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# Transcendence in Difference to Creation: A Christian Essential as a Problem of Modern Philosophical Theorizing

Many have attempted to thinking together Christianity and All-Unity, but not always with great success. It seems as if, from a Christian point of view, it is not that easy to simply get rid of all those inconvenient differences between the Creator and His creation, between transcendence and immanence, between heaven above and earth below. Reference to these differences persists in Christian discourse, and is often marked by painfully consciousness of a tension between divine transcendence and divine creation, a tension that takes an acerbated form in these words from Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*:

That a sparrow can live is comprehensible; it does not know that it exists before God. But to know that one exists before God, and then not instantly go mad or sink into nothingness!<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard here ascribes to what he calls a “fantasized religious person” the paroxysm of an outlook which is in fact constitutional for Christian existence: Every human being is a part of God's creation and sees himself at the same time as opposed to his divine creator. We belong within the unity of being, yet when we consider our finitude over against divine infinity we may feel crushed, as if we are of no account, or unworthy to exist.

Of course, such a drastic vision leaves out something essential in a Christian perspective, namely that every human being is wanted and loved by God, an object of divine care. “God so loved the world...” (John 3. 16). Yet the terrifying opposition of the divine infinite and the puniness of finitude should not be done away with in a monochrome insistence on God's unconditional love, which has been common within theology only since the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the aftermath of World War I theologians of “crisis” talked of “the shaking of the foundations” (Paul Tillich) and of God as the totally other (Karl Barth, under Kierkegaard's influence), but by the 1960's a roly-poly God of love had swept the boards and both Tillich and Barth radiated this benevolent vision. However, we should never forget that soteriology is only possible within the presumption of difference – Christian faith is faith in salvation, in a transcendent, eschatological fulfillment of human existence in a life free from sin, finitude and mortality

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1 Kierkegaard 1983: 32.

and united with God. The possibility of such a salvation only holds within a concept of *difference* between God and man, which cannot be eliminated without weighty consequences: If there is no difference any longer, salvation becomes a minor point, a side effect of religion, which may be achievable here and now, and Christianity turns into something very different from what it has always been.

As we all know, the difference between God and his creation is easily identifiable in the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments. In contrast to some ancient Middle Eastern cosmologies, the creation narrative of Genesis 1 leaves no doubt that the God who in a sovereign fiat brings his good and ordered creation into existence can never be confounded with his creation. When he makes a Covenant with Israel, visiting his people and caring for them, he always maintains what we may call a critical distance from them. The Hebrew scriptures are punctuated with reminders of the inscrutable majesty of God: “from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. Thou turnest man back to the dust, and sayest, ‘Turn back, O children of men!’” (Ps. 90: 2–3). The Qur’ān, too, names Allah first as “the Merciful, the Compassionate” but immediately adds “King of the Day of Judgement.” The Incarnation brings God as close as possible to his creatures, yet Jesus stresses the irreducible divine transcendence at many points, as in the phrase “who art in heaven” in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (Mt. 6:9). The Bible clearly attests an undeniable difference between the divine Creator and his creation, which cannot be disposed of as a minor fact.

Accepting this difference, so often and so emphatically proclaimed, one has still to answer the question: what *kind* of difference? Systematic theology has dealt with a wide variety of answers to that, varying from a radical gulf that allows no common ground between God and creatures, to the Thomist “analogy of being” that Barth denounced as diluting divine otherness and transcendence, to mystical apprehensions such as that of Meister Eckhart that carry panentheism to the point of inviting the suspicion of pantheism. Rather than pursue these traditions, I shall focus here on the way the modern world has negotiated the tensions between transcendence and immanence.

In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has argued that the concept of a real and definite distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between immanence and transcendence, has been enforced not earlier than after the beginning of the modern age. Taylor contrasts the “porous self” of the middle ages, that lives in a world which is open for acts of the Divine, with the “buffered self” of modernity, that has lost all this elemental contact with transcendence.<sup>2</sup> So

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor 2007: 41.

only since then do we have, according to Taylor, not just a difference, but a real dualism between the region of the divine and the world we live in, and we also have the concept of a neutral “nature” which can or cannot “be in interaction with something further or beyond”. Since then Christian theologians have grown accustomed to thinking in categories of transcendence and immanence that are part of “a crucial bit of modern theorizing, which in turn corresponds to a constitutive dimension of modern experience”.<sup>3</sup> The passage from Kierkegaard quoted above is, from that perspective, a fine example for modern thinking in categories of a duality between God and his creation that amounts to radical estrangement. The difference between divine and created has become so extreme as to drive the tormented individual mad. Most philosophers after Kierkegaard come to a further conclusion: If God is that far away, if His existence is not relevant for us as human beings, we may as well ignore him.

In current discussions in philosophy of religion we notice that the difference between the divine Creator and his creation rarely arouses much interest. To the contrary, since the beginning of this century, we note a measurable growth of interest in concepts such as monism, pantheism, panentheism and all-unity. In these last years, it has been especially the concept panentheism that has attracted many theologians and philosophers of religion. Arthur Peacocke sees the concept of everything being part of God as an answer to the “pressing need for a reconsideration in depth of the perennial issue of the dialectic involved in affirming both God’s transcendence over and God’s immanence in the world”;<sup>4</sup> Philip Clayton even talks about a “panentheistic turn in modern theology”,<sup>5</sup> as he sees panentheism as a way “to think together more fully the scientific and the theological understandings of events in the natural world”.<sup>6</sup> But this debate is not only confined to the English discussion; especially during the last decade, we have also had a noticeable amount of publications on this topic in German theology.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to cite an example from my own university: Klaus Müller, chair of philosophy in the Faculty of Catholic Theology, Münster, has been focussing in his later works on his thesis that Christian belief is based upon a “Monistischer Tiefenstrom”. It is not easy to translate that a “Tiefenstrom” is a deep ocean current, so Müller’s thesis is that Christianity, at its deepest level, is structurally monistic, although it appears dualistic and even pluralistic on the sur-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>4</sup> Peacocke 2004: xxii.

<sup>5</sup> Clayton 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Clayton 1999: 264.

<sup>7</sup> Just to name three of the many publications: Hengstermann 2010; Göcke 2012; Stammer 2016.

face. In his opinion, theology will soon be awakened “from dogmatic slumber” in the matter of monism, realizing, that a “cosmotheistic-monistical option” is one of the “most important fundamental questions” it has to give an answer to.<sup>8</sup>

Another example of this turn to the question of monism is provided by Ronald Dworkin, a non-theistic author, whose book *Religion without God* has been a bestseller in English-speaking countries as well as in Germany. Dworkin’s plea for a God-free religion is not a pamphlet against religion in general, like those penned by the protagonists of “New Atheism”, but rather an invitation to dialogue between theists and atheists. In his book, Dworkin contrasts the “Sistine God”, named after Michelangelo’s fresco in the Sistine Chapel, with the monistic worldviews of Spinoza, Einstein and even Paul Tillich. The latter are, according to Dworkin, exemplify a life-stance which makes dispensable “the obscure idea of a personal God”, so as a consequence “it would be much clearer and more accurate to call them religious atheists”.<sup>9</sup> If we were all able to follow them, there would be, as Dworkin sees it, no more problems with differences between theism and atheism, which in his opinion are in fact an “esoterical kind of scientific disagreement with no moral or political implications”.<sup>10</sup>

Reading these books, one could almost get the impression that many theological and philosophical thinkers since the beginning of modernity have forgotten one very important thing about Christianity – that a close unity between the created world and its ever-present Creator, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves, as St. Augustine stressed, has been constitutional for Christian existence. (Who would like to be a dualist, anyway?) All these thinkers have one very simple problem in common: The questions they deal with are in fact *not* constitutional for Christian existence. The question of a choice between monism and dualism, between unity and plurality, between creation as opposed to or as part of God, is itself a modern philosophical question, which first appears in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the time of Descartes and Spinoza. I do not want to appreciate the genuine truth or non-truth of any of these theories – from an ontological perspective, there may of course be arguments for and against them; but from a perspective of intellectual history, we have to admit that nobody in pre-modern times has asked these questions in the way we do now. The “porous self” described by Taylor that lives in a pre-modern environment, is open for a permanent contact between its sphere and the sphere of the divine. The pre-modern subject does not question God’s existence, does not have to ask if its life-stance

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<sup>8</sup> Müller 2005: 83.

<sup>9</sup> Dworkin 2013: 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

is better described as monism, dualism or panentheism, and would not even understand the question. In contrast, Peacocke, Clayton, Müller and Dworkin do ask these questions. Why? Following Taylor, we could say: Because they have to be seen as sons of modernity, as “buffered selves” living in a world without divine impacts. A strict duality between transcendence and creation, such as Kierkegaard expressed, is one possibility of dealing with this circumstance. Today’s monists and panentheists draw just the opposite conclusion: Confronted with the possibility of a separation between transcendence and creation they try to force them back together into one. But none of these attempts can ever lead back to the pre-reflexive calm of Taylor’s “porous self”; in fact, they stay what they are: reflective efforts to unify what has been separated a long time ago. As Michael von Brück aptly remarks, the concept of “unity” (meaning the specifically modern concept of unity) is itself a dualistic concept, because it already presupposes disunity as its opposite.<sup>11</sup>

As an aside, I would like to mention the likelihood that the monism we observe within philosophy of religion may reflect a certain “monistic turn” of philosophy and public interest in general. In philosophy of mind, for example, a materialistic monism has become the most common answer for the mind-body-problem, though the explanations why mind is a product of matter vary from one theorist to the next. Critics of religion such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens also tend to argue on the basis of a universal monism – one principle, commonly Darwinism, is invoked to explain everything in the world, including religion. It seems to be a fundamental disposition of modern thinking (despite the counter-thrusts of postmodernism) to seek a single grand principle as an explanation for everything. One must be permitted to ask if it is really a good idea to follow that urge in the case of philosophy of religion. In my opinion God is not so small that he can be neatly fitted into our limited explanatory frameworks.

If Taylor is right to claim that the opposition of divinity and nature is an essential fact of modern existence, what are we supposed to do? In the case of Christian theology I would like to make three points:

First: In western countries, we have to accept the fact, that Christian belief is not and will no longer be part of a naïve and simple hearted life-stance. Some contemporaries may continue to accept nature as creation and God as its creator in a traditional matter, but others will remain agnostic, and many may not see anything behind nature. This, incidentally, puts in question a concept which still can be found in most Christian systematic theologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century –

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11 Cf. the contribution of Michael von Brück, in this book pp. 149 – 161.

the *homo naturaliter religiosus*, or, as Karl Rahner puts it, the “primordial direction of man to the absolute mystery as a perpetual basis of humanity”.<sup>12</sup> This notion is valid within Christian faith and probably also in interreligious dialogue, where people see themselves directed to this absolute mystery; but it has become meaningless for those who do not even understand the questions we ask any more.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, we have to ask ourselves, how the concept of salvation, which is in different ways part of every world religion, can continue to be upheld in theological theorizing. Christian theology has a difficult task to face in this regard. On one hand, it has to maintain the difference between nature and the divine as providing the basic framework of Christian faith in salvation; on the other, it has to negotiate with the sharper modern duality of nature and the divine, which finally makes salvation impossible again. A model like panentheism recommends itself here, as helping the daughters and sons of modernity to think God and nature as closely related again. It may be a sufficient instrument to stop our desperation because God is that far away.<sup>14</sup> The dialogue with other religious traditions that have quite different understandings of unity and salvation will be another very helpful instrument to support Christians dealing with this problem, a problem which may also be present in those traditions in other ways.

But nevertheless, thirdly, against the tendency within theology to iron out rationally the duality between transcendence and immanence, as in many discussions of why and how religion and science are compatible, we need to step back to the fundamental mystery of the togetherness of God and creation as envisioned in Scripture. Both critics of religion and rationalizing theologians represent the “buffered self” of modernity trying to answer the question of its relationship to the divine, which is not part of its everyday life any longer. In my opinion, Taylor’s diagnosis leads to the conclusion that Christian theology should no longer see this game of self-justification as a major task, nor pursue the question of 20<sup>th</sup> century theological anthropology: “What kind of relationship is there between God and man?” It may be hoped that Christian theology in the future will become a more mediating discipline, asking the question:

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<sup>12</sup> “Die ursprüngliche Verwiesenheit [...] auf das absolute Geheimnis [als] dauerndes Existential des Menschen”. Rahner 2008: 55.

<sup>13</sup> When Bernhard Nitsche speaks of the “*dynamic of transcending* in the sense of a formal interminability that goes beyond all classes of objects”, that makes sense within Christian theology, but not all contemporaries in Western countries will understand what he means.

<sup>14</sup> Bernhard Nitsche’s insight that the different basic dimensions of human existence are valid in connection with the human interpretation of the ultimate horizon of existence can be invoked to give religion a foundational role in modern anthropology.

“In which way can we moderate in a sensible and reasonable way between the different expressions of Christian and religious faith within the frame of modernity?”<sup>15</sup>

Christianity is a religion that is based on the fundamental difference between God and creation, which cannot be ignored or dissolved. This difference has been experienced as a gap since the beginning of modernity – a gap which is being felt all the more at a time when the concept of unity is very popular in every sphere of human knowledge. I am sure that Christian theologians can learn quite a lot from the hallowed monistic traditions in Buddhism and Hinduism, but we need not pretend that monism was our own fundamental life stance. A Christian cannot avoid facing the difference between Creator and creation, transcendence and immanence, the divine and the human, and so if Christians talk about unity and nonduality, it is this prior condition of difference that prompts them to do so.

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<sup>15</sup> In my opinion, Bernhard Nitsche is asking *both* questions at once. If so, we may attempt to articulate the interests behind his approach in a more focussed way.

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