical critique of metaphysics and a fundamental modification of ontology. Postmodernists therefore deny the absolute or a final ground. Transcendence is conceived of as negativity, which is located in a pre-transcendental gap that manifests itself as a hole in the subject, according to Žižek, in the groundlessness of everything, according to Nancy, or in an indissoluble possibility that can be regained through inoperability, according to Agamben. There is no need for a religious perspective on the world or the self but rather need for the underlining of their utter profanity,

65 For this, see especially Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung*, 113ff. See also Eva Geulen, "Wirklichkeiten, Möglichkeiten und Unmöglichkeiten: Zum Problem der Lebensform bei Giorgio Agamben und Theodor W. Adorno," *Modern Language Notes* 77, no. 1 (2010): 642–660.

even if that profanity reverts to religious notions in order to remain profane. Christianity can help rid atheistic thinking of its fallacy and thus acquire a critical function, but it is not allowed a positive and formative function on top of that.

The critique emanating from postmodern thought shows great strength but ultimately a deficit as well. Deconstruction is critical because it wants to reduce and dismantle interpretations for the sake of the possibility that what is interpreted can also show itself differently. Any interpretation is always a fixation that pins down meaning and robs the world of possibilities. Postmodernists are not concerned with the assurance of meaningfulness, as was predominantly the case with the theologians of interpretation, but with opening up and reclaiming possibilities. In this, the postmodernists make an important contribution. The opening up of possibilities and the dis-enclosure of reality, however, require a permanent criticism that is constantly attentive to prevent itself from postulating a principle and proclaiming an ideology that constrains life through closed perspectives or compelling goals. The criticism of postmodernists, therefore, constantly stands in the way of a more constructive attitude.

In postmodern thinking, God is invoked as an entity that does not exist and even claims not to exist itself; as a ground that is un-ground; or as a pre-transcendental negativity. Thus, a principle is posited that is intended merely to dissolve every principle. Not so that the principle realises itself in a development, as with Hegel, but rather to undo from the beginning each goal of each realisation and to allow it to return to its primary possibility of being either realised or not. That keeps the world open, which constitutes an important contribution but also prevents thinking from arriving at any orienting statements. Postmodern thinking seems unable to succeed in developing a meaningful and true perspective on life in which perspectives for action are provided that go beyond the next step or involve more than the deconstruction of precisely its own perspectives. There is a shortfall in that. Yet this shortfall does not imply a disqualification of postmodernism, nor does it initiate a plea to simply ignore postmodern thought, because a true perspective without the critical complexity of postmodernism is impossible. Just as theology must pass through a theology of interpretation, which focuses on humans as interpretive beings, it must also pass through the postmodern critique of it, which questions and deconstructs interpretation. In my opinion, theology cannot stand by the interpretation, as if it were founded and secured. Nor, in my view, can it stand by a deconstruction of interpretation, which offers a permanent dis-enclosure but does not offer larger perspectives.

Theology can renounce God and limit itself to a critique of ideology, or it can focus on an exposure of how God is being misused in the believer's life.[66] Theology may also want to continue doing theology and continue to speak of God after criticising onto-theological thinking, last grounds, and the logic of sovereignty. That will be a theology that is focused on God after God, which is still about God. Such a theology can connect with the projects of the past, which of course have not been totally deprived of their value by postmodernism, as evidenced by the theological notions in the thinking of Žižek, Nancy, and Agamben. However, theology will have to be able to do justice to postmodern complexity and respond to deconstruction while still wanting to speak constructively about God, life, humanity, and the world—with conceptual content and in such a way that it can contribute to the flourishing and thriving of life and human life. At present, the development of such a theology is, as always and everywhere, under construction among a number of theologians, as will be shown in the following chapter.

Thinking patterns exposed

The great importance of postmodern deconstructionists for a theology after Kuitert is that fundamental traits of Western and Christian thinking patterns are being exposed. Western and Christian thinking is trapped in a structure based on first principles, final grounds, and final ends. A liberation from that requires a complex form of thinking, which needs Christianity and enlightenment to rid itself of its own derailments. Postmodernists argue that reality depends on interpretation. However, they hold that interpretation must be viewed more critically than theologians of interpretation do by supporting its meaningfulness. The shift of creative power from a power that can make and break us to the subject that creates a world of meaning remains a movement that is still seeking or upholding a final foundation. This calls for deconstruction. Such a deconstruction, however, can hardly itself provide orientation or perspectives for action. This raises the search for a theology that can incorporate postmodern criticism but continues to speak interpretively and exploratory about God and the world.

66 As is done, in my opinion, by Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Theology: A Vision for Change* (Indiana University Press, 2016) and Peter Rollins, *The Idolatry of God* (Howard Books, 2012).

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8. God Again

Abstract: Constructive theologians Richard Kearney, John Caputo, and Catherine Keller assign an important role to God but provide the notion with new content that deviates from traditional views. Kearney argues for a return to God after the loss of an almighty, sovereign God. In his view, God neither is nor is not but can be. According to Caputo, the name of God does not refer to a being but denotes an event. Catherine Keller takes God as a designation for the relationships out of which the world is constituted. Their mutual discussions show that their conceptualisations of God emerge from fundamentally different beliefs about God.

Keywords: Richard Kearny, John Caputo, Catherine Keller, anatheism, event, relations

This chapter focuses on the work of contemporary philosophers of religion, Richard Kearney, John Caputo, and Catherine Keller. They can be considered post-theistic theologians who are developing a theology of God after God. They may do so from different backgrounds and views, but there is a coherence among them as well. This coherence becomes particularly clear from their differences from the previously discussed modern theologians of interpretation and postmodern deconstructivists. According to Kearney, Caputo, and Keller, God is not a final ground in which the subject finds its certainty and freedom, as theologians of interpretation argue. Nor is God the un-ground or the anti-principle that prevents our worldview from being enclosed, as postmodern deconstructivists want. According to the theologians in this chapter, God rather offers possibilities to humans and the world with whom God interacts. In their elaboration of this perspective, Kearney, Caputo, and Keller take the liberty of updating the Christian tradition for the present.

The theologians discussed in this chapter provide important directions for a theology "after Kuitert." They continue to think and talk about God after God because God matters to the way people connect with the world

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and relate to others and the other, yet they expand on this very differently. Kearney has a background in hermeneutics. He conceives of God as a possibility that can be realised by humans if they open themselves up to others. A God-who-may-be helps humans to relate well to others and to interact with each other in such a way that they transform themselves and turn God into reality. Caputo has a great affinity for postmodern deconstruction, which he applies in his own way. He understands God as a promise and a call of reality that presents us with a better world than the present one. It is up to humans to respond to that call and realise its promise. Keller is a feminist theologian schooled in process theology. She places a great emphasis on relationships. Everything that exists consists of relationships. In her view, God is the totality of all the relationships that make up the world. To shed light on the work of Kearney, Caputo, and Keller, the main features of their theology will be discussed in this chapter. It will then be indicated to what extent their theological designs differ from one another and provoke fundamental debates.

8.1. Richard Kearney and the God-Who-May-Be

The work of Richard Kearney (b. 1954) is broad and multifaceted, but the following common thread can be found. In his work, the relationship of self and other plays an important role. The self or subject tries to understand itself as part the world and must do so in constant interaction with the other and other human beings. The subject becomes something only in its relation to what is other from itself and strange to itself, which is something it cannot grasp and understand, but to which it must constantly relate. In its relation to the other, the subject becomes a self.

Humans use stories to determine their relationship to themselves and others. By doing so, they tell who they have become, and they make connections between themselves and others in the context of a world. Stories can both harden identities and foster enmity but also promote that self and other grow and develop through each other.

Religious traditions have the ability to favour this growth. They narratively map the world and thereby offer humans perspectives on themselves, others, and the world. From his own tradition, Kearney argues that we must understand the story of Christianity as the story of a God-who-may-be and not as the system of a God-who-is, who has established existence. A God-who-may-be is a perspective, a future that we can realise if we are open to the other and offer hospitality to others. In that case, we ourselves can

be welcomed into the world of the other, who becomes our host. Self and other thereby become both guest and host who can welcome each other.

An important question then, of course, is why we still need to talk about God in these reflections. Kearney's answer is that God is the Other that comes to us through the otherness of the other. This answer implies the crucial idea that the other is more than just some other and can be seen as the manifestation of something greater than itself, something that transcends and exceeds it, but is never separated from it. The Other reports itself in the other only as a dimension that transcends the other, but never presents itself independently of that other. Kearney next extends this notion—that the other is more than just some other—to the view that reality is more than just this reality. Religion enables us precisely to deal with this "more" of reality—its transcendent dimension, its surplus, or its excess of meaning—and to realise the possibilities of a better and richer life in dealing with ourselves and others. In this way, a God-who-may-be comes to existence among us.

This main line of Kearney's work can be examined in more detail by taking a closer look on some of his books. These include the three titles he presented under the overarching theme of a *Philosophy at the Limit*, namely *The God Who May Be*, next *On Stories* and finally *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*.[1] In addition, his book *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* is of great importance, as it contains in more detail his thoughts about God after God.[2]

Self and other

As a hermeneutically oriented thinker, leaning heavily on the work of his teacher Paul Ricoeur, the theme of self and other is of great importance to Kearney. According to him, self and other always remain different but are always related to each other as well. Underscoring this relationship, he distances himself from a one-sided emphasis on either self or other. On the one hand, he distinguishes himself from the tradition that heavily emphasises the subject and can only think of the other as an alter ego. He thereby rejects the Hegelian movement of thought, which seeks to arrive at itself through an understanding of the other and thereby equates the other

1 Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2001); *On Stories* (Routledge, 2002); *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (Routledge, 2003). For systematic reasons, the three books of *Philosophy at the Limit* are not addressed here in order of appearance.

2 Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

with itself.[3] On the other hand, he distinguishes himself from philosophers such as Levinas and Derrida, who turn the otherness of the other into such a radical difference that there hardly remains a relationship at all.[4] He thereby criticises the postmodern movement of thought that allows the other to be so utterly different from the self that the self can only feel compelled to respect otherness beyond any understanding. In both cases, the relationship between self and other, which enables them to change through each other, is missing.

Although he differs from theologians of interpretation developing their subject theory and postmodern thinkers arguing for radical alterity, Kearney has common ground with both, precisely because he wants to keep both self and other together. Like the German theologians of interpretation, he places a great emphasis on the importance of interpretation because of his hermeneutical approach. Humans always understand something "as something." Theologians of interpretation, however, are focusing on the subject and consciousness as the starting point for a religious interpretation of the world and the self because the subject is rooted in a deeper or final ground. Kearney does not develop a theory of the subject and its final ground but focuses on the other and otherness to which the self must relate itself. The subject becomes itself only in its relation to what is strange and foreign.

Kearney shares his attention to what is strange and other with philosophers such as Levinas and Derrida. They argue that the subject can never grasp or understand otherness. The other is really different from the subject, so the subject cannot recognise itself in the other and thus cannot come to itself by that means. Moreover, the other never allows itself to be inserted into a totality because of its otherness, which always falls outside totalities for being something else and different, so that the world can never be thought of as a complete whole. According to Levinas, as a human being, I can never grasp the otherness of others in my own thinking because it is beyond my horizon. The otherness of others appeals to me as something I have to respect. Derrida radicalised the other with his famous statement that "every other is completely other."[5] Predication of the other is impossible, as

3 Fundamentally, Kearney's objection to Hegel is that he finds the self in the other but has no regard for the other in the self. Kearney places priority on otherness, which, however, is not radically and incomprehensibly different, and uses Levinas in this sense to change Hegel's movement—not from self to other, but from the other to self—without going entirely with Levinas. Cf. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 81.

4 Cf. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 17.

5 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago University Press, 2008), originally 1999, 82.

the other always differs from everything else because of its otherness. The otherness of others, therefore, cannot be unified simply as the manifestation of an identical Other.

In short, in his reflections, Kearney only partially adopts the emphasis of Levinas and Derrida on otherness. As noted above, they have such a radical conception of what is strange and other that the self is opposed to it beyond relation. Kearney rather seeks a middle ground between the subject put forward by theologians of interpretation and the wholly other of postmodern thinkers by speaking of an interaction between self and other.

Stories

The other and the foreign make it possible for us to have experiences of an extraordinary nature beyond the reach of reason. That is, in short, the core idea of Kearney's *Philosophy at the Limit*. In extraordinary experiences, we relate to the other. In our confrontation with the unthinkable and inexplicable other, we need stories to establish a connection between ourselves, the other, and our world.[6] Stories, therefore, are of particular and fundamental importance because they give meaning to a fragmented world and structure it.

In *On Stories*, Kearney explores the complexity of stories and narrative truth. Such is a truth that emerges from the narrative but cannot easily be captured in a concept or idea. Stories are essential for that reason, but they are never innocent, and there are dilemmas attached to telling them. Stories can offer us new views of reality by providing novel and creative descriptions of our situation. They give us new imaginations of our existence, which transform our being in the world and provide us with new opportunities to act in it.[7] However, they can distort and deform the world as well. Fact and fiction are always intertwined in stories, and the act of storytelling consequently confronts us with moral questions.

An important question, first of all, is whether we should understand narrative as a representation of reality or as a possibility to transform it. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, James Joyce recreates his past in order to make his present world habitable. *Wahrheit und*

6 Kearney, *On Stories*, 157. About *Philosophy at the Limit,* see Robert Sinnerbrink, "After Onto-Theology: The Ethics of Narration," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11, no. 2 (2003): 225–244, and Michael Dunne, "Richard Kearney's 'Philosophy at the Limit'," *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 68 no. 2 (2005): 307–323.

7 Kearney, *On Stories*, 12–13. In this respect, Kearney is much more positive about the role of imagination in triggering transformation than Kuitert, who contrasts imagination primarily with truth. Kearney seeks "narrative truth" as a truth in which imagination plays a role.

Dichtung are thus mixed up, which is very productive for Joyce as a poet but would actually be problematic for a historian. According to Kearney, the question of how we should deal with the past also plays a major role in psychoanalysis. The analyst lets patients tell their story, but the question is whether this is necessary to unveil a hidden truth or to deprogram old stories and open up life stories to something new. A second dilemma of storytelling arises with stories and testimonies of the Holocaust. In this case, the question is raised of how to approach the horror of the past that is too terrible for words and therefore cannot really be shown. The horror can still be depicted with the help of fiction, which, while enabling empathy, also becomes disloyal to the unimaginable horrors of the past. The horror can also be deliberately concealed since it cannot be articulated, but in so doing, the horror is placed beyond the reach of communication and takes on the traits of a monstrous holiness. A third fundamental problem finally arises in narratives of national identity, which constantly deal with the question of who is included or excluded.

So, according to Kearney, stories are fundamental, but we should ask ourselves what stories we tell, how we tell them, and why we tell them. Kearney himself argues that we can reorder the world through narrative, positioning ourselves differently compared with the past, so that a different future becomes conceivable.[8] Moreover, the story can give us insight and understanding. For example, if we empathise with the protagonist of a story and at the same time distance ourselves from that person and see by what forces his or her fate is determined, we also gain insight into the forces that determine us, which may produce a catharsis.[9] The story thus offers us wisdom and insight into ourselves and the world.[10] However, the fundamental value of stories can only come to its realisation if we do not cling to our own and familiar, but are open to others and the other. Only in an ethical attitude, which does not exclude others or the other, can new ways of seeing and being be opened and can we be receptive to a transformation that allows for a world to be shared.[11]

The strange and the other

In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Kearney shifts his attention from the stories to the strange and other we can relate to in stories. Strangers, gods

8 Kearney, *On Stories*, 131ff.
9 Kearney, *On Stories*, 137ff.
10 Kearney, *On Stories*, 142ff.
11 Kearney, *On Stories*, 150ff.

and monsters are beings at the outside of our world, who are dangerous to us and toward whom we define ourselves as ourselves.[12] However, these strange beings are always connected to ourselves because we project onto them what we do not know or accept in ourselves.[13] There is a part of us that is foreign to ourselves, different from that which we think or feel belongs to us, that we therefore do not accept. This otherness or strangeness of ourselves is easily projected onto strangers, gods, and monsters. However, if we project the other in ourselves onto them, and repel it, we will never find a proper relationship to ourselves. This can only be done in relationships with ourselves and the other, which includes both the other *within* and *outside* ourselves.

If the self places otherness completely outside itself and projects it onto strange beings, the figures of the stranger, the gods, and the monsters blur into each other. In that case, we can no longer find proper relationships with them, in which we distinguish between the other that we welcome and the other that we reject. The stranger becomes either a scapegoat whom I chase away, or a God who commands me.[14] The monster is demonised and kept out of our reach in order to keep God on our side, but gets qualified as divine and sacred as well, as it becomes both a *tremens* and a *fascinans*, namely something that both repels and intrigues us, which conforms to Rudolf Otto's description of the holy.[15] A God who is totally other, in utter otherness, may as well be a monster as a God. If, by contrast, self and other relate to each other or start to find some understanding of each other, distinctions become possible. Strangers are neither gods nor monsters. God is not so incomprehensibly other that God could also be a monster. Neither every other is an angel, nor every self is a monster.[16]

The connection we have with the other outside of us—strangers, gods, and monsters—is inevitably related to the relationship we have with the other within ourselves. Kearney discusses the theme of the other within ourselves under the heading of melancholy, which includes our traumas, feelings of emptiness, fear, and powerlessness.[17] We can repel and repress our traumas and fears, but then turn them into ghosts that keep chasing and attacking us. We can also process them by accepting that they belong to

12 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 3–4.
13 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 4–6.
14 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 26ff., 70ff.
15 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 88ff.
16 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 10.
17 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 141ff.

us as something else.[18] This requires a story about ourselves, in which we develop a so-called narrative self. Such is a self that shapes itself by telling what it is and how it came to be that way in its relationships. Such a self can transform itself to find a proper relationship with self and other. "The challenge, in other words, is to arrive at the existence of a narrative self that is willing to process the pain of the past in dialogue with its Others."[19]

The God-who-may-be

In *The God Who May Be*, Kearney elaborates on the claim that God and religious narrative can help one become a self that can properly relate to the other. This claim does not involve the onto-theological God-who-is and establishes or determines Being, but an eschatological God-who-can-be. Such a God offers us possibilities to transform ourselves through interaction with the other. In this interaction, God is involved in transformation as much as humans, as God gets actualised as the kingdom of God. Such a God "neither is nor is not but may be."[20] Kearney therefore does not connect God with *esse* (being) but with *posse* (ability). As *posse*, God gives us possibilities. Therefore, God is not Being itself as *actus purus* (that is, Being realised in an actualisation in which God exists at every moment as God essentially is). This classical, scholastic conception of God, which was elaborated by Thomas Aquinas among others and subsequently criticised by Heidegger as onto-theology, is rejected by Kearney. "God will be God at the eschaton."[21] Thus, God will only fully and actually exist in the future when the possibility of the kingdom of God becomes a reality. This kingdom is not only something God does for us but also something we do for God. We can give God's *posse* an actual *esse* through which God is realised in the kingdom of God and exists as the kingdom of God. The God-who-can-be is a giver of possibilities, enabling us to give God existence as a kingdom. This creates a so-called chiasm, a mutual dependence in which humans are dependent on God, who gives possibilities, and God is dependent on humans, who realise these possibilities.[22]

The realisation of God is intertwined with our relationship to the other and our recognition of the other because God and the other are linked,

18 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 135.

19 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 188.

20 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 1.

21 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 4.

22 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 4–5. Kearney expresses his agreement with Etty Hillesum's statement, "I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength from ebbing away," which Kuitert, in *I Have My Doubts*, distanced himself from.

which becomes especially clear from Kearney's elaboration of the concept of *persona*.[23] The persona is the essence, being, or soul, as it were, of the other person who appears to me. The persona appears to me through the person but remains a transcendent other. The persona can never be reduced to the person of the other that I see and understand. The husband, reading his wife's diary, for example, encounters the persona of the person whom he never fully knows or sees through. Nor is the persona a well-defined entity in the way an idea, an ideal, or an idol can be. For example, the pop star Madonna embodies the idea or the idol Madonna, but this is not the persona. There is something elusive about the persona. It appears in the person, through the person, yet it is there "and not there; but never somewhere else."[24] The other whom I encounter and who appears to me could be called the revelation site of the persona, and this turns this person into a passage of the infinite.[25] An incomprehensible, transcendent persona manifests itself through the perceivable other, and this persona "is the sign of God."[26] The persona is the in-finite other in the finite person in front of me. It is, so to speak, the infinite other manifesting itself in the realm of the finite. The other can open my ego, allowing me to approach the other in such a way that the other can show and realise the other's persona, which allows my persona to be changed in interaction as well. The God-who-can-be thus manifests itself primarily in the persona of the other, which takes priority over the individuality of my self.[27] I give existence to God if I give room to the persona of the other in an interaction in which I myself change, which lets God get realised as a kingdom through us. This idea helps to clarify the difference between Kearney and the theologians of interpretation once again. According to the theologians of interpretation, the subject can be conceived as a manifestation of God or the last ground because it is capable of seeing the world as a unity. A divine gift to the subject becomes manifest in this, which confers on the subject a divine quality as the image of God. According to Kearney, however, not the subject but the other is primarily an image of God, in whose person something very o/Other illuminates, namely, the persona as something transcendent and intangible that refers to God.

23 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 9–19. Elsewhere, Kearny also uses concepts like *kenosis* and *perichoresis*, which refer to the idea that God disposes of God in order to enter into humans who can enter into God, so as to give existence to each other, like the person of the Trinity do.

24 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 14.

25 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 17.

26 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 18.

27 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 16.

Regarding this idea, Kearney's concepts do raise some questions. One of the main questions is how God should be understood as posse. Is God a pure possibility articulated as an idea by humans, enabling them to actualise this idea? Or does God possess some form of *esse*, which allows God to provide possibilities?[28] Next, the question is why the persona of the other is conceived as a sign of God, but the subject is not. Kearney does not elaborate on these questions because his intentions are of a different nature. He wants to show that a God-who-may-be can help us realise God as a kingdom in an interaction of self and other. The story of God is about processing our traumas and fears, through which a desolate and empty earth can be transformed into the kingdom of God. He does not elaborate on metaphysical, ontological, or theological questions.

Following his own program, Kearney criticises Heidegger's last God and Caputo's God as event, because these gods can manifest themselves in Being, but cannot transform it from wasteland to kingdom.[29] According to Kearney, Heidegger and Caputo are too dismissive of the value and wisdom of the great religious traditions, which can help us distinguish between good and evil, between gods and monsters, between strangers and enemies, and between ourselves as great ego and ourselves as another. In *The God Who May Be*, he therefore focuses on four biblical stories that demonstrate the value of religious tradition and illustrate his own theology.

The first story Kearney discusses is the story of the burning bush from Exodus 3, in which God describes Godself as "I am who I will be." According to Kearney, this God should not be conceived ontologically, but rather eschatologically as a God whose *esse* reveals itself as *posse*. This does not mean, incidentally, that God should be thought of conditionally. The way God will be in the future depends on human actions in history, but God's infinite love does not. God gives God's love unconditionally and independent of human beings. In this respect, then, God disposes of an independent and absolute existence as infinite love, pure gift, and untainted goodness.[30] The second story discussed is about the glorification on the mountain. On the mountain, Jesus' person is changed in such a way that he shows the

28 Kearney is not very clear about this. With Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus), he calls God the "absolute possibility" (Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 103ff.), but also maintains the idea that God is infinite love, always giving possibilities. J. Panteleimon Manoussakis, *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, 2006) collected a number of interesting and partly highly critical articles on Kearney's concept of God.

29 See especially Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 193–228.

30 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 37.

persona of Christ. Kearney explains this story in such a way that we too can be messianically transformed, implying that Jesus is not the only Christ.[31]

Kearney then turns to an entire book of the Bible as the third example of a story illustrating his theology. In his view, the biblical Song of Songs clarifies that God's desire and human desire merge into one another, as it is God's desire to be realised in our desire. Consequently, a desire *of* God is present in our desire, which makes us desire, as well as a desire *for* God, in which God is realised. God longs for our desire, through which God is actualised.[32] In the fourth story, the one of the rich young man from Mark 10, it is stated that "with God all things are possible" (10:28). The gospel thereby emphasises that God gives possibilities that would be impossible without the reciprocity between God's grace of the gift and human openness to it.[33] In that respect, the possibility of the gospel differs from the possibility that philosophers such as Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger, and Derrida mention, since the gospel refers to an impossibility that is opened up as an eschatological possibility through the interaction between God and humans.

Anatheism

In *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, Kearney picks up the idea that the other, through the persona, is more than just the concrete other. He broadens that to the view that reality is more than just this reality. The "more" of reality presents itself as the surplus of meaning it generates in human experience. In human experience, a transcendent dimension of reality reveals itself, which prevents reality from coinciding with itself because of its surplus of meaning, making it always more than it is.[34]

The more of reality allows for a religious interpretation and can be associated with God. In that case, God must not be understood as a sovereign arranger of all but as a gift and an endowment that enables humans to transform their relationship to reality. On the basis of this thought, Kearney seeks a so-called anatheistic path to God after God.[35] He wants to explain to both theists and atheists that reality contains a surplus of meaning. On

31 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 43, 46.

32 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 53ff.

33 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 82.

34 In a similar way, Charles Taylor describes that a work of art can generate an epiphany; cf. S*ources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989): 419ff. About *Anatheism*, see Chris Doude van Troostwijk en Matthew Clemente, *Richard Kearney's Anatheistic Wager: Philosophy, Theology, Poetics* (Indiana University Press, 2018).

35 In Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 5–6, Kearney still calls himself a Judeo-Christian theist who is open to input from other religions and does not want to claim a definitive truth.

the question of whether that surplus should be interpreted religiously, opinions can diverge with an understanding and recognition of each other's position. Anatheism thus constitutes a position that differs from atheism and seeks to transcend theism. It is both an an-atheism (non-atheism) and an ana-theism (a retrieved theism). From an anatheistic point of view, both belief in God and denial of God are realistic options. A conversation on this matter is possible if theists abandon their strong conception of a sovereign God and atheists recognise the possibility of transcendence.

According to Kearney, transcendence manifests itself as a surplus of meaning, leaving words, persons, and events open to multiple interpretations.[36] As he argued in *The God Who May Be*, this surplus is eminently embodied by the stranger, who "always embodies something *else*, something *more*, something *other* than what the self [the subject] can grasp or contain."[37] In the Abrahamic religions, therefore, the encounter with the stranger is fundamental because the stranger is the bearer of transcendence, as Kearney illustrates by means of three stories.[38] The story of Genesis 18 tells us that Abraham receives three strangers and thereby provides hospitality to God. The story from Luke 1 about the Annunciation tells that Mary opens herself to the angel, who, as a stranger, invades her and gives her a promise. The story of Mohammed in the cave of Hira tells that he is confronted by a strange presence to which he entrusts himself, after which the voice of the archangel Gabriel speaks through his mouth. Such stories demonstrate that we can acknowledge and receive God—the transcendent, other, strange, and ambiguous—when we receive a concrete other. As a result, the stranger and we simultaneously become guests and hosts, and a mutual transformation begins. We receive the stranger as a guest, who becomes our host as soon as we enter the stranger's world.[39]

In *Anatheism* the focus is no longer exclusively on the other as the one who brings in the transcendent Other. Rather, all of reality becomes the bearer of a transcendent dimension. To shed light on that, Kearney uses the notion of a sacramental imagination. This sacramental imagination refers to the Eucharist and can therefore also be called a eucharistic imagination, which is related to a "holy epiphany" and "everyday holiness."[40] In the celebration

36 Kearney, *Anatheism*, xiv.

37 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 152.

38 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 17ff.

39 The dialectics of guest and host actually replace, for Kearney, the dialectics of master and slave for Hegel in the development of self and other.

40 On the sacramental imagination, see especially Kearney, *Anatheism*, 85–100, where Kearney relates in particular to Merleau-Ponty and Kristeva. Kearney's sacramental imagination is closely

of the Eucharist, we receive God in the form of the bread, who thereby becomes our guest, while God is also host at the same time, inviting us to the meal.[41] By ordination or consecration, the bread of the Eucharist becomes more than just bread, namely, the body of Christ. In exactly the same way, ordinary things can become special and holy when they are touched or consecrated by sacramental imagination. Just like bread becomes the body of Christ through consecration, everyday things can become sanctified through sacramental imagination, which makes them more than they are.

Kearney explains the role of the sacramental imagination on the basis of examples from literature. Thus, he clarifies that a religious consideration of reality on the basis of a sacramental imagination is not at all reserved for religion but also occurs in literature. It can be shared by both believers and non-believers, theists and atheists. When ordinary things are touched by memories, experiences, and meanings already present in a person's consciousness, they are thereby consecrated, so that they become special and sacred. They come to count for something greater than themselves that appears in the interplay of perceived object and perceiving subject, through which they are changed or transubstantiated.[42] Kearney clarifies this idea with examples from the work of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf.

In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Molly experiences a kiss she gives to Bloom as the repetition of her very first kiss long ago. Her memory consecrates the kiss to Bloom, making her entire life history re-presented and modified by the kiss. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust relives the presence of his deceased mother in Venice. Because he once visited the city with her, they coincide in his memory and Venice can be transubstantiated into a representative of all the mother figures in Proust's cycle of novels. As a result, in Venice, Proust regains the presence of his mother, which has been lost irrevocably. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf describes how Lily Briscoe manages to revive the late Mrs. Ramsay in a painting. She contacts her by having memories of her rearranged at the moment of painting.

related to the experience of transcendence as typified in the work of Jörg Lauster. Lauster and Kearney both orient themselves to hermeneutics, the difference being that Lauster takes his starting point in the subject, Kearney in the other.

41 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 27–28, 153.

42 Because of the sacramental imagination, religion is not only related to the divine stranger but also to the self. Therefore, Kearney can also name the familiar as the (complementary) source of religion, see Kearney, *Anatheism*, 51: "Out of the silent dark of the heart-cave—from which many religions originate and to which they often return—emerges a chorus of sounds, images and gestures …". These sounds, images, and gestures are necessary to make religious sense of the stranger.

Literarily, transformations like these, as described by Joyce, Proust, and Woolf, also occur in other ways. Stories can merge into one another when they are retold, altered, or relived, as happens, for example, in the transformation of Homer's *Odyssey* into Joyce's *Ulysses*. Transformations also take place when the author's world is translated into text and the text returns to life in the world of the readers, who can rearrange and re-figure their own lives as an extension of the text. Such transformations have been of great interest to Kearney because they matter to the relationship between self and other and between God and humans. Through these transformations, the possibility of a shared world between humans comes into view, in which God can be realised as the kingdom of God. This religious perspective springs from the sacramental imagination, which opens the gateway to an anatheistic space in which we can return to the sacred and to God after God, who, according to Kearney, is a God-who-may-be.

8.2. John D. Caputo and the Theology of the Event

In *The Weakness of God: A Theology* of the Event, John D. Caputo (b. 1940) develops a theology of the event, which he elaborates on in later publications.[43] The program of this theology is packed with the proposition that the name of God harbours an event. Theology must free or detach this event from the name.[44] The issue, then, is not the being of God but the event that is indicated by the name of God. Of God, we only have a name, which is important only insofar as it refers to the event. Caputo clarifies that the New Testament thematises this event as the kingdom of God, which also makes clear what kind of event he has in mind.[45] For him, it is about the event of justice, forgiveness, the gift, and hospitality as they are embodied by Jesus in the gospel. Where the kingdom of God happens, such events open up the existing situation through a gift that exceeds the reciprocity of economic transactions, a form of justice beyond the law, or a form of hospitality that transcends the difference between mine and yours. In these ways, the events of the kingdom deconstruct us and our world. They change existing relationships and position us in our world in a new and different

43 John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indiana University Press, 2006).

44 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

45 Caputo, *The Weakness of* God, 13; see also John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Polebridge Press, 2016), 107.

manner. God is the designation for that kind of event. So God is neither a being nor Being itself, but God is the name for the event that moves and shakes up Being.[46]

A weak theology of the event

Before Caputo developed his weak theology, he had focused on religious life and, as a philosopher of religion, had been engaged with Thomas Aquinas and Heidegger.[47] He identified a mystical core in their thinking and then found his own voice through Derrida, whom he provided with a religious interpretation.[48] The passage from Thomas to Heidegger and Derrida marks a development. Thomas Aquinas wrote about God as Being itself, which exists in and on itself. Heidegger disassociated himself from the highest being locked up in this description and asked about Being as if it were something like God. Derrida then disposed of Being. Like the later Heidegger, he focused on language but did not regard language as the terrain where Being comes to light. Language, in fact, has its own dynamics and creates its own worlds. Texts and linguistic expressions are always understood in ever-new contexts because they are constantly related to other texts, so their meaning continuously shifts. The creation story of Genesis, for example, enters into conversation with Babylonian myths but gets a whole new meaning once it is included as the first story in the Bible, and then changes character again when it is used in modern times as a story to counter the idea of evolution. Language and texts are always part of the network in which they function. This network determines their meaning and deconstructs meaning as well once texts function in new constellations.

When Caputo refers to the name of God, in the wake of Derrida, no Being or highest being relates to it. It is the linguistic utterance itself that does something with words and constitutes something like an appeal, a protest, or a prayer. In the post-secular realm, in which Caputo places himself after the adieu à Dieu, the name of God functions as a protest against an utterly profane existence within the confines of a secularism that superficially lives from what is available.[49] The name of God breaks open existence because

46 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 5.

47 John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (Fordham University Press, 1978); *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (Fordham University Press, 1982); *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Fortress Press, 2015).

48 John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Indiana University Press, 1997).

49 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 290. See also: John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins (Columbia University Press, 2007).

it contains the hope of an event that breaks through the present order, as it does not just promise more of the same but looks forward to the unexpected. Such an event is not, but exists only in the name of God. In that name, we pray for a different, better, and more fulfilled life than this, even though we cannot possibly say what it will look like. In fact, the hope of the unexpected does not allow itself to be filled in with any particular expectation. We can long for it, as Augustine longed for God, but we must ask ourselves, like him, what we actually long for when we long for God. Longing becomes praying and crying, as Caputo characterised Derrida's work, because we persistently pray for the coming of the event and continually weep for what comes of it.

The theology of the event is a weak theology because God has no power to establish anything in the realm of Being. "I think of the world as addressed by a call, not produced by a cause, … and of God as a call … not a sovereign power."[50] We find ourselves in the world, in the realm of Being, which is where we are called by God to something new and different, namely the kingdom of God. This call of God has no power at all, but it does have authority over us. To explain the nature of this authority, Caputo turns to Derrida, who, in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," argued that justice deconstructs law.[51] Laws are constructions that seek to process justice but never fully do so. Therefore, they cannot be given absolute authority but must constantly be deconstructed for the sake of justice.[52] The demand for justice in turn cannot be deconstructed but must be recognised as an utter demand, even if we cannot define what justice is or describe what it looks like. We deconstruct laws in the name of justice. According to Caputo, the call of God has authority over us in the way justice has. God has no power to do anything, but the call that emanates from the event in God's name has authority over us, setting us in motion.

Whereas Derrida argued that the law must be deconstructed in the name of justice, Caputo argues that God must be deconstructed in the name of the event contained in the name of God.[53] This shift in the argument has important implications for Caputo's theology and his relationship to other

50 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 39.

51 Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (Routledge, 1992).

52 See also John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

53 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 27–29ff; Cf. John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 9: "I have substituted 'God' where Derrida said 'justice'." Caputo pretends that in doing so he is simply playing with a casual thought, which he

thinkers. Mark C. Taylor called deconstruction a hermeneutics of the death of God. If there is no more God—no ultimate reality, no final sense—all that remains of our linguistic utterances, according to him, is a mere play of meanings, which are constantly shifting in continually changing networks that are thereby deconstructed. Deconstruction is thus a consequence of the death of God. Caputo argues, in contrast, that deconstruction assumes a call or an event that we long for, thereby turning deconstruction into a hermeneutics of longing for God. Deconstruction thus takes place out of desire for the event. It is performed precisely in the name of God, not so much after the death of God but after the death of the death of God, as it were, out of desire for a God after God. In this way, Caputo claims that deconstruction does not terminate religion but has a religious urge itself and thus can be considered a religion, albeit a religion without religion (as it is a religion that divests itself of all religious forms).[54]

Next, Caputo wonders whether there cannot be a world in which the reign of justice initiates such a social order that the laws follow this justice docilely. This would produce a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of différance (Derrida's password), or rather, a kingdom of God. In doing so, he turns in a different direction than Derrida. For he is not only concerned with the critical, disruptive, and shaking-up effect of deconstruction but also with a better version of reality that conforms to the call of the event. Thus, he does not only deconstruct in the name of God but also asks where and how the event of God can happen in the events of this world.

The event, the call, and desire

In Caputo's thinking, the event, the call, and desire are almost indistinguishable from each other. They presuppose each other, yet they cannot be reduced to each other. The event *is* not and has an existence only in the call. The call does emanate from the event, but, for its part, it needs human

acknowledges goes against the letter of Derrida, but nevertheless makes important changes to the argument. See Caputo, *The Weakness* of God, 29.

54 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 290–291: "So when Mark C. Taylor famously said years ago that deconstruction is the hermeneutics of the death of God, I begged to differ. I myself regard this Taylor-made deconstruction as too downbeat a view, since deconstruction is for me rather a hermeneutics of the desire for God and so a certain religion (without religion). The religious dimension in deconstruction—which makes big totalisation projects like 'secularism' look incredible—is its affirmation of the impossible, of genuine events that cannot be contained within closed borders. Rather than anything final or funereal, deconstruction is a life-giving aeration, giving faith and the spirit of God room to breathe. The post-secular is a celebration of the event, of an excess or transgression of the world by the event, premised on the idea that the name of God is too much for the world to contain."

articulation to truly be a call. Therefore, the call must resonate with human desire without becoming a product of it. The event, the call, and the desire are thus intertwined and therefore remain elusive, as can be demonstrated by the following.

The event we hope for is outside of Being and has no status in this realm at all. In fact, it remains completely outside our horizon, for a real event is one that we cannot foresee, calculate, or plan and therefore happens to us unexpectedly.[55] Caputo did mention justice, forgiveness, gifts, and hospitality as events we hope for, but Derrida had already shown that these events are impossible because they cannot fulfil the conditions of their possibility. Hospitality, for example, can only occur if everyone is welcome, including those who are not and are therefore excluded from the welcoming. A true gift demands that it is given to the recipient without the obligation of a response, not even to say thanks, which will only happen if the gift goes unnoticed and will not be noticed as a gift. Forgiveness implies that the past is forgotten, but without forgetting it, which would make forgiveness unnecessary. Forgetting without forgetting, however, is impossible. Thus, the event we hope for, which according to the Gospel enters with Jesus, is an unlikely, impossible event, of which we nevertheless hope it will occur.

The event calls, but we cannot possibly identify the call that proceeds from the event. We hear the call, but we do not know from where it comes.[56] There is a call that makes us long for an event that we cannot possibly describe or specify. The origin of this call cannot be found, and no caller can be traced behind it. Those who do want to name or identify a caller are actually trying to overpower and control the call, with the result of undoing it.[57] A theology that addresses such a call must therefore be a theopoetic one.[58] Logic describes the laws of thought and the orders of Being.[59] It is concerned with what exists. Poetry, in contrast, focuses on the possibility of the impossible and on what is not, to which the call belongs. Theopoetics, not theologics,

55 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 103ff.

56 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 114.

57 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 97. In this respect, Caputo is critical of Dingemans's view of the voice of the caller. According to Caputo, there is nothing but a voice, behind which no caller can be identified. Cf. Rick Benjamins, "God laten bestaan," in *Liberaal christendom: Ervaren, denken, doen*, ed. Rick Benjamins, Jan Offringa, and Wouter Slob (Skandalon, 2016), 93ff.

58 The term "theopoetics" has been used since the 1960s with a broad and sometimes somewhat diffuse meaning. Of fundamental importance is Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1976). On theopoetics see Marius van Hoogstraten, *Theopoetics and Religious Difference: The Unruliness of the Interreligious: A Dialogue with Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller* (Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

59 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 104ff.

therefore, voices the call that emanates from the name of God because it hopes for the event contained in the name of God and longs for it. The call needs such voicing on the basis of our hope and desire, because it only takes shape through them. The call is thus constituted by our articulation.[60]

Human desire is constitutive of the articulation of the call, yet the call does not express our needs and desires since God is not a projection but a projectile, not an illusion we invent but a desire that touches us. We do not put into words what we long for, but we give words to that which longs for us and calls to us.[61] Our desire for the event is not a desire that emanates from us but a desire beyond our desire, in which God longs for us and calls us, to the effect that in our desire we are determined from elsewhere, as it were.[62]

Even though the event, the call, and the desire beyond desire are highly elusive, Caputo wants to clarify that in the name of God we rightfully hope for the possibility of the impossible and long for a world defined by the event, without believing in a God who exists.[63]

Although Caputo does not present his weak theology of the event as a Christian theology, its Christian roots are abundantly clear. He refers first and foremost to Paul, for example, who in the first chapter of his letter to the Corinthians himself speaks of the weakness of God, who has chosen "what is nothing" (*ta me onta*).[64] In doing so, Paul criticises both a strong theology and Greek philosophy, which do focus on Being, beings, and things that exist (*to on, ousia*).[65] It is true that Paul in the second chapter of the letter to the Corinthians and in Romans 13 falls back on God's sovereign power, but the use of this notion must, according to Caputo, be considered as an error by an author who has become unfaithful to his own views.[66] Secondly, Caputo connects the call with the event of the cross. According to him, the call of God is primarily heard as a protest against the powers of

60 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 114.

61 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 36, 122.

62 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 88.

63 Pieter Huiser argues that in a relational ontology, the existence of God does not have to be denied, even if God is thought of as an event, as Caputo does. Cf. Pieter J. Huiser and Rick Benjamins, "Caputo's Notion of Insistence as an Instance of Existence," *Neue Zeitschrift fur Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 63 no. 3 (2021): 299–315.

64 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 42ff.

65 Caputo more or less corresponds with philosophical interpretations of Paul. Cf. Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Het uitschot en de geest*. About the weakness and folly of God, as mentioned by Paul, see Caputo, *The Folly of God*. In John D. Caputo *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Indiana University Press, 2019), Caputo returns at length to the weakness of God and the folly of the cross.

66 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 50.

this world that crucified Jesus.[67] As a protest against the world, the call of God rises from the powerless death of Jesus. Thirdly, Caputo connects the event to the gospel and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God happens where justice, forgiveness, and hospitality take place as impossible events.[68] There, time is freed from the power of the past—through forgiveness, for example—and freed from concern for the future. Otherness and the other are welcomed there, and to the singular is done justice in the space between justice and law.[69]

The dangerous word perhaps

In *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, Caputo sharpens his theology, making it clearer and more pointed. He maintains his view that God does not cause Being, but presents itself in Being by way of the call. The world is a "chaosmos," a dance of probabilities that sometimes produces unlikely products.[70] The word chaosmos is typically used to indicate that our cosmos does not constitute a balanced harmony but a fragile balance of various forces. It has more or less by chance produced the order in which we live. Yet, a call arises out of the chaosmos, which can be called a call of God.[71] This call *insists*. It therefore does not *exist* but constitutes a call of chaosmotic reality itself, in which something calls itself or allows itself to be called.[72] This complex assertion can be clarified through a simple example. An encounter can hold the promise of a future friendship. In that case, it is reality itself that holds a promise and calls us to realise friendship. This call has no independent existence and thus does not exist as a separate entity in or outside the world, but insists on us or in us and our relationship with the world. It then depends on us whether the promise of friendship is indeed realised. Exactly in the same way, it also depends on us whether God, who insists as a call, is given existence and comes to exist.

In this way, Caputo largely aligns himself with the chiasm as articulated by Richard Kearney. Kearney advocates a God-who-can-be, who is giving humans opportunities to actualise God as the kingdom of God. Caputo

67 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 43.

68 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 127ff.

69 Cf. John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Baker Academic, 2007).

70 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, ix.

71 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, ix.

72 It allows itself to be called in "the middle voice," which is the medium (the middle) that in Greek and Latin grammar, besides the activum and passivum, belongs to the "genera verbi" and forms a middle between active and passive.

advocates a similar entanglement. God needs us to be God (after all, the call only takes shape in us as prayer, faith, or hope), and humans need God to be human (in their openness to the future to which they are called).[73] Still, there remains an important difference between the chiasm of Kearney and the one of Caputo. According to Kearney, the love and possibilities of God are unconditionally given. In his view, the perspective of an eschaton in which God will be still matters. Caputo argues, in contrast, that the call arises from the chaosmos and that reality can and will never respond to our hopes, our prayers, and our desires, even though they are evoked by reality itself. Indeed, reality can never meet the promise of the call.[74] It may promise us friendship or love, but even if that results in valuable relationships, lasting commitments, or good marriages, these still do not fulfil the promise that reality once carried within itself. We must therefore always deconstruct our actual relationships, which amounts to the recognition that they do not realise their potential. Thus, the chiasm never comes to completion. God insists and calls us to realise a promise that reality can never fulfil.

Reality and its promise can be summarised in the word "perhaps." Perhaps the promise will come true, perhaps our hope will be realised, and perhaps our prayer will be answered. Caputo identifies God with this perhaps, but this perhaps is downright dangerous. On the one hand, it does keep the world and the future open because there is a chance for a better, richer, and more fulfilled life. Perhaps. On the other hand, however, there is no guarantee of a good outcome, and it is a great risk to bet on it, for we may make things worse. As an ultimate word, perhaps also characterises the chaosmos. There is no final foundation, no highest principle, no deepest ground beyond a perhaps that denies all certainty. The good news about it is that the absence of certainty breaks open every closedness. It makes us take the chance. The bad news, however, is that this bet becomes a leap into the dark, without security, in which we leave ourselves at the mercy of events. We perform our deeds in the hope of blessing, but we do not know where they will lead us. In the betting on a good outcome and the attempt to improve the world, we are fundamentally at the mercy of an unaccountable God. This is not a God of unfathomable counsel and sovereign majesty, but a God of a perhaps beyond our calculation and our planning, on whom we nevertheless hope and by which we allow ourselves to be moved.

In religion, people allow themselves to be seduced by the perhaps of reality and of God. According to Caputo, a great danger and an unavoidable

73 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 14.
74 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 6.

risk are present in this. In fact, religion can drive people to madness if they listen to the call and subsequently accept the invitation to the impossible. When they accept perhaps's invitation to bring about hospitality, forgiveness, or justice, they do not know what they achieve, and it will be uncertain whether, in the end, justice will flourish or blood will flow. This danger is inherent to religion and cannot be escaped once people move beyond the foreseeable, calculable, and manageable to surrender themselves to the mercy of the event and the perhaps.[75] Thus, God means trouble, Caputo argues, and those who pray for the event will let the trouble in. These troubles or difficulties are both inescapable and uncontrollable. If we respond to the call of perhaps we can never predetermine the results of our actions. We act uninsured and can only position ourselves in such a way that we will be worthy of the event that we hope for. Still, we are responsible for the consequences of our actions because we carry them out ourselves in response to a call we hear.[76]

Religion is Vorstellung *without* Begriff

By means of perhaps, Caputo undermines any religious certainty while also embracing perhaps with religious fervour. He is critical of religion, although he constantly engages in religious thought. He points to the religious impulse of Derrida's deconstruction and argues with Derrida for a religion without religion. This critical complexity raises the question of exactly how his theology relates to religion.

Religion lives on representations of beliefs, images, and narratives that are basically of a mythical nature. Theology can deal with these representations in very different ways. A confessional theology knows itself to be bound by the representations of Scripture or tradition and tries to think them through, organising and systematising them. On the basis of reason, a rationalist theology attempts to formulate what reasonable insights, metaphysical truths, or generalities present themselves in mythical material. A hermeneutic theology presupposes the enduring eloquence of myth and seeks to uncover and actualise it.[77] Caputo, however, is not looking for a truth *behind* the imagery or an eloquence *of* representations, but asks for the event that is stored *in* the representations to be liberated from them. This means that his theology always remains dependent on traditional

75 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 33.
76 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 37–38.
77 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 68ff.

thought, which he parasitises in a sense by demythologising it and reading it theopoetically as a repository of the event.[78]

Religion can thus be seen as a *Vorstellung*, Caputo says, and in this he agrees with Hegel. Whereas Hegel looked for the *Begriff* of the *Vorstellung* or representation, in which its truth is contained, Caputo, in contrast, only wants a *Vorstellung* without *Begriff*. We have, simply put, nothing but the representation, from which we cannot determine what truth it represents. These representations, however, are valuable if we interpret them theopoetically. In the representation, an event insists that calls us and appeals to us. The truth of religion consists of this. "Religion is a representation, not of a metaphysical substance, but of the insistence of the event."[79]

The representation of religion thus represents nothing—there is no truth behind it—but remains of great value because it represents another being-of-the-world, another disclosure of it, another way in which the world opens up in a new configuration and in an unforeseen way.[80] This does not reduce religion to mere imagination or to a subjective view of a supposedly objective reality. In the spirit of Heidegger, Caputo opposes an objective, scientific description of reality, which would imply, as Derrida said, that the world is considered "as if we were dead" or never born. Reality is not objectively outside of us, as if we are not there and do not matter, but we ourselves belong to this reality that speaks to us and makes its desires known in us.[81] Being cannot be described objectively in a scientific way but also manifests itself in the beings that we are and speaks from within us through a promise, a call, and a desire that are accommodated in the religious representation.[82] For as long as we live, we therefore need a theopoetics that cannot ignore the natural scientific insights, of course, but is willing to listen to the call and the promise of Being and to rephrase the representations of religion.[83]

The importance of theopoetics lies in life itself. According to the natural sciences, life is a transient phenomenon of the universe. Life knows no why and has no purpose. For that very reason, then, it should never be reduced to a means to an end but received as a gift without reason. Theopoetics

78 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 97.

79 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 96.

80 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 93.

81 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 176.

82 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 190.

83 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 193. Caputo shapes his theopoetic views on religion as "Vorstellung" without "Begriff" in discussions with Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou, and Quentin Meillassoux.

can help to ensure that life is not violated but employed—or, if necessary, given up—for more life.

Living until death

In *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory*, Caputo focuses on the theme of the cross, which, as a representation, contains an event and a call but offers no passage to the truth of an everlasting glory beyond it. Theology has always interpreted the defeat of the cross as a victory over the powers or as a transaction in which the death of Christ counts as a satisfaction for sin. As a result, a triumph replaces the defeat of the cross. Caputo now wants to radically rid himself of any attempt to see the cross as a decisive move in the master plan of God. There is no strategy behind the cross that leads to glory and victory, but the cross testifies to a "difficult glory" *in* defeat. Neither glory nor victory are appropriate terms in relation to the cosmos on a planetary scale. The cosmos, which is actually a chaosmos, is heading for extinction and an eventual death. In this respect, the cross is an appropriate emblem for the end of our world, which will disappear. Cross and cosmos contain glory nevertheless. Their difficult glory, according to Caputo, lies in the affirmation of finite life. Consequently, the reconciliation of the cross is a reconciliation with our mortality and finitude.

In the elaboration of these thoughts, Caputo invokes Luther, who, in his theology of the cross, opposed a theology of glory.[84] Theologians of glory ascend to God on high. The theology of the cross, in contrast, seeks God in humility and suffering, where a God of glory can only enter without glory if God's divinity is hidden. Caputo interprets this hiddenness in a radical way. There is *only* hiddenness in the event of the cross, so we don't know at all whether a high God is hiding there. This makes any statement about a God "behind" the cross impossible and leads to the destruction of any theology.[85] A true theology of the cross therefore can only imply a crucified or crossed-out idea of God.[86] Nothing remains but to have faith in the power of the story of the cross, which gives life without any guarantee.

The story of the cross gives rise to a call whose origin we cannot further identify.[87] The call constitutes an event. In it, we are touched by some-

84 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 2.

85 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 146.

86 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 6.

87 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 39–40. We cannot even say that this call is the call of God. The apostle Paul, knowing himself to be a called one, would not even be able to identify the call. He can only articulate it in the language and concepts he has at his disposal, as all other people do in their own way. Nor is the call ever observable. Observable is only what people do in response to a call.

thing unconditional that cannot be deconstructed or relativised.[88] This unconditional is the kingdom of God, which represents the possibility of the impossible and the realisation of justice, forgiveness, and hospitality. In this way, it contains a promise of life, on the basis of which any existing order can be deconstructed.[89] Jesus' death on the cross should thus be seen as his unconditional affirmation of the kingdom, which makes us live in the light of that kingdom. In the cross thus insists a call that cannot be broken and calls us to a more and better life.[90]

The story of the cross fits our cosmos, which, like Jesus and us, is finite and mortal. Indeed, natural science states that the planetary entanglement of the chaosmos is subject to disintegration due to the expansion of the universe.[91] We live in a temporary and local process that will disappear. Therefore, we cannot escape, even on a cosmic scale, what Heidegger called a *Sein zum Tode*. We must therefore face both the death of the cosmos and the mortality of God, who insists in the cosmos. Atonement in this context means that we affirm the difficult glory of life in mortality. Our mortality is not exchanged for a glorious immortality but exposed in all its weak, mortal, impermanent, improbable, surprising, and difficult glory.[92]

Caputo emphasises that the very glory of mortality demands mortality. Indeed, what is impermanent can only be appreciated and loved for what it is if it is without reason and exists for no reason, without having to respond to any purpose or intention. Exactly then, everything becomes more than it seems to be, as it displays its own glory in the fragility of the world.[93] Precisely for this reason, an inescapable mortality provokes the unconditional affirmation of life and calls forth the radiance of a finite glory. In this lies the gift of death, which Derrida spoke about, which is closely related to the paradox that eternal love is only possible for those who die. An immortal being cannot love eternally and cannot act unconditionally because it cannot put itself on the line.[94]

88 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 48. Caputo here equates the call with the event.

89 For that, see also Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*

90 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 121.

91 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos,* 216ff. Caputo here refers to the theology of Catherine Keller, discussed later in this chapter.

92 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 249.

93 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 251.

94 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 254. Contrary to Hegel, who believed that the finite can come to terms with its mortality because it participates in infinity, Caputo argues that the acceptance of a radical finitude shows the glory of the finite. Whereas Tillich believed that human beings can derive the courage to be from an inexhaustible ground of Being, Caputo argues that we are claimed by something unconditional in finitude.

An impossible reconciliation with finitude affirms the difficult glory of life. It keeps the future open because it answers a call and a promise that emanate from reality itself—which does not get fulfilled. In this, the core of Caputo's theology presents itself, exemplified by the cross. The cross is a representation that contains a call to which we can respond, but behind which we can find no conceptual truth telling us by what ruse of God or reason we will arrive at an eternal victory of life.

8.3. Catherine Keller and God's Interrelatedness with the World

In her theology, Catherine Keller (b. 1953) places a strong emphasis on relationships and connections.[95] From process theology, she adopts the idea that all that exists is made of relationships. Relations are the building blocks of the universe, rather than substances. Because of her emphasis on relations, Keller is critical of the idea of both an autonomous subject, to which theologians of interpretation tend, and an utter otherness, be it Derrida's alterity, the event of Caputo, or the un-ground of Nancy. Because everything consists of relations, an independent subject is as impossible as an unrelated otherness. Therefore, God must also be thought of relationally. God is not a being in itself but consists of the whole of all the relations that make up the world. God, as the totality of all relationships, is, on the one hand, constructed and determined by those relationships and, on the other hand, provides them with new possibilities for their further development. We cannot fathom or encompass the whole of our relationships, and that compels us to use a negative theology to speak of God in such a way that we do not capture, define, or identify God.

The deep and creation

Already in her first 1986 book, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self,* Keller places great emphasis on relationships.[96] From a feminist perspective, she raises the question of whether people need to develop into autonomous subjects who separate themselves from the world, other people, and God in order to actually be persons.[97] A dominant male perspective on

95 For an overview of Keller's work, see Rick Benjamins, *Catherine Keller's constructieve theologie* (Skandalon, 2017) and "Apophatic Panentheism: Catherine Keller's Constructive Theology," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 60, no. 1 (2018): 103–121.

96 Catherine Keller, *From A Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Beacon Press, 1986).

97 Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 1

the development of humans seems to suggest that. Men, however, thereby deny that they are embedded in the world and are always dependent on others. Women thereby rob themselves of the development of their own persons and solidify their husbands' perceived independence. Men and women thereby come to live in a broken web of relationships.

In order to repair the broken web, we must bring the patriarchal power structures into focus, from which the self-images of men and women originate. These can be dug up from Babylonian and Greek mythology. Next, a perspective is needed to show that humans are not autonomous and separate beings but need relationships. In theology, the primal sin of the separated self has traditionally been recognised. Luther, for example, describes the sinner as a human being that is bent back into itself (*homo incurvatus in se ipsum*).[98] However, since he believes that a person can be redeemed by God's grace only from the outside, he emphasises the idea of separation and separateness as yet. In psychoanalysis, separation and separateness are equally emphasised, as it is seen as a necessity for the differentiated self-image of a child to separate itself from father and mother.[99] Keller, however, contrasts this view with a primal empathic connection that the two sexes are supposed to initially have shared with each other.[100] Not separation but connection thus constitutes the underlying principle of the development of our personality. Her fundamental conviction is that, in the depths of our being, we are always connected to others. By extension, she claims that in theological matters, God must be thought of in terms of connection instead of separation. She substantiates this view with the philosophy of Whitehead, who does not contrast God with the multiplicity of the world but rather sees it as the unity of multiplicity. Thus, God is not separated from the world but is intimately intertwined with it as its cohesion and coherence.[101]

In fact, the insights of her first book also form the core of the theology of creation that Keller elaborates in *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*.[102] Creation, according to her, is not a creation out of nothing but a creation from the deep. From the deep, creatures emerge that form and structure themselves in reciprocal relationships. In giving form to one another, they also give form and shape to God as their unity. In contrast, a creation out

98 Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 33.
99 Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 133ff.
100 Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 136.
101 Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 163ff.
102 Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, Londen: Routledge 2003.

of nothing presupposes that God is the pure origin and absolute beginning of all that is. This view reflects male supremacy, which views the deep, the chaos, and the flood as a feminine threat to the separated, masculine, and individualistic self.[103] A creation out of the deep can be worked out on the basis of process theology. This type of theology always denied that there was a temporal beginning to the world and that God is the only creator because humans also create. Process theology, however, lacks a theology of creation that relates well to Genesis. Keller now wants to provide that.[104]

According to her, based on biblical texts, there is no need for the doctrine of a creation out of nothing. In the Bible, there are both texts that testify to a fear of the deep as well as texts that reveal a love for the deep.[105] In Genesis 1:2, it is said that God's spirit hovered over the deep. This shows a recognition of the life-giving potential of the deep. The beginning of Genesis can, moreover, be read in different ways. According to the translation and interpretation of Rashi, a Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages, the text gives reason to assume the cooperation of God and the depth.[106] Therefore, there is no biblical necessity for creation out of nothing. Nor is there a dogmatic necessity. A creation out of nothing was first formulated by the Gnostic theologian Basilides and then accepted by Irenaeus and Athanasius.[107] Yet their intentions were quite different from those of Basilides. Moreover, their tehomophobic theologies also contain tehomophilic motives. Next, the influential theologies of Augustine and Karl Barth also contain ambiguities that allow the conception of a creation out of nothing to be put into perspective.[108]

In this context, where there is no biblical necessity for a creation out of nothing and the doctrinal reasons for it have been put into perspective, Keller brings forth her own thoughts. God creates because God allows the existence of creatures who can create themselves. The creatures emerge from the depth and organise themselves. They structure and form themselves in interrelationships, and in so doing, they also give form to God as the One who unites and encompasses all. God also encompasses the deep of *tehom*—that is, the deep over which God's spirit hovered, according to Genesis. *Tehom* is God's depth from which God rises along with the creatures. In this way, *tehom*, the creatures, and God are closely connected without coinciding.

103 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 31ff.
104 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 4.
105 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 25ff.
106 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 114ff.
107 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 43ff.
108 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 65ff., 84ff.

The deep can be seen as the womb or the matrix of possibilities from which the creatures emerge. The creatures organise themselves. This requires creativity, which can be referred to as God. The self-organising complexity of the creatures thus emerges from the depths of God and is shaping God as their unity. *Tehom*, the creatures, and God therefore refer to ever different aspects of the same whole that remain distinct from one another.

The core idea of Keller's theology of creation, as indicated, can be further explained in three points. First, the deep from which creation emerges is a metaphor that refers to several things at once. The deep refers to the primordial soup after the Big Bang from which our universe emerged, but also to the depth of the subconscious, as well as the chaos of sociopolitical conditions, or the fluidity of our relationships. In doing so, it constantly refers to a situation of instability, in which there always are possibilities from which something new can happen. Creation from the deep, by extension, is not a one-time event but always happens when novelty arises or something new begins in the midst of all that is.

Second, Keller is not optimistic about the deep and does not romanticise it. The deep is not a paradisiacal place in which we were connected to one another before we fell into our separateness. As chaosmos, the deep contains the opportunity for newness but also poses a threat.[109] The deep also consists of lost dreams, the nasty consequences of good intentions, and failures from which, nevertheless, something new can emerge.

Third, thoughts on the deep constitute a further reflection on the concept of God. God is not the absolute start of everything, which is an important and distinctive trait of process theology. God is not the sovereign source and final goal of all that exists, not a pure arche or final telos, as the postmodern critique of onto-theology also emphasised. God should be thought of in more relational terms, as feminist theology wanted. But who or what is God if God creates out of the deep? Keller's thoughts on this can be summarised as follows: God is the manifold One, or the pluri-singularity of multiplicity, which is unified in it.[110] That God creates means as much as that the creatures themselves create.[111] God can consequently be seen as the creative power of creatures, who are both created and creating themselves.[112] God cannot be identified as anyone or some One, but rather must be referred to apophatically, in the manner of negative theology, as a non-God, a non-person, a

109 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 157–171.
110 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 173–175.
111 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 195.
112 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 180–181.

non-spirit, or a non-image.[113] However, this raises the obvious question of why we should still have to use that big and confusing word: God. Keller does so because she thinks it is still the best word for the creative power at work in all beings in the world and their relationships, through which a creation emerges from the deep.[114] The word God refers to the mystery in which we are intertwined. We do not know what God is, just as we do not grasp the totality of our relationships and our interwovenness in the web of the world. We do not know the inherent possibilities contained therein either. We must therefore speak of God non-knowingly.[115]

The end of history

Even before she wrote her theology of creation, Keller engaged in a critical way with apocalypticism.[116] Just as Genesis is about the beginning, apocalypticism is about the end of history. According to Keller, the idea of an apocalyptic end evoked thinking patterns that profoundly influenced Western thought and its understanding of history.[117] She wants to open up those views, as she does with her refutation of a creation out of nothing. The ambiguous and complex nature of apocalypticism is crucial in this regard. On the one hand, apocalypticism locks history up in a closed structure as it implies a linear development from an initial beginning to an established end. On the other hand, apocalypticism has the capacity to open up history in that it thematises a radical break with the status quo and looks forward to a new beginning.[118]

Keller's discussion of apocalypticism contains critical and self-critical considerations directed at the progressive movements for emancipation and liberation with which she sympathises. These movements strive for a better world and reject apocalyptic doomsday scenarios. Yet they can adopt apocalyptic thinking patterns imperceptibly. Indeed, they hope for a better world, but they can also demonise adherents of the old world for standing in the way of the future. This can function as a legitimisation for violence and oppression in the way it actually occurred in apocalyptic movements. Under the surface, an anti-apocalyptic attitude may thus still

113 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 172.

114 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 196.

115 In Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Columbia University Press, 2015) she further elaborates this view into an apophatic panentheism.

116 Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Press, 1996); *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Fortress Press, 2005).

117 Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 9.

118 See Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Fortress Press, 2008), 159–176, 165.

be retro-apocalyptic or crypto-apocalyptic in that it wants to turn history toward an ultimate goal.[119]

Keller wants to expose the disguised apocalyptic patterns of thought because they confine history to the schemes of an ideological perspective. Underlying such a perspective is the unspoken presupposition that there will be an ultimate victory over the old world and its adherents in the end. Keller wants to sustain resistance to the destruction enhanced by the old world, but without the expectation of a victory. The whole idea of a victory may turn humans into destructive martyrs for their cause, standing in the way of a better world precisely by ignoring the opportunities for improvement that occur in the moment. To criticise apocalyptic thinking patterns and at the same time remain faithful to an apocalyptic opening of history, Keller believes a counter-apocalyptic attitude is necessary.[120] In this attitude, we can remain apocalyptically focused on a new era, not because we hope for an utopia and the downfall of the old world, but by establishing ourselves firmly in the time and place given to us. For that to happen, a habitat is needed in this world, where we are shaped by relationships and committed to common interests. This is how the pursuit of a better world remains intact. Paradoxically, we can only continue to strive for a better world if we abandon the idea that such a world will be realised at the end of history. Only then can we remain self-critically focused on the possibilities that spring from our relationships in the here and now.

Just as Keller argues that creation always occurs when something new emerges, she also argues that apocalypses occur occasionally, namely when the old decays and something new begins. Thus, she merges the postmodern critique of an enclosed development between *arche* and *telos* together with process theology, which emphasises creativity in an open process without an absolute beginning or end. Meanwhile, her intention is not to relinquish or merely deconstruct ideals for a better world, but to keep them upright in critical complexity and a self-critical treatment. A better world will not come about by imposing our ideals on reality or unmasking them, but by demanding that we keep in touch with the relationships that make up the world because they provide us with the possibilities and opportunities for something better.

Apophatic panentheism

In *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* Keller develops her theology into apophatic panentheism. She does so in

119 Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 7–8.
120 Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 19.

view of the problems of the present time. This time is characterised not by hope but by lost hope because of economic, ecological, and political crises. In these crises, belief in a good outcome of developments seems so absent that philosophical or religious beliefs seem to break down on them. Therefore, it is inevitable to take "the possibility of the impossibility of religious belief" seriously.[121] Yet new possibilities can present themselves even in this situation if we face the lost hope honestly. Such new possibilities are not impossibilities, which are always detached from the present and always emerge unexpectedly, unforeseeably, and uncontrollably, as Caputo argues. Rather, they emerge from the depths of all our ambiguous, conflicting, and even traumatic relations, which nevertheless can be enriching and hopeful.[122] We are woven into these relationships, from which new possibilities can emerge.

The possibility that religious belief has become impossible fits seamlessly into a negative theology. In negative theology, everything said about God is undone and crossed out. However, this does not mean that the concept of God must also be erased. Indeed, God can be thought of as a name for our relations to everything, including God.[123] We cannot erase these relationships. Yet, we can neither fathom nor decipher them. This implies that we cannot speak affirmatively or firmly about God, as negative theology recognises. A negative theology, precisely through its unknowing, can make an important contribution to our relations, though.[124] In fact, such a theology helps us to respect and appreciate the infinite connections and links that make up the world without fixing and controlling them by designation, recognising that we are implied and enfolded in each other. We are built out of relationships, and through these relationships, others are enfolded in us. Through these relations, we are conversely also enfolded into the relations from which others are built up. In this perspective, everything is present in everything, and exactly this thought is expressed by the concept of God.

In *Cloud of the Impossible*, Nicholas of Cusa, also referred to as Cusanus (1401–1464), plays an important role. Keller already referred to him in *Face of the Deep*. Cusanus speaks of God as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, which is a union of opposites. As a union of opposites, God includes everything so that everything is in God. God can therefore be seen as the One that unites the multitude without dissolving it. Through his conception of the *docta*

121 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 28.
122 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 44–49.
123 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 296; cf. 264.
124 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 6.

ignorantia—the learned ignorance—Cusanus emphasises that we cannot describe God. However, he ultimately refers to God as *posse ipsum*, which is to say that God is possibility or ability itself, which gives us possibilities and enables us to be able.[125] Cusanus is of great importance to Keller because he does not advocate a separate transcendence but argues that God or the One is entirely engaged with the world.

Following in the footsteps of Cusanus, Keller elaborates that the world is enfolded in God and that God is unfolded in the world.[126] In this image, unity and multiplicity are thought of together. By extension, the connection of everything to each other also becomes insightful. God is, as a folding together of everything, unfolded in all. Conversely, everything is enfolded in God. In God, all is present, and all is united in everything, because of which each one is also in each other. This mystical or holistic view corresponds to Whitehead's assertion that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity, substantiating the idea of our planetary entanglement and connection.[127] This mystical or holistic attitude, moreover, refers back to the ancient idea of the *one and all*, which Spinoza expressed in his assertion of the one substance and Hegel included in his self-realisation of Spirit. With Keller, this *one and all* now becomes *a one of all*, and there is a crucial difference in that.

On the basis of the aforementioned insights, Keller develops her apophatic panentheism. This is *panentheism* because God and the world differ from each other yet are completely entangled with each other, in that the world is enfolded in God and God is unfolded into the world. It is an *apophatic* panentheism because we cannot name God, just as we cannot fathom the relations that make up our world, in which God is unfolded. Nevertheless, the relationships in which we are engaged offer us new possibilities, even in times of lost hope.

In terms of text, the structure of *Cloud of the Impossible* is complex. The first part deals with the *complication*, the folding together, and states that we are enfolded into the One, in which multiplicity converges. In it, theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Cusanus are discussed. The second part deals with the *explication*, the unfolding, and focuses attention on the inner-worldly entanglements in which God is unfolded. In it, Keller discusses quantum physics, the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, the poetry of Walt Whitman, and the ethics of Judith Butler. The

125 Richard Kearney also refers to Cusanus at length in *The God Who May Be.*

126 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 113–114.

127 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 115.

third part deals with the *implication*, the enfolded implications, and the religious attitude of a self-critical love that allows itself to be corrected in relationships. Such an attitude can help us get rid of our complexes and heal what, in Keller's first book, was referred to as a broken web.

Political implications

In *Political Theology of the Earth*, Keller sharpens her apophatic panentheism in the context of American politics following the election of Trump in 2016.[128] In these politics, a reactionary antagonism is dominant, which is determined by an irreconcilable opposition rejecting the other—woman, black, immigrant, Muslim, or lhbtq—and constitutes an embodiment of sovereign power in the way it has been thematised by Carl Schmitt.[129] According to Keller, an apocalyptic battle is going on against the evil of the other, while at the same time an ecological crisis is being ignored, leaving no time that remains and no future that is left. In opposition to government power, a heterogeneous counter-movement of women, people of colour, immigrants, and others is being built. This diverse movement could easily find its identity in opposition to power. In that case, however, it would copy power, which, after all, finds its very identity in aversion to others. The counter-movements can also easily oppose each other, as their opposition focuses on a diversity of issues like sex, gender, or race. A search for a common denominator could easily lead, therefore, to a liberal relativisation of differences or to a formulation of principles so general that they either remain powerless or still work exclusively.

In this situation, Keller, drawing on the political scientists Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly, advocates a loving agonism, a sympathetic rivalry, which rejects both the antagonism of power and the consensus of liberalism.[130] This agonism does not aim to gloss over differences but to make enmity based on clashing values manageable. The differences between feminists, people of colour, nonbinary people, and others who oppose the established power, therefore, need not be sharpened or smoothed out but are calling for conversation and debate. The differences do not have to disappear into general agreement, but they may contribute to the complexity of the movement. Thus, a loving agonism suits a world in which we are caught up with each other and must shape our distinctiveness in connection with

128 Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

129 Keller, *Political Theology*, 22ff.

130 Keller, *Political Theology*, 26ff.

what is different. The resulting complexity has nothing to do with sovereign decisions from above but is the result of self-organisation that enables a coalition from below.

Among the oppositions between power and counterpower, or antagonism and agonism, Keller exposes a more fundamental contradiction, which is between *exception* and *inception*, and this contradiction is based on a theological difference.[131] The instance or authority that grants itself sovereignty, isolates itself from the whole, and ultimately bases itself on the idea of an omnipotent God who is separate from the world. Such an instance embodies the power of God and pretends to act on behalf of it, regardless of whether it believes in a sovereign God or only implicitly repeats that old theological conception in a secularised way. Sovereignty and exception go together, Keller argues, echoing Agamben.[132] This appears quite clearly in theologies that feed the thinking patterns of sovereign power. Therein, humans are set apart from nature, white humans are set apart from the rest of humanity, Christ is excluded from all people, and God is isolated from the world. Humans do not belong to the world or nature, but they are the exception to it because they were created in the image of God. This mindset of exception has led to major crises in democratic, ecological, and theological fields. Democratically, voices are silenced; ecologically, humans have granted themselves the allowance to destroy the earth; and theologically, a separated God has made church, faith, and theology unbelievable to many.

Opposed to *exception* stands *inception*, meaning as much as commencement and inclusion. It thus constitutes a reference to Keller's process-philosophical view that everything that exists is made up of relations and that every novelty is constructed from the absorption of prior influences. Every event thus constitutes an entanglement of what preceded, in which the past is given a future. Each moment, each event, and each creature constitutes an amalgamation that carries a possibility within it, through which something new can emerge from the depths. Keller connects this thought with the conception of a weak messianic power as articulated by Walter Benjamin.[133] He states that the Messiah can enter into any moment of the present. Keller connects this with the possibility that every conjunction is holding within itself. Every moment offers the opportunity for novelty, in which a weak messianic power manifests itself. Thereby, the opposition between exception and inception can be unfolded theologically.

131 Keller, *Political Theology*, 43.
132 Keller, *Political Theology*, 51ff.
133 Keller, *Political Theology*, 54ff.

It includes an opposition between creation from nothingness and creation from the deep, as well as an opposition between sovereign omnipotence and weak messianic power. These theological oppositions have political implications.

In her political theology, Keller places great emphasis on the earth, because we can no longer engage in politics without regard to the nonhuman: animal, vegetable, and mineral. This compels us to put an end to the human exception to nature.[134] The earth is what constitutes us and that in which we are engaged. The very same earth and its ecological crisis, however, lead to the inescapable thought that time is ending and is short. Keller in no way closes her eyes to the possibility that our world will disappear and the earth will continue without us. However, that is a plausible possibility in so-called *chronos* time or clock time, whereas she places particular emphasis on *kairos* time or instantaneous time.[135] The latter is the time of every now in which the Messiah can come in, and the time of momentum in which every becoming carries a possibility. In that time, the inception is still possible—a creation out of the deep, out of the traumas of the past and the ruins of the world. By virtue of now-time, nothing can ever be said about an absolute end or a final redemption of clock time, but hope can be offered. However, hope is not a certainty and offers no guarantee. Hope for novelty, moreover, is not an easy matter because the failures of the past and its ruins cannot be neglected and have to be enfolded into the possibilities of the present.

By extension, on the theological level, there are a number of serious questions to ask that might pressure a modern, liberal, or progressive Christianity. An important question—from the theological right, so to speak—is whether process theology does not propagate an incapable God who is of no use to us because such a God cannot help us. After all, doesn't God fail when our world perishes, or does God not fail when we fail in working the earth?[136] A second important question—from the theological left, so to speak—is whether we should not radically abandon Christian theology because the Christ event has lost its messianic potential.[137] The Christ event, with its message of new life from death or a new beginning after the end, has become implausible or meaningless and no longer has the ability to really change our perspective on reality anymore.

134 Keller, *Political Theology*, 69ff.

135 Keller, *Political Theology*, 3. Keller relies on Tillich for this distinction.

136 Keller, *Political Theology*, 107.

137 Keller, *Political Theology*, 105.

In her discussion of these questions, Keller advocates staying with the difficulties of theology.[138] It means that she wants to dwell at the defeats and ruins of the God of the exception. Theology can recognise that the idea of an omnipotent God has not helped and is failing. A negative theology can then offer perspective. It can acknowledge its own defeat and admit that it cannot name the infinite, which constitutes its defeat.[139] Still, a theology that is aware of its own not-knowing can help us to live in the ruins of all certainties, including the ruins caused by all certainty about God. The question from the 'right' about the success and power of God becomes irrelevant as soon as we focus, with the help of a negative theology, primarily on the depths from which life emerges and on the cosmic life of which we are a part. Cosmic life does not refer to a God who makes or breaks, but to a God who is embodied. It is not at all about a God who succeeds or wins, Keller argues with process theology, because God's intention is to materialise in the world's adventure in such a way that God is embodied through the bodies of creatures. What God "gains" is not victory or success but an increase in complexity, yielding a growth in tragic beauty.[140]

Based on the same negative theology, Keller ultimately also deviates from the "leftist" deconstructive or radical theologians who want to leave theology behind because it has lost its importance and messianic potential. They still hold theological concepts to be influential, but not fruitful anymore. Toward them, Keller also wants to stay with the difficulties, which can be approached by means of negative theology. According to Keller, a negative theology is equivalent to a secularised theology, which by its very nature is a political theology as well.[141] For this, she refers to Cusanus, who explicitly sought tolerance and peace. He wanted to prevent a crusade of Catholic Europe against Islamic Ottomans with the argument that what is looked for in different rites under different names is for all unknowable and unnameable.[142] Of even greater importance to theologians who wish to abandon theology is the opposite argument, namely that every politics, including secular politics, contains an implicit theology. For that reason, it remains important to engage in theology, because theology can expose hidden views and, for example, clarify the difference between a theology of sovereign power and a theology of weak messianic power.[143]

138 Keller, *Political Theology*, 112.
139 Keller, *Political Theology*, 120ff.
140 Keller, *Political Theology*, 124, 125.
141 Keller, *Political Theology*, 159ff.
142 Keller, *Political Theology*, 163, 164.
143 Keller, *Political Theology*, 112, 133.

Keller therefore insists on theology and on the messianic potency of the Christ event.[144] Christ illustrates the interconnectedness of everything in God and bears witness to it, as Christ realises a possibility, which is then given to us as a possibility "in Christ."[145] The Christ event therefore remains important for a political theology of the earth. Not because it refers to the incarnation of God in one exceptional Son, but because it refers to a breakthrough of what could potentially happen anywhere.[146] With that, Christ retains iconic importance, so to speak. Christ refers to the entanglement of everything in everything, enfolded in God, which is what Keller's apophatic panentheism is about. Christ thus remains an important sign of the concept of God, which Keller reflects in her theology.

8.4. Mutual Differences

There are significant similarities in the work of Kearney, Caputo, and Keller, allowing them to be collectively referred to as post-theistic theologians focusing on God after God. They are practicing theology in a theopoetic style after God and do not connect God with necessity but with possibility, to which humans respond in interaction. These similarities do not eliminate the differences between them, however. Kearney, Caputo, and Keller have been critical of each other, and their criticisms can ultimately be traced to a difference in basic theological convictions. A discussion of their differences at the conclusion of this chapter has importance in itself, of course, but also clarifies that a theological design of God after God does not constitute a completed end point but demands an ongoing theological reflection in the form of a conversation in which different perspectives emerge.

144 Keller, *Political Theology*, 148–154.

145 If everything is always already in God, what happens in Christ constitutes the inception of that, "not as exception but, to the contrary, as fulfilment, that is, as realisation. This means at once to actualise a possibility and to reveal it," Keller states in *Political Theology*, 148–149. With Benjamin and Agamben, she argues that the messianic now-time can realise the unfulfilled past by giving the past a future. With John Cobb, she argues that Christ as logos designates a call to "creative transformation." With Irenaeus' idea of recapitulation, she argues that in Christ, everything is summed up or folded together. She merges those thoughts. She then argues in *Political Theology*, 155, that Jesus' particularity can be seen as an illustration of "the mutual participation that always already constitutes us as creatures, but that in the messianic event was realised … in a peculiar fullness, in a body that bespoke and endless all-in-all yet to come."

146 Keller, *Political Theology*, 126.

Kearney versus Caputo

Kearney's work centres on a God who may be. As a giver of possibilities, God enables us to provide God's ability-to-be with an existence so that God will be in God's kingdom. This results in an interaction between God and humans, which Kearney refers to as a chiasm in which God and human beings depend on one another and can change in their relationship to each other. Caputo partially concurs with this view but also radicalises it. According to him, God is not primarily a giver of possibilities but the name of an event itself located outside of Being, appealing to us with an authority without power that awakens our desire for more life, but in doing so always remains outside our horizon.

Caputo's radicalisation can be read as a critical revision of Kearney. God *is* not, and cannot be, but remains outside of Being. God does not give possibilities, but is itself the perhaps of reality. As perhaps, God is essentially dangerous and implies problems because we are never sure what we are accomplishing when we respond to the call and try to realise what we desire. It can produce both heaven and hell. There is indeed interaction between God and humans, but according to Caputo, this interaction can never come to completion because we are called to fulfil a promise that reality can never fulfil. Caputo acknowledges to some extent that reality is "more" than it is, but this more of reality comes to light as the fragile glory of its own finitude, whereas Kearney adheres to a transcendence that manifests itself as a surplus of meaning.

In a number of passages, Kearney questions the thinking of Levinas, Derrida, and Caputo with arguments that, in turn, can be read as a rejoinder to Caputo's radicalisation. A God as an event beyond Being is presented as such a radical alterity that we cannot relate to it. Such a relation is essential for Kearney because we can only find a new relation to the other within if we relate ourselves to the other outside of us, which enables both self and other to change each other and to transform themselves in their relationship. In Caputo's theology, the possibility of transforming this world from wasteland to the kingdom of God is ultimately removed. According to Kearney, with Caputo, the event that is harboured in the name of God is, after all, unknowable, incalculable, and different to such an extent that the great religious traditions can no longer provide guidance for distinguishing between good and evil, gods and monsters, or stranger and enemy, but leave us blind in the dark when we respond to a call on the authority of a *Vorstellung* without a *Begriff*.[147]

147 Kearney, *Anatheism*, xiv, 152.

A fundamental difference between Kearney and Caputo consists of the status of God. Kearney insists on a God whose *esse* must be thought of as *posse* or as *posse ispum*, as Cusanus argued. In this respect, God is unconditional. The way God will be in the future may depend on human behaviour, but God's love is unconditional and sovereign. God, as pure goodness, owes an independent existence qualified as *posse*. Likewise, with Caputo, there is an absolute aspect to God in the sense that God, as event, cannot be determined or manipulated. However, Caputo argues that the event of God *is* not, since it is outside of Being and can never be contained in Being. God has no existence, not even in Godself, and will eventually disappear with the world. The central issue at stake between Kearney and Caputo, therefore, concerns the fundamental question: God, something or nothing? The divergent answer to that question separates Kearney's theology from Caputo's.[148]

Kearney versus Keller

Differences can also be observed between Kearney and Keller. For both, relationships are of great importance. For Kearney, the relationship between self and other is essential. With Keller, everything is made up of relationships. Kearney's idea that God gives possibilities to be realised by humans corresponds far and wide with process-theological views of God, who gives the world a purpose and direction according to God's primordial nature and then incorporates the world according to God's consequential nature into Godself. Yet there is an important difference between Kearney and Keller, which is related to the extent to which God and the world are intertwined. In Keller's view, the intertwining is absolute. The world is enfolded in God, who is the unity of the many, and God is unfolded in the world. With Kearney, however, God, being absolute goodness, keeps incorruptible independence.

In responding to Kearney's concept of a God-who-will-be, Keller expressed her concern that Kearney is thereby anticipating a final outcome.[149] Such a final completion on an "endless morning," in which there will be no more

148 Cf. also Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 193–218, where Kearney and Caputo mostly express agreement with each other. In two later articles, they discuss each other's work more critically, and the difference between Kearney's hermeneutic approach and Caputo's deconstructive approach becomes more apparent. Cf. John Caputo, "Where Is Richard Kearney Coming From? Hospitality, Anatheism and Ana-deconstruction," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47, no. 5 (2021): 551–569. Richard Kearney, "A Game of Jacks: Review Essay of John D. Caputo's Recent Work," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47, no. 5 (2021): 570–586.

149 Catherine Keller, "Richard Kearney's Endless Morning," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 7 (2004): 890–896.

death and all tears will be wiped away, according to Keller, still leans on an intervention of God and tacitly presupposes an omnipotent God. Thus, the God-who-will-be is still provided with supremacy.

Conversely, in a conversation between Kearney and Keller, Kearney shows himself concerned that Keller's panentheism compromises God.[150] From his point of view, there can be no evil in God. Manifestations of a radical evil like torture or rape must be placed outside of God, which makes Keller's view that everything is in God untenable.[151] Kearney fears that panentheism is both compromising human freedom and the unspoiled nature of God's love.[152] Even though he certainly does not wish to advocate dualism between a transcendent God in a metaphysical realm of pure light and the fallen world, he does want to hold to a God whose *posse* only implies goodness. Keller does agree with Kearney that God "is the possibility of love that lures more love" and that evil stems from human behaviour, but she also holds that God evokes a world in which both the good, the better, and evil are possible.[153] In this respect, there is more complexity to God than just pure goodness. Indeed, God can be accused of having called forth a world in which the fall is possible. In this sense, with Keller, there is a certain ambiguity in God.[154]

In the same conversation, Kearney and Keller both emphasise the importance of the interconnection between God and humans, or between God and the world, and turn against extreme forms of "heterology," in which God differs from all else to such an extent that God is located outside of Being and outside of all relations, as is the case—by implication—with Levinas, Derrida, and Caputo.[155] Keller does note, however, that there is an important difference between her and Kearney as well regarding their agreement, as she works with a language of ontological connectivity, while Kearney uses a language of otherness and strangeness.[156] She thereby identifies an essential difference between them. In Kearney's *Anatheism*, a perfectly good God connects itself with humans "in a sacred moment of radical opening and reception," in which the stranger is received, so that we "learn divinity from the other, not from ourselves, not alone, but always in relation, in response

150 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 46; cf. Rick Benjamins, "Apophatic Panentheism," 119–120.

151 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 54.

152 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 47.

153 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 49.

154 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 48.

155 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 66.

156 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 68.

to the *hospes* in front of us."[157] For Keller, however, an ontological connection between God and creatures is fundamental. Everything that is exists in relation. Therefore, it is meaningless to talk about God as separate from the world and to suggest that God relates Godself to humans in a sacred moment. God is ontologically and inseparably connected to the world, even though distinctions can be made between God, creatures, and the deep.

Whereas the central issue between Kearney and Caputo seemed to result in the fundamental question: God, something or nothing? with Kearney and Keller, it seems to result in the question: God, love that receives the other or unity that encompasses all? At this point, their pathways diverge.

Keller versus Caputo

Substantial differences occur between Keller and Caputo as well. In her theology, Keller criticises the idea of God as an event of the impossible, separate from Being. Since everything that exists consists of relations, a God outside of these relations is inconceivable. Keller holds on to the possibility of the impossible, but it cannot come as an event from the outside into this world. It rises from the deep, in which everything is interwoven and connected.[158] God is the entanglement of everything in everything, enfolded in God, but not an event breaking into this world.

In *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo addresses this objection of Keller and her apophatic panentheism.[159] He argues that God, as *posse ipsum*, as "ability itself," as God is called by Cusanus—to which both Kearney and Keller refer—entails an ambivalent concept.[160] *Posse* can mean both potentiality and power. Kearney and Keller do make use of the openings and perspectives offered by Cusanus' innovative concept of God, conceiving *posse* as possibility, but Cusanus himself remained within the Neoplatonist pattern of thought of a Christian *theologia gloriae*. *Posse* means power with Cusanus. By referring to God as *posse ipsum*, Cusanus states that God is pure power, of which not all possibility needs to be realised. What is indeed realised, however, depends on God's ability for its existence, and this ability encompasses the totality of all possibilities. Therefore, the world is not possible without God's *posse*, which, with or without the world, itself remains *posse ipsum*.[161]

Keller is interpreting Cusanus in a panentheistic manner. Caputo sympathises with this, even though it is questionable whether Keller's interpretation

157 Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagening the Sacred*, 63.
158 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 41, 99–101, 103–105.
159 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 193–215.
160 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 198–202.
161 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 202.

is irrefutable. Anyway, she wants to prevent some highest being from determining what takes place below. A top-down model is therefore replaced by a bottom-up model. In the top-down model of omnipotence, lower, finite entities are dependent for their actualisation on an omnipotent power that creates them out of nothing, of which they are the image. In the bottom-up model, entities realise opportunities presented to them from the deep. They themselves are the higher realisation of an underlying potentiality. Top-down, the entities are *effects* of omnipotence; bottom-up, they are the *expression* of a virtual power. Top-down, God is the first *cause* of Being, bottom-up, God is a *ground* of Being that offers possibilities, as it was articulated, for example, in the theology of Tillich. Both models can be apophatic. Top-down, the height above all height is beyond expression, as something beyond Being, beyond light, and beyond all understanding. Bottom-up, the deep remains below expression, ineffable as an impenetrable darkness, an abyss, or un-ground.[162]

Caputo is willing to go along with Keller's apophatic panentheism, about which he speaks commendably, but his great concern is that the ground of being—the potentiality, the possibility, or the virtual that can be realised in the world—still determines what comes about.[163] In that case, panentheism has changed nothing compared to theism, in which a supreme being provides realisation. To prevent the ground of Being from determining what is actualised, events are needed that are surprising, that cannot be calculated, cannot be traced, and cannot be planned, so that the ground of Being, as it were, can be surprised itself. These are the events that Caputo, with Derrida, is striving for. As events, they must fall outside the order of Being and also stay outside the order of potentiality from the deep; otherwise, everything will already be programmed in the One. When Keller says that everything coincides and is enfolded in God, Caputo fears that there will be no place left for the breaking in of events anymore. In that case, panentheism provides nothing more than moving the work of the theistic God from the height to the deep.

Whereas the issue between Kearney and Caputo seemed to be about God as either something or nothing, and the central issue between Kearney and Keller seemed to be about encountering love or encompassing unity, the issue between Keller and Caputo—in the words of the latter—is about coincidence or accident.[164] Is God the enfolding of everything, in which everything coincides, or is God the event that merely falls in?

162 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 204–205.
163 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 206.
164 Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 207.

In the light of these discussions, a final word about God appears to be impossible, even after God. On the contrary, precisely after God, a new space opens up to rethink God on the basis of a modified concept of God. Rethinking God fundamentally entails a reflection on the question of who or what human beings are, what kind of world they live in, and what makes life good, complicates it, or keeps it open. Moreover, it entails fundamental intuitions on what can and cannot be said about God. These are perennial questions, which nevertheless have to be asked and answered again and again because the answers we give to them ultimately determine how we relate to ourselves, the other, and the world. In the responses we give, we express who we are in the face of what transcends, calls, encompasses, or interrupts us. The work of Kearney, Caputo, and Keller presents new answers that make sense of older traditions and, in their mutual differences, open up spaces for ongoing reflections.

Interaction between God, humans, and the world

A constructive theology is of great importance for a theology after Kuitert, in which God is no longer thought of as a supreme being, nor as an interpretation or imagination emerging from thinking patterns that deserve to be deconstructed. God is thought of as a God whom humans shape through interaction. Yet God is not a product of humans. God remains independent as a giver of possibilities that precedes us, as an event that befalls us but we do not determine, or as a whole that is bigger, broader, and deeper than us. Nevertheless, there is an explicit interaction or chiasm between God and humans or the world. We provide existence to God, who is providing us with possibilities, by realising these possibilities, according to Kearney. We answer a call from God that starts taking shape in our desire, according to Caputo. We are made up of relations, through which we build and determine each other as part of all that is and God as the encompassing whole, according to Keller. A theology of God after God thus opens up a new space, in which we can position ourselves in the world with others related to God.

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Part Four

God after God

9. God Through Humans

Abstract: God after God can be conceived as a ground of interpretation, an un-ground, or a giver of possibilities. It is argued that our God-talk begins with the experience of transcendence and the awareness that the world is more than just this actual or factual world. In their receptivity to the transcendent, humans are passive, but they are constitutive of the designation and naming of the transcendent. In this respect, God—as an indication of the transcendent—takes shape in an interaction between God and humans, in which God becomes and can be realised.

Keywords: God after God, transcendence, experience, reciprocity, surplus of meaning, voice of God

In the first chapter of this book, it was claimed that God is still an important word, denoting what carries, transcends, calls, encompasses, or interrupts us. The notion of God brings into focus what is beyond us and helps to orient us in the world. The main question of this book was how, in a post-Christian, postmodern, and post-secular context, we can arrive at a plausible understanding of God without having to think of God as an independent entity separate from the world. How can we think of God after God if God is no longer conceived of as a supernatural, all-determining, all-good being?

From the nature of this question, it naturally follows that this book is primarily about theological and philosophical conceptualisations. Therefore, individual religious experiences, life choices, or spiritual life are not emphasised. The starting point for this book was the theology of Kuitert, who abandoned old conceptions of God and thought along with meaning-seekers and lovers of religion. However, he seemed to get stuck because, on the one hand, he insisted on a God who must exist independently of humans, for otherwise God would become a product of the imagination. On the other hand, he argued that God cannot be anything but a product of the imagination, since we can only speak from down here about up there. Thus, we can never attain real knowledge of God.

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With Hegel and Heidegger, however, it appeared that the sharp opposition between up there and down here did not have to be as absolute as Kuitert stated. With Hegel, God can be thought of as Spirit coming to knowledge of itself in the minds of humans. God is God in such a way that God, to be God, must be known by human beings as what they themselves profoundly are, namely spirit. With Heidegger, God can be understood as Being to which human *Dasein* belongs. God can be thought of as the ungrounded ground of reality, which happens in the being of beings.

Subsequently, the differences between Hegel and Heidegger proved considerable. Hegel outlines history as a great and meaningful process in which a spiritual principle is unfolding. This does happen through numerous detours, but still toward a clear goal, namely, that humans come to know themselves, recognise others, and join a free community determined by a shared spirit. Hegel trusts, so to speak, that we can adhere to the ideal of a free, spiritual community of humans because reality itself is geared toward it and will ultimately take us there. Heidegger perceives modern history as a fateful event in which people with great technical ability try to bend Being to their will. He sees the modern desire for such control already reflected in the classical idea of God as a supreme being, from which one can deduce what "being" is and how it should be ordered. He himself wants to understand the voice of Being again to arrive at an authentic existence. His wager is, so to speak, that beyond our alienation, a more honest and original existence must be possible.

By reading Hegel and Heidegger after Kuitert, the idea can be overcome that we are just imaginatively speaking from down here about up there. If God is thought of as Spirit or Being, God is not divided from us as a separate entity. With God as Spirit or Being, we are speaking of ourselves, and of what constitutes us most deeply as spirit or beings. However, the steps we take in doing so also raise new questions. How do we position ourselves in the world as spirits or beings? Are we on the way to a free spiritual community, or must we place ourselves outside the established social order in order to find an appropriate existence?

With the theologians and philosophers of the third part, that question came into view, though it was approached sideways rather than answered directly, as the emphasis again fell on conceptualisations of God. Broadly speaking, one can say that from the three movements of the third part, three views of God emerge. God can be seen as interpretive ground, as unground, and as a giver of possibilities. These three views are accompanied by three different views concerning the human stance toward reality or the world.

According to theologians of interpretation, God is intimately connected to the subject and comes to light when the subject interprets the world and itself. God appears to be that, on the basis of which the subject is able to interpret the world and itself. The subject is able to interpret by virtue of God, who is the final ground of reality. We might erase God, but if we interpret the world and ourselves without the theological interpretation of an interpretive ground, we will end up short in our interpretation of the world and ourselves. We can still interpret, but without understanding on what basis. In that case, we will readily deliver ourselves to the cultural machinery of meaning and sense-making but no longer see who we are at our deepest level, namely, free human beings on their own that are allowed to understand and express themselves. Within the framework of a theology of interpretation, emphases can be placed differently. The emphasis can be on the subject's interpretation that produces the idea of God, on experiences that invite the subject to arrive at such an interpretation, or on God through which the subject arrives at new interpretations of itself. However, the close relationship between God and the subject remains intact in all of these variations. God positions us, simply put, as free and independent beings in the world to contribute meaningfully and critically to society by interpreting and culturally expressing ourselves.

In my opinion, the perspective of the theologians of interpretation, with their emphasis on the subject, is largely absent in Dutch theology and probably in the Anglo-American world as well. Although the perspective of this interpretive theology can be criticised, I consider it of great importance given the fact that we have lost a God from up there. To find God, we must not go outside or upward, but inward. God is related to the relationship of humans to themselves and their deepest ground.

According to postmodern deconstruction, we must get rid of our conceptions of God in order to find our place in the world. On the basis of the concept of God as a supreme being—the source of all that exists, the origin and purpose of all life—human life is included, as it were, in a scheme that already establishes what humans must make of themselves in order to reach their destiny. As a result, life is locked up. In order to liberate life by dis-enclosure, theology must get rid of God as the ground of all. However, to prevent that another agency—reason, the subject, humanity—takes the place of God and starts to determine what human beings should be like, and to prevent humans from being locked up in a closed immanence, God must remain as un-ground. Thus, God keeps the place of God empty to prevent tyranny and to enable humans to be what they are, or to be something else, so as to differ from one another together in a more true and better

life. Within this framework of postmodern deconstruction, emphases differ as well. The emphasis may be on a refutation of God as supreme being or deepest ground, on the breaking of a flat or complacent immanence, or on the defence and protection of life as a pure possibility of being this way or that. In all these cases, God as un-ground prevents an improper containment of existential possibilities and idolatry.

In my view, the critique of a deconstructive theology is of great importance, as it prevents theology from engaging in ideology critique without viewing its own ideology self-critically. Yet it can hardly offer constructive views or perspectives for action itself because it remains fundamentally critical.

According to theologians who speak of God again in a constructive way, God does not define what humans should make of themselves, but God indicates the possibility of making something of themselves. By making something of themselves, humans can simultaneously contribute to the realisation of God. Thus, God matters to the way humans are placed in the world. Their place, however, varies depending on how God is thought of. God can be seen as a giver of possibilities that enables people to relate to others in such a way that they realise God as the kingdom of God. Next, God can also be seen as the perhaps of reality that shakes up the world by calling us to an "impossible" justice, gift, or hospitality, including all the risks it entails. Furthermore, God can also be seen as the totality of the relations that make up our world, in which we are embedded and to which we contribute. From there, unimagined possibilities can emerge through interconnections and relationships. Eliminate God from these views, and the world keeps turning as it did. However, we would lose our focus on matters of utmost importance, namely a proper relationship to the other outside and within ourselves, an orientation to "impossibilities" that correspond to our deepest desire, and an honest and constructive dealing with the web of our relations.

Experience of transcendence

The title and argument of this book clearly articulate that I commit myself to thinking about God after God. In my view, after God, talk about God is still meaningful. This is largely due to the fact that I attach importance to the gospel, in which God plays an important role. With Jesus as Christ, the gospel presents us with a human being who embodies God and realises God's kingdom.[1] Moreover, God is a central concept in Western thought,

1 Cf. Rick Benjamins, "Christus, belichaming van God," in *Liberaal christendom: Ervaren, denken, doen*, ed. Rick Benjamins, Jan Offringa, and Wouter Slob (Skandalon, 2016).

whose formative effect I would not want to strip away by removing God-talk. However, Scripture and tradition alone cannot sustain the importance of God if experience and reason cannot agree. A reflection on the concept of God is needed, therefore, on the basis of our world experiences to arrive at a plausible notion of God, as has been done again and again in the Christian tradition.[2]

In my view, experiences of reality give us a reason to keep talking about God. Such a reason is primarily constituted by experiences of transcendence that can be interpreted and filled in with the help of the notion of God. Simply put, experiences of transcendence are experiences of reality having an impact on us, in which reality appears as carrying us, transcending us, calling us, encompassing us, or interrupting us. In such cases, we can hear the voice of God in reality, for example, because we feel addressed by the distress of others, because we are confronted with something sacred that commands our absolute respect, or because we feel part of a greater whole that simultaneously broadens us and reduces us to our true proportions. In all such cases, we do not face reality as humans trying to grasp or control it, but we are seized, touched, or addressed by reality ourselves. That dimension of our relationship to reality is usually not thematised in our daily lives or in social and scientific enterprises but is essential for religion and for the arts as well.

The experience of transcendence is not about contact with something transcendent *above* or *outside* the world, but about an awareness of transcendence *in* or *of* the world. In this sense, "up there" is "down here." We do not encounter something supernatural or a being that transcends the world, but we get in touch with a dimension of reality that overcomes us and is beyond us only in this respect. Reality lifts us up or seizes us. It shows itself to be greater than we are at those moments, and it breaks through our conceptual apparatus. As a result, we gain an unexpected or deep awareness of the reality to which we belong while also gaining insight into ourselves. Of course, such experiences are not separate from reflection. They are mediated, interpreted, and developed by reflection and the apparatus of concepts available to us. For this purpose, traditions equip reflection with the

2 Jan Muis, *The Implicit Theology of the Lord's Prayer: A Biblical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Allan J. Janssen (Fortress Academic, 2021), originally 2016, takes a different stance. He takes his starting point for speaking of God in the particular acts in which God makes Godself known to human beings. The Bible testifies to these, and characteristics of God are derived from them. Muis argues that the existence of God in the Christian tradition is always related to different conceptions of reality but is not bound to any one of them. However, "every ontology is relative with respect to God and his revelation," xii.

necessary material, among which is the notion of God. Although this notion cannot be derived directly from experience, experiences can give reason to involve the transmitted notion of God. Experiences of transcendence thus provoke the use of the concept of God and thereby provide a basis to continue talking about God.

It is not imperative to use the notion of God in order to further substantiate or interpret experiences of transcendence, but in my view, it is useful. Sometimes, it is said that the universe speaks to us, works on us, gives us children, or things like that. Expressions of such a kind were most of all identified by Schleiermacher as being typically religious, even though they make no mention of God. Yet the use of the notion of God offers a great advantage. In the Christian tradition from where I speak, the notion is related to a very fine, differentiated, and multiple conceptual apparatus of theological reflection, which helps to interpret experience. Christian ways of speaking about God allow us, for example, not to say rather sweepingly that the universe gives us something but to name a particular aspect of the universe, referred to as God, from where the gift comes. With the same word "God," our obligations to the universe can be expressed. This would avoid that all reality is connected to God and allow for a distinction between reality we have to take for granted, reality we can and must change, and reality we may receive as a gift. Obviously, experiences of transcendence do not have to be connected to God or articulated in religious language, but God-talk does provide a very appropriate idiom in which such experiences can be deepened and processed. In religious idioms, so-called "experiences with experience" are stored. These are reflexive handlings of experiences, which can help us process our experience and locate ourselves in the world on that basis.

The theologians featured in this book often refer to experiences of transcendence as experiences of a surplus, an excess, or a "more" of reality. This means that reality can always show itself differently from what we have seen so far or manifest itself in a way that cannot be captured by familiar words or phrasings. In these cases, reality reveals itself in new ways. Kuitert referred to this by suggesting that we experience "more" than reality when we experience reality in its power over us and ourselves in our dependence on it.[3] Lauster argued that experiences of transcendence show reality to be "more" than it is, as they suggest a higher or deeper dimension.[4] In *Anatheism*, Richard Kearney's main argument revolves around epiphanies or experiences

3 Cf. p. 46.
4 Cf. p. 134.

of transcendence in which something "more" of reality appears and a surplus of meaning is generated.[5] Caputo argued that all becomes "more" than it is once it is recognised that it is just there for no reason, since only then it appears in its own glory.[6]

The importance of surplus experiences and our difficulty connecting these experiences of transcendence with God or giving them a place in our lifeworld can be clarified by the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor showed how we have become "modern selves," for whom self-development, autonomy, and authenticity are central.[7] He exposes at length that the modern selves we have become cannot possibly be able to return to a world that is ruled by an objective and self-contained moral or metaphysical order to which we have to conform. If the word God is used to refer to such an order, which gives meaning and unity to the world, theological language will easily evoke resistance and misunderstanding. At the same time, Taylor notes that a so-called "buffered self," which isolates itself through self-development, autonomy, and authenticity to focus primarily on its own development, entails an impoverishment of experience and will consequently be an obstacle to finding fulfilment in life.[8] We must therefore transcend the subjectivity of the self, but we can do so only through the subject, through the access of what appeals to us personally and resonates with us subjectively. "The order is only accessible through personal, hence 'subjective,' resonance."[9]

What transcends us is accessible only through one's own experience. To express and share that experience, after the demise of an objective order and a shared idiom, so-called "subtle languages" are needed, which are used especially in art.[10] These subtle languages do not refer to something outside of us but make us look at reality in such a way that something appears in it that is deeper, bigger, and richer than just plain reality. Subtle languages attempt to depict the unimaginable or express the ineffable without tying it down with concepts. Where that happens, the work of art becomes itself an "epiphany," that is, a site where "a beyond" manifests itself through the image. The beyond that transcends us does not exist objectively so that it can be described, but exists through the work of art and therefore depends

5 Cf. p. 183.

6 Cf. p. 205.

7 See in particular Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self.*

8 The term "buffered self" appears in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

9 Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 510.

10 Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 393ff.; Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 758ff.

on human articulation in the work of art. Through the articulation, the beyond takes shape and form, not as if it were invented by the articulation and projected onto reality, but so that it shines through the articulation and can touch humans in a shared experience as a transcendent reality.

What Taylor puts forward has been expressed in a similar way by Jörg Lauster and Richard Kearney, albeit that Lauster and Kearney relate to each other almost mirror wise. They approach experiences of transcendence both in a hermeneutical way, but whereas Lauster links transcendence to the subject or the self, Kearney connects transcendence to the other, although self and other can never be without each other, as can be seen, for example, in the work of Korsch.

Lauster and Kearney both assume the basic hermeneutical insight that we always perceive something as something, even in the case of experiences of transcendence. Lauster emphasises that an experience of transcendence is an experience of the subject. It is not an experience of a supernatural object, but an experience for which the subject itself uses transcendental concepts or religious language. What the subject perceives can only be expressed through the use of words such as "God," "the sacred," "the supernatural," "the ultimate," or similar terms. This indicates that the experience is uncommon and belongs to an outer category for which all other language is inappropriate. Experiences of transcendence, according to Lauster, are mostly gained in nature, in art, or in feelings of happiness. The experience of transcendence makes the subject feel included in a meaningful whole, even if the subject itself does not fathom the meaning of that whole. Through the experience of transcendence, the subject is able to see its life in a new light. Even though the emphasis is on the subjective side of experience, the experience is still evoked by something outside of the subject.

Kearney rather emphasises the relationship to the other and the different instead of focusing on the subject. Only when humans are open to what is different *from* themselves can they relate to the otherness *of* themselves in a new way. If we let the other into our world, we can also be allowed into the other's world, which allows us to change through each other. The way we relate to the other is paradigmatic for our relationship to the transcendent and the sacred that is signified by the other. According to Kearney, the stranger is a sign of transcendence par excellence because she always embodies something *else*, something *more*, something *other* than what the self can grasp or contain."[11] The very encounter with the divine stranger therefore lies at the heart of the Abrahamic religions. Even

11 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 152.

though Kearney emphasises the different and the other, he simultaneously mentions the self as the source of religion. "Out of the silent dark of the heart-cave—from which many religions originate spring and to which they often return—emerges a chorus of sounds, images, and gestures soliciting endless translation into different liturgies."[12]

Experiences of transcendence and the Christian language about God

Experiences of transcendence invite us to speak about God and to use the notion of God in the interpretation of such experiences. The connection of experiences of transcendence with God, however, as already mentioned, is neither obvious nor seamless and therefore constitutes a theme in itself.

Lauster points out that Christian language provides an idiom by which transcendence can be indicated. He fears a loss of awareness of transcendence and an impoverishment of experience when this language falls away. To me, this seems to be partially right. Stated like this, however, it implies that we must enter into Christian language in order to make sense of experiences of transcendence, which admittedly could not be gained without language at all. Yet many people have abandoned Christian language precisely because it no longer seems appropriate to give expression to themselves or to what is beyond. The beyond, according to Lauster, is God as the final ground of all.

In his anatheistic approach, Kearney argues that experiences of transcendence can also be signified in non-Christian and nonreligious language. He advocates a mutual understanding of people with theistic and atheistic views. He himself leaves the idea of an omnipotent God and the need for theodicy behind while still opening up to transcendence, and in turn, he is asking from the atheistic side for openness to experiences of surplus, which can be connected to God. Kearney interprets this surplus himself by using the idea of a God-who-may-be.

Caputo takes yet another path. According to him, God is the name for an event (of hospitality, justice, or forgiveness) that shakes reality and breaks through the ordinary. Such an event needs our desire for the event so that we may become worthy of the event (of hospitality, justice, and forgiveness). The call that emanates from the event is neither supernatural nor transcendent, but is a call of reality itself. Reality itself carries within it the promise of a better life or more justice, which is a promise to which we, who ourselves belong to reality, respond. According to Caputo, the essence of Christian language can thus be understood secularly as an articulation of and a response to a call of reality. In fact, in religious language, the call

12 Kearney, *Anatheism*, 51.

and promise of reality are both preserved and perverted. On the one hand, Caputo seems to accept that the call requires a religious tradition in which it is harboured, stored, and preserved, but on the other hand, he wants to deconstruct religious tradition in order to distract it from centralising itself while remaining open to the call that transcends it. God is a word in which the call of reality is kept, which must be cracked open in order to be focused not on God but on the call.

As far as I am concerned, the Christian tradition, in which people have expressed themselves in many ways through stories, philosophies, buildings, visual arts, liturgies, and practices, offers a rich and varied language that is well suited to making sense of experiences of transcendence. Conversely, of course, this also means that experiences of transcendence are informed by Christian language once we use it. Our experience will be shaped by the Christian tradition as soon as we step into it. The Christian tradition, with its legacy of centuries, offers a great wealth of insights and means of expression in which transcendence has been interpreted, and should not be narrowed in scope by preconceived ideas. To remain open, Christian language should not isolate itself from secular, multi-religious, and post-secular perspectives on reality but enter into conversation with them.

Simply put, in my view, God lives through experiences of transcendence that can be interpreted in a religious and Christian way. Although experiences of transcendence are possible without God and the Christian tradition, they do help to be open to transcendence. This liberal approach probably differs from an orthodox one, which generally tends to take the existence of God as a given and attempts to derive further knowledge about God from revelation. The difference between the two approaches can be well clarified on the basis of the resurrection, which for Christianity is probably the most fundamental—but of course not the only—experience of transcendence. For a more orthodox approach, the resurrection as a historical event will form the basis for a view on the world and on life view that is sharply distinct from others. For a more liberal approach, the story of the resurrection offers the opportunity to see life in a different light and to reconsider the ultimate values of life versus death. In both cases, an appropriation or rehearsal of Christian language and symbols takes place, which I think is useful because it helps us understand ourselves in the world.

Reciprocity between God and human beings

Experiences of transcendence need language and interpretation in order to come into being, and in this, the subject always plays a role. On this basis, it can be argued that the subject is of importance, that God takes shape

through the articulations and behaviours of humans, and that there is an interaction between God and humans in which God is realised.

The idea of an interaction between God and humans has not been well received in classical theology, as it goes against the so-called aseity of God, which means that there is no cause for God's existence, because God exists by Godself and is God's own cause. It is part of God's being to exist, and in this, God is completely independent of any interference from the outside. Interference with God, moreover, would be contrary to God's perfection because it implies a change in God. Such a change is always a change for better or worse, which is impossible for a perfect being that is always at its best. There is no change in God, therefore, and God's immutability goes along with an inability to suffer, because God cannot be affected from the outside due to God's independence and perfection.

Classical theology, however, has always had a difficult time reconciling God's aseity, immutability, and inability to suffer with the idea that God incarnates in Christ and that Christ suffers and dies. Indeed, this implies that God is affected, which does not suit God's immutable being. Complex pieces of the doctrine of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the theory of Christ's two natures are devoted to the connection of God's aseity with God's incarnation. Still, they have not been able to take away the implication that God makes Godself vulnerable in the child in the manger and suffers in the human being on the cross. In the Christian doctrine of God, therefore, a discrepancy remains between an absolutely self-sufficient and immutable God and a God who gives Godself to human beings out of love.

Despite classical theology, there has been a great emphasis on the suffering and pity of God since the twentieth century, giving rise to speaking of God's defencelessness or weakness. The weak side of God, though, is usually included in conceptions of the Trinity or mediated by thoughts of God's power, so that it is a willed weakness, which ultimately is not weak at all. In this respect, the Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof spoke of God's "defenceless supremacy," which ultimately works what it aims at.[13] God's powerlessness is often conceived of as a self-limiting form of omnipotence. Nevertheless, there are voices that especially emphasise God's weakness and dependence. The most telling and appealing of these is probably from Etty Hillesum, who on July 12, 1942, writes in her diary: "I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You

13 Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, Revised Edition, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Eerdmans, 1986), originally 1973, 140ff.

cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible."[14]

As far as I am concerned, it is unwise to dismiss classical theology outright because it contains a respectable way to connect an experience of transcendence, namely through Christ, with the transmitted concept of God. However, the understanding of God thereby established has, in modernity and postmodernity, increasingly become a fossilised metaphysical doctrine that hardly seems to connect with experience anymore, is no longer helping to make sense of experiences of transcendence, and even seems to push them away. For that reason, a new understanding of God (after God) is needed that does correspond to our experience. A new understanding of God, however, cannot be easily introduced either. Old meanings, experiences, questions, and insights remain attached to God. They stand in the way of an entirely new construction, but they also provide a pile of material that can be newly interpreted or give rise to new interpretations. In front of tradition, a new interpretation will probably always look flawed and not yet fully thought through. It must therefore be open to rebuttal. Yet it does not have to be intimidated by traditions, which themselves, after all, have always developed preliminary insights that were never fully thought through and were under criticism as well.

With that in mind, I have gradually come to the conviction that God depends on human beings, just as human beings depend on God. My 1993 dissertation focused on the relationship between God's providence and human freedom in the work of Origen.[15] Unlike the Greek philosophers, Origen supposes that God is in tune with humans and that there is an interaction between them in this sense. From my 1997 book *Mocht God bestaan* (Were God to exist), I still maintain the central idea that the notion of God can help postmodern humans understand themselves.[16] In *Een zachte soort van zijn: Drie manieren om van God te denken: Plotinus, Rilke, Jonas* (A gentle way of being: Three ways to think of God) from 2003, I described the images of God that emerge from the work of Plotinus, Rilke, and Hans Jonas. Particularly with Rilke and Jonas, there is reciprocity between God and humans.[17] In *Een*

14 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* and *Letters from Westerbork* (Henry Holt & Company, 1996), 178.

15 Hendrik S. Benjamins, *Eingeordnete Freiheit: Freiheit und Vorsehung bei Origenes* (Brill, 1994).

16 Hendrik S. Benjamins, *Mocht God bestaan: Het christelijk geloof ter verantwoording* (Callenbach, 1997).

17 Hendrik S. Benjamins, *Een zachte soort van zijn*.

en Ander: De traditie van de moderne theologie (One and other: The tradition of modern theology), I focused on the modern theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which God was alternately thought of as One or Other, but the idea of an interaction was not prominently present.[18] In my 2016 contributions to *Liberaal Christendom* (Liberal Christianity), I briefly elaborated on the idea of reciprocity between God and humans, as I had previously encountered it, especially with Rilke and Jonas, and was now able to further articulate it with recent thoughts.[19]

In *The Book of Hours*, Rilke writes about a God who, in the words and images of creative humans, comes to light from silence and darkness.[20] Their words and images allow God to be present, but they also constitute a screen standing in the way between God and human beings. God becomes and grows through the work of artists, and God will finally inherit all the beauty of the world. However, the relationship between God and humans is fragile. If humans lose their contact with God, God falls back into darkness. In a receptive state of poverty and humility, though, people can stay in touch with God and serve God. Hans Jonas wrote two essays at the end of his career in which he broadly tries to paint a plausible picture of God and our world. According to his conjecture, the deity scattered itself fully into the process of the cosmos's becoming in order to receive itself back from it, enriched by all experiences gained in time and history. God thereby puts Godself at risk and makes Godself dependent on human actions. Human actions mark the features in the face of God, and in this way, humans are responsible for God, who is not omnipotent but suffering.

The idea of mutuality between God and humans can be connected very well with the notion of experiences of transcendence. By that means, it can be explained that the subject is of importance for God, that God takes shape through the expressions and behaviours of human beings, and that there is an interaction between God and human beings in which God is realised.

God takes shape through human beings

In expressing experiences of transcendence, humans give words or shape to what transcends them. What transcends them—the transcendent, sacred, or God—cannot be described objectively as a reality separate from them but only takes shape through human articulation. In this sense, the subject's

18 Rick Benjamins, *Een en Ander.*

19 Rick Benjamins, Jan Offringa, and Wouter Slob, *Liberaal christendom: Ervaren, denken, doen* (Skandalon, 2016).

20 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke* (Insel Verlag, 1955), I, 249–366.

articulation matters for God because God appears only through it, similar to the way in which Hegel argued that Spirit comes to itself in the human mind and Heidegger articulated that Being appears in beings. The claim of an interaction between God and humans, however, goes beyond that. It does not imply merely that God takes shape through articulation in human thinking; it also claims that God itself takes shape through articulation. This raises, on the one hand, the formal question of whether we are capable of saying anything about God itself, and on the other hand, the substantive question of whether God is indeed partly dependent on human beings.

I believe that through articulation we give form to the transcendent—that which carries, transcends, calls, encompasses, or interrupts us—and thereby also say something about the transcendent, which presents itself to us through articulation. In this sense, we are saying something about God itself. I am convinced that it is disastrous for religion or faith to speak from there with objective certainty about the essence of God, but that it is equally undermining to say nothing about God anymore because of a lack of certainty. The transcendent appears to us only in the way it is articulated by us, and that is the form it then takes.

The claim that the transcendent—namely, God—is indeed depending on humans seems counterintuitive at first glance. After all, it is part of the grammar of speaking about God that God precedes. Humans did not create themselves, the world is not created by itself, and by the word God, we indicate that we are determined by God. In this context, Schleiermacher, for example, talks about the feeling of utter dependence. Humans who can act independently in the world—and thus exert influence on worldly factors on which they are *relatively* dependent—are *utterly* dependent on the fact that they exist. From whom or what? That is what we call God, according to Schleiermacher, who otherwise does not speculate but takes the human sense of utter dependence as the internal basis of their religiosity in consciousness. Bultmann called God the all-determining power of reality, about which I, however, can never speak outside myself because I myself am determined by that all-determining power. If I want to speak about God, I must not speak about God but about myself as one who is determined by God. Tillich refers to God as the ground of Being that works in people as beings. The priority of God, which is thereby always emphasised, has been pithily expressed by Ingolf Dalferth in the title of his book, *God First.*[21]

21 Ingolf U. Dalferth, *God first: Die reformatorische Revolution der christlichen Denkungsart* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018).

The claim, God first, recognises that we belong to reality, on which we depend, which precedes us, acts upon us, and works with us. Now it seems logical from there to see God as the final ground or the first cause of all that exists. In doing so, however, we easily fall into a form of causal thinking, which was especially criticised by Heidegger in *The Principle of Reason*. Causal thinking makes the world explainable and controllable by first stating that nothing happens without a cause and then conceiving of God as the cause of all causes. Heidegger tried to escape this by arguing that Being is the groundless ground for the beings in which it appears. To me, Heidegger's critique of causal thinking seems justified, but I would say, consequently, that not only are beings determined by Being, but that Being is conversely determined by beings as well. In theological terms, this amounts to the claim that even though God is first, God is determined by creatures as well. One can argue that everything has a cause, and, therefore, there must be a first cause for everything that exists. The first cause, then, must have existence within itself to prevent infinite regression. Such a line of thought brings us down a classical theological track. However, one can also argue that every cause needs the effect to be the cause of it, which means that the first cause becomes partly dependent on the effect or is even determined by it.

The idea of God as the last ground or first cause plays an important role among theologians of interpretation and the theologians or philosophers who deconstruct. Sharply stated, theologians of interpretation tend to connect the subject so closely with the final ground that the subject itself becomes co-causal with the first cause. The last ground, which ensures the unity of the world, enables the subject to see the world as one. The subject thus becomes the co-creator of the world, which comes into being for the subject only through the subject. However valuable that view is and how much it contributes to the dignity and importance of human beings, it can hardly account for the fact that the subject is also determined from the outside. The subject not only produces a world by ordering the world by way of its thinking; it is also a product of the world, through which it is formed. Within interpretive theology, Lauster and Von Sass in particular are putting this forward.

According to the postmodern theologians of deconstruction, God should definitely not be taken as a last ground or first cause. They thereby prevent the subject from being woven into a web of origin and purpose, or making itself central as a co-cause of the world. The subject must be able to manifest itself precisely in its unfounded contingency, in what may be called the inexplicable and ungrounded wonder of this world. An important critique of religion presents itself in this view, which is not the old-fashioned,

atheistic criticism that God does not exist, but a critique that points out the dangers attached to God, a final ground, or a first cause. They can exercise coercion and squeeze the world into a scheme. In my opinion, this critique is significant. Yet I think the postmodern authors are not paying enough attention to the critical rationality that is present in religion as well. The sacred, transcendent, and interrupting force that is indicated by God-talk provides religion with plenty of reasons to oppose coercion by God on the basis of God.

According to theologians who think about God after God, there is an interaction between God and humans. Kearney and Caputo advocate a so-called chiasm in which humans depend on God providing possibilities and God depends on humans realising possibilities. This chiasm happens to look different with Kearney and Caputo, by the way. Kearney suggests a God-who-may-be who comes first as a giver of possibilities. However, God becomes truly God only when God is realised by human beings. In this, he remains close to a conception of history in which salvation is realised. With Caputo, God does not come first, but God is a call or a promise emanating from reality. Humans respond to that, albeit without ever being able to fulfil the promise. In doing so, Caputo places a greater emphasis on the existential situation of human beings. In Keller's theology, the interaction between God and humans is even more emphasised. God is the totality of the relationships out of which the world is constructed, getting its shape from the world. Unlike Kearney and Caputo, Keller stands in a tradition of process theology, in which the interaction between God and world since Whitehead and Hartshorne has been a crucial theme. According to process theology, God interacts with the world and is affected by it. God is both creative and receptive, just like the entities or "occasions" in the world are receptive and creative—receptive and creative in both cases in the order mentioned.

A real interaction between God and humans or the world, in which God is given form, can, in my opinion, be based on the idea that knowledge implies change. Knowing reality affects reality. The proposition is defended in physics, for example, when it is said that observation affects reality, for instance, because observation intervenes in the behaviour of particles. If so, knowledge is no longer the distanced knowing of an observer remaining out of touch but constitutes a relation in which the one who knows engages with the known, and both are changed by their relation. In that case, we and God are changing to each other in that we know and are known. A God who reveals Godself as reality that makes itself known changes by the way it is known. In the same way, we also change because of what we

know and because we are known. Precisely on this point, I think there is an agreement between Kearney and Keller when the former argues that self and other change to each other and the latter asserts that reality is composed of relations. Knowing is a relationship that implies change.

It is precisely at this point that I believe the notion of God deepens our relationship to reality. We may want to know reality in a distant way through observation. The importance of this is obvious, not only for and by the sciences. However, what God adds to the structure of reality, which we can obviously articulate scientifically, is a representation of reality as it speaks to us. We stand in a relationship to a reality that carries, transcends, calls, encompasses, or interrupts us. A God who reveals itself as reality that makes itself known changes by the way in which it is known, as I just stated, but that also works the other way around. A reality that makes itself known changes by the way in which it is known, and it is also known by hearing the voice of God in it. In religion, we do not relate distantly to reality, but we are intimate with it. It wants something from us, asks something of us, and gives us all kinds of things, which may cause us both to burst into jubilation and to curse our hearts out—and anything in between. Theology constitutes a reflection on our relationship to reality from within the relationship, not from a distance. In this sense, theology is not the queen of the sciences, who can tell how things really are and what is or is not allowed to be thought. Neither is she Cinderella, who should be barred from the ball. Like others, she is keeping with reality and does so under the aspect of God.

In conclusion

In 2006, the IKON, then a Dutch oecumenical broadcasting organisation of seven denominations, commissioned a survey on the image of God among pastors.[22] It concluded that one out of six pastors was not sure if there was a God or higher power, or even denied the existence of God. I was a pastor at the time and could not tell whether or not I belonged to that group of doubters and deniers.

The survey also stated that many pastors believed that God-talk was a matter of human imagination. Many of them had begun to think differently about God in the course of their ministry. They had not, however, with Kuitert and De Lange, completely bid farewell to a personal and supernatural image of God, though they no longer adhered wholeheartedly to traditional

22 Hijme Stoffels, *God is een verhaal: Resultaten van een onderzoek naar godsbeelden onder pastores van de in de ikon vertegenwoordigde kerkgenootschappen* (ikon en VU, 2006).

images of God either. It was striking, however, that younger pastors were more inclined to traditional thinking than older ministers. Later research confirmed that younger believers are thinking more traditionally than older ones.[23] In his comprehensive study, Joep de Hart concluded that since the 1960s, the number of people leaving church has increased sharply, especially among young people and especially in broad and more liberal church communities. The remaining churchgoers tend to adhere to traditional conceptions due to a kind of thickening effect.[24] Meanwhile, according to the research of his and others, the relevance of the Christian religion continues to decline, and culture is moving in an areligious direction.[25]

It seems very likely to me that the church in the Netherlands is becoming more conservative and that a more conservative church has difficulty communicating with meaning-seekers, lovers of religion, floating believers, and thinkers about God. If a conservative church annexes God-talk, it may just end up encouraging the above-mentioned groups to turn their backs on it. This calls to mind Schleiermacher's question, posed in 1829 in his *Zweites Sendschreiben an Lücke*: "Should the knot of history come apart like this? Christianity with barbarism and science with unbelief?"[26] Should the paths separate in such a way that the church is happy with a supernatural and anthropomorphic God and the lovers of religion no longer want to know anything about God? I believe the Christian tradition has broader value than the church alone. There is religion outside of Christianity, there is Christianity outside the church, there is faith in science, reasonableness and unreasonableness in all domains. This book was meant to stay with God after God in that situation, regardless of each's positioning in any domain.

From time to time, I am asked bluntly whether I believe that God exists. Oddly enough, churchly and non-churchly, religious and areligious questioners find the question perfectly clear. I had a time when I was stalling on that question for quite a while. I also had a time when I asked back what exactly the questioner meant with God and existence. Both were unsatisfactory. This book is my balanced response to the question.

23 Joep de Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*.

24 Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, 49, 63.

25 Joep de Hart, Pepijn van Houwelingen, and Willem Huijnk, *Buiten kerk en moskee*, 141–142.

26 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*, ed. Heinz Bolli (Siebenstern, 1968), 146.

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