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Theology at the Crossroads of Academy, Church and Society

Abstract – Mehr denn je erlebt sich die Theologie in Europa in einer Randposition gegenüber Universität, Kirche und Gesellschaft – und oft findet sie sich selbst an jenem Ort wieder, an dem sich diese drei Bereiche berühren. In meinem Beitrag werde ich mich mit allen drei erwähnten Bereichen auseinandersetzen um zu zeigen, dass die Marginalisierung der Theologie nicht nur Besorgnis erregend und unbequem ist, sondern auch herausfordert, neue Möglichkeiten zu erwägen sich mit den betroffenen Bereiche neu ins Gespräch zu bringen. Tatsächlich findet sich Theologie heute an der Schnittstelle von Universität, Kirche und Gesellschaft wider: eingebunden in die zentralen Diskussionsprozesse, aber ohne exklusiv und ganz nur zu einem einzelnen dieser Bereiche zu gehören. Ja mehr noch, droht Theologie ihr Proprium zu gefährden, wenn sie verdrängt, dass ihr genuiner Ort an jener Schnittstelle ist und sie sich dementsprechend in einen einzigen Bereich ganz zu integrieren sucht. Dies geschieht dann, wenn Theologie sich, unter dem Druck der Universität und der post-säkularen Gesellschaft sich in Religionswissenschaft reformiert. Es geschieht auch dann, wenn die Theologie sich ganz in den Raum der Kirche zurückzieht und sich im Gefolge davon von etablierten akademischen Standards und dem Interdisziplinären Dialog distanziert: sie gefährdet damit sowohl sich selbst – als auch die Kirche. Schließlich geschieht es dann, wenn sich die Theologie nicht der Herausforderung stellt, den christlichen Glauben, theologisch verantwortet in einer nach-christlichen und post-säkularen Gesellschaft neu und zeitgemäß zu ‚rekontextualisieren‘. So liegt es im eigenen Interesse der Theologie – und ihrer Sprechversuche von Gott – dass sich Theologie nicht in den Mittelpunkt rückt oder ganz in einem Bereich aufzugehen versucht. Es ist an der Schnittstelle von Universität, Kirche und Gesellschaft daß die Theologie aufgerufen ist über jenen Gott nachzudenken und zu sprechen, der sich selbst nicht in Bereiche, Diskurse oder Erzähltraditionen einschließt, sondern diese plötzlich öffnet, wenn sie ihn zu definieren versuchen.

Introduction

From time to time, it becomes necessary for Catholic theology to consider, and even reconsider, its place and task in light of the situation within which it finds

itself and to which it wants to relate in a plausible and relevant way. In this contribution, I will attempt to reflect not only on the ecclesial nature of Catholic theology, but I will also consider, first, the academic nature of theology, and, further, its relation to European society in general. The observation that theology's place in universities has become less evident than it used to be, indeed invites further reflection. The same holds true for the plausibility and relevance of theology for, and in, our current (often) post-Christian and post-secular European societies. I will develop how, now more than ever, especially in our European settings, theology experiences itself at the crossroads of academy, Church and society, at the place where these three areas meet. It is in this specific place, and *from* this specific place, that I will attempt to engage in an evaluation of theology's current state, and thus a reconsideration of its role and task. Within the framework of this contribution, it is of course not possible to do this in an all-encompassing way. I do hope, however, that some of these thoughts may contribute to – what ought to be – an ongoing conversation.

In what follows, I will deal consecutively with the three areas mentioned, and as it will soon become clear, it is very difficult to discuss one of them without considering the other(s). Theology indeed finds itself at the crossroads, and is pushed, challenged, questioned, inspired and engaged back and forth, from one location to the other. It is dynamically related to all three of them, indeed involved in what is really at stake in them, without exclusively belonging to any one of them. Moreover, it will even become clear that theology puts its project at risk, when it forgets that it is located at the crossroads, or is made or forced to forget this positioning. And, as a matter of fact, the areas themselves are likely to suffer from this as well.

Theology's location at the crossroads is both uncomfortable and challenging. Sure, it may find security and stability when it withdraws from the crossroads into one or the other area – becoming only academic, only ecclesial, or only public. It would seem, however, that such a withdrawal is only possible at the cost of sacrificing its dynamism and inspiration – its real 'locus theologicus' – and by the same move its relevance for the areas concerned, even the area into which it withdraws. From this then it would follow that theology both deals with what is really at stake in all three areas, but does so from their margins, where they meet, overlap, and interact, where they collide, transgress and conflict, where they differ, engage, and dialogue.¹

¹ For a more elaborate reflection on the importance of 'topology' for the self-understanding of theology, see, e.g. H. J. Sander (2006).

1. Theology in the Academy

Since the times of the early universities, theology has been an academic discipline, and for a long time was even the most distinguished one.² In the modern university, however, with its scientific ideals of empirical rationality, universality, objectivity and transparency, the place and role of theology has caused quite a sizable portion of discussion. Surely, in whatever form or construction, theology is a scientific discipline and its curriculum is still on offer in many academic institutions, whether of public or private status, whether state or privately funded, whether officially organised or recognised by churches or not. The same holds true for the discipline and curricula of Catholic theology, which is today presented in a variety of forms and through these differences is practiced throughout Europe. In terms of education, e.g., it is together with the other curricula subject to the Bologna process, including its mechanisms of quality control and accreditation.³ In terms of research, theology, in combination with religious studies, is often recognised by state and other funding agencies, and is one of the subjects of which the reviews are covered by the *European Reference Index for the Humanities* of the European Science Foundation.⁴

Nevertheless, it would be quite naive to conclude from this that theology is still the crown discipline in the present academy. As long as it can legitimise its activities, for example, when applying for research funding, by calling upon the scientific methodologies of other sciences (philology, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology etc.) or by its relevance (ethics, the study of world religions), the situation seems not as problematic – apart from the question of why one still would need a specific discipline, department or faculty for research when one can also perform via the other disciplines. It is especially this strictly theological finality of the discipline, and its programme of ‘Christian faith seeking understanding,’ that stands under pressure. In a modern situation of secularisation and rationalisation, as well as a postmodern context of detraditionalisation and pluralisation⁵, the fact that theology’s claims are linked to a very particular tradition, with a transcendent legitimation, only aggravates this pressure. The same

² The university of Leuven, e.g., was founded in 1425, but was only granted a theological faculty (and thus the status of a full university) in 1432, after having proved to be a viable enterprise. Cf. Lamberts (1976), 29.

³ For the official Bologna Process website 2007-2010: cf. <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

⁴ Cf. <http://www.esf.org/research-areas/humanities/research-infrastructures-including-erih/erih-initial-lists.html>. For a critical reaction of the European Society for Catholic Theology, see the Extra ET Newsletter of January 2, 2008.

⁵ For a more in depth discussion of these terms, and their consequences for contemporary theology, see Boeve (2003) and Boeve (2007).

holds true for its particular relation to a very specific religious community, which, in a lot of European countries, and to an ever faster degree, evolves from a majority position to a minority group amongst other religious groups, ideologies and world views. Detraditionalisation here is even reinforced by the pluralisation of the religious. Whether one likes it or not, Christian theology no longer stands at the centre of the academy, and is, as regards its specifically theological finality, often challenged in its status as an academic discipline.

In the following, I will delve further into this context, and tackle two inter-related problems resulting from these developments for theology – but also, as will become clear, for the academy. The first deals with the academic status of theology (and a discussion of its survival strategy in religious studies), the second paradoxically with the academic status of the academy (and its rather pragmatic research standards).

a. The academic status of theology

A first challenge for theology in the academy is the *pressure placed on the legitimacy of its strictly theological finality*. The binding of theology to a particular faith, especially when expressed in the link to a particular faith community in our current circumstances contributes to its legitimacy problems. A way to deal with these problems is to suspend these preferential relations, which appear to have driven theology to the margins of the academy, and thus to fully withdraw into the academy itself. As a matter of fact, this is what is often at stake in the discussion of the relation between theology and religious studies, and, more in particular, in the question of whether theology departments should develop into departments of religious studies.⁶ Such questions, of course, as recent developments have shown (Schreurs 2006), not only come forth from the pressure of the academy, but also from particular ecclesial interventions, which – willingly or not – isolate theology from the other scientific disciplines. As we evidently enter at this point into a crossroad between the academy and the Church, I will come back to this discussion in the second part of my lecture. As a result of all of this, religious studies would seem to inherit the status of an academic discipline. And it is because of this that some theological departments do indeed decide to switch over into becoming religious studies faculties, or to at least use the aura of religious studies in order to become ‘fashionable’ again.

Such a survival strategy runs the risk, however, of losing the theological project of ‘faith seeking understanding’ all together. It thereby becomes difficult

⁶ For a more elaborate argument as regards the discussion of the relation between theology and religious studies in this paragraph, see my *Mutual Interruption. Toward a Productive Tension between Theology and Religious Studies*, to be published in *Louvain Studies*. For a slightly different German version see Boeve (2009a).

to develop specifically theological questions, because they are immediately repudiated as (too) confessional or parochial. Scientific methodologies, with their methodological atheism, surely and indispensably inform theology about its context and the situation of Christian faith in it, but will not from themselves lead to the question of where God makes history today. This new situation does make theology more aware of its very specific and – indeed – often marginal place in the academy, because *prima facie* its theological status, both on academic and cultural grounds, has lost its unproblematic and self-evident character. First, as far as the academic grounds are concerned: although theology often leans upon methodologies from other sciences, including religious studies (which has become – so to say – its new *ancillae*), its claims go beyond these methodologies. Secondly, and also from a cultural perspective, because the Christian faith has only become one among many religions and worldviews, theology is forced to consider the way it deals with its claims to truth. Only when addressing these two issues may theology be able to speak from its current place in and to the academy today.

Nevertheless, the theological question remains important today, and this is not only to be argued for from a – rather self-evident – Christian-theological perspective, but to a certain degree can as well reckon with cultural and – therefore also academic – plausibility. The survival strategy – i.e. theology's full retreat into the academy in transforming into religious studies – too easily gives into one of the illusions the academy itself today falls prey to: the presumption of objectivity and transparency which would characterise modern rationality, and, related to this, its presupposed value-free character. In this regard, some of it still fits the rather classic secularisation strategies, which are not less value-free, but tend to forget the modern emancipatory hermeneutical circles they are embedded in. It is neither possible nor opportune to go into the vast literature of some recent philosophy of science which criticises the too self-confident modern claims of rationality, but the least one can say is that it has made us more aware of the fact that knowledge and its production are historically situated and interest-bound, and embedded in hermeneutical and power-related settings. The least one can say, in such situations, is that Christian theology today has become more aware of its location, of its hermeneutical circle, and very specifically draws on it to make its claims. And being aware of its own place, it should come to theology, from this place, to raise the consciousness of others in this regard. The discussion with some Neo-Darwinists, transgressing the thin line between science's methodological atheism and their own ideological atheism, is only one example of this.⁷ There is, however, more to say regarding this subject.

⁷ References can be made to the positions of, among others, R. Dawkins, D. Dennett and S. Harris.

b. The academic status of the academy

A postmodern criticism of pre-modern and modern rationality standards, indeed, has not only – and probably even not in the first place – led to a greater hermeneutical consciousness. At the same time, it has rather brought about a more *pragmatic self-understanding of science*. Post-modern criticism has not affected scientific praxis itself, but changed its way of legitimating itself. That was the basic premise of Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979): that nowadays science is legitimated mainly by means of its performativity. When all stable frameworks become relativised, what then remains is 'what works'. Together with scientific methodologies that start off from mathematical models, the scepticism about substantial normative hypotheses (which can always be deconstructed as too particular or as connected to specific interests) results in an increased quantification of the research, not only on the level of scientific methodology, but also on the level of accounting for the research praxis itself. Apart from the need to be able to compare different disciplines in research assessments, this is one of the main reasons why scientific reviews are ranked according to formal criteria, publications are counted, research networks are weighted, and output other than publications (doctorates, patents, spin off, etc.) is quantified. Procedural peer assessment progressively replaces substantial evaluation.

It would of course be too straightforward to conclude that the academy has lost its soul through such procedures, and that quality has been replaced by quantity. Good quantitative standards do reflect, in one way or another, qualitative standards, and most research organisms and assessors are quite well aware that a quantitative assessment is to be complemented with a qualitative evaluation. As an academic discipline, it is theology's urgent task today – especially because it can no longer claim a privileged position – to live up to the exigencies of the academy and by so doing prove to possess its legitimate place. Moreover, given the legitimacy problems of theology, which we discussed in our first paragraph, such more formal and quantitative evaluation procedures may – in light of rather pragmatically scientific standards – even help to support theology's cause. Theology, often according to its variety disciplines, indeed possesses its scientific reviews, its peer assessment, its output, its international research networks – and can put all of this at work when, for example, engaging research assessments and applying for funding. It is only when it acquires its academic credentials according to the criteria of the academy that theology will be able to critically address academia when necessary, when, for example, forgetting about the necessary interrelation and balance between quantitative and qualitative assessments. It is quite sure that it will then have support from other academics when doing so.

The same holds true also for another development in the academy, one which I am also not able to discuss here at length: specialisation. Particularly in view

of its own multidisciplinary character and its reliance upon a variety of ancillary sciences, theology is almost obliged to specialise as well – definitely when it strives after the highest academic standards and intends to remain a conversation partner to these other disciplines. But it is also urged to engage in the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dynamics which a self-critical academy currently fosters to overcome fragmentation and isolation. Not only the academy, but also theology itself will gain from this.

When fully academic in these regards, and thus living up to the standards set by the academy, theology might then receive the opportunity to point the academy further than itself – even when situated at its margins and maybe even because of being at its margins. It might first be able to point the academy toward the limits of its methodologies and discourses, and warn against certain reductionisms. It might foster a more critical-hermeneutical consciousness, reminding and explaining that knowledge is situated and interest-bound. It might be able to bring to expression, explicate and enlighten the often hidden questions of meaning, ethics, and anthropology, which come up at the margins of scientific research, but of course also in academic education and in service to society. In our societies in which stable frameworks have become precarious, theology might even be welcomed to do so, and invited to show from its own resources and procedures what it has on offer in terms of dealing with questions of meaning, ethics, and anthropology. At those moments, it then perhaps may introduce once again, in the current often post-Christian and post-secular context, the God of Jesus Christ, who invites humanity to make history together in the expectation of the coming of God's reign. As we enter here into the crossroad between academy and society, we will come back to this in the third part of this lecture.

So, it is neither by fully withdrawing into the academy, thus transforming itself into religious studies, nor by claiming a special, preferential status to which contemporary academic criteria no longer apply, that theology will find its fitting place in the academy from where to speak to the academy, but also to the Church and to society.

2. Theology in the Church

For some time now, however, it would also appear that in today's Church theology hardly occupies a central role – despite the fact that at least one of the theologians active at the Council has played up till this day a very central role, and more than once has advocated the ecclesial vocation of the theologian.⁸ But, perhaps, theology's place in the Church is not the centre.

⁸ This both in his personal theological work and as a prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For personal theological work in this regard, see, among others, Ratzinger (1993).

Theology, as faith seeking understanding, stands indeed *at the service of the Church*, itself not being there for itself, but called – as stated in *Lumen gentium* – to be Sacrament of the world, People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit. It is the faith of the Church gathering those who believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, present through the Holy Spirit, that theology seeks to understand and contribute to, in an attempt to express both its internal and external plausibility and relevance. It is this faith that constitutes a historically developing community, one at times confronted with cultural and socio-political shifts, and urged to make sense of the ‘faith of their fathers’ (and mothers). In each new context theology has been required to stand at the service of the Christian faith in its reflexive attempts to come to terms with the questions, conflicts and challenges it has encountered. Theology therefore assisted the Christian faith and the community of the faithful in ‘recontextualising’ its plausibility and relevance throughout historical and contextual shifts.⁹

In this regard Church and theology are *mutually constitutive*. In the first place it is the faith of the Church that theology is called to reflect upon. But it is also the other way around, in that theology is constitutive for the Church. Its service to the Church is to investigate on a daily basis the way in which Christian tradition can become a living tradition today – that is, to trace when, where and how the God revealed in history and, par excellence, in Jesus Christ, reveals Godself in our contexts. This involves a careful hermeneutical study of the development of Scripture and tradition in relation to its historical contexts, seeking how revelation came about, and it invites a never-ending process of experience and interpretation. It calls for an appropriate interdisciplinary investigation of the present-day situation and the way Christian faith is both part and parcel of it, yet differing from it as well. It urges the (re)interpretation of images, models and categories coming from both the past and present to express what the Christian faith is about. It requires the search for contemporary plausible and relevant images, models and categories to assist the faith community in life, worship and reflection. In all of this, it is bound to Scripture and tradition. Together with the Church, theology continues the tradition by recontextualising it.

The history of Church and theology teaches that this did not always result in a peaceful, steady, continuous process of reflection, but was played out on a dynamic field of exchange and discernment, conflict and rejection, learning and digestion. It is on this field that theology is called to play its role, sometimes a disturbing one, anchored as it is in the life of the faith community. In this regard, and to state the minimum that can be said, over the past decennia the relations between the magisterium of the Church and theology have not always

⁹ For the concept of recontextualisation, both in its descriptive and normative aspects, see a.o. Boeve (2003), chapter 1, and Boeve (2007), chapter 2.

been optimal, and theology seemingly has been perceived even as a threat to the Church, its unity and integrity. This has resulted in attempts to define more explicitly and specifically the place and task of theology in the Church (Cf. CDF 1990) and brought about structural and individual measures to ensure the orthodoxy and loyalty of theologians to the magisterium (CDF 1988 and CDF 1998).

At this juncture, I would like to discuss two interrelated points of attention for theology today. First, I would like to discuss the thesis that, although theology exists only because of the Church and in service to the Church, theology however ceases to function appropriately when it either fully withdraws from, or is forced to withdraw into, the domain of the Church. Secondly, and related to the first, I will delve into theology's relation to the Church's teaching office. By way of transition to the third part, I will conclude with some thoughts regarding the reception of Vatican II.

a. Theology and the Church

It would indeed be a mistake to interpret the specific ecclesial vocation of theology as reducing or limiting theology merely to the domain of the Church, exclusively defining theology's operations and purpose from within the Church. Looking at recent developments, however, theology appears to run this risk: by isolating itself in the academy in relation to the other sciences, and – often as a result of the first development – by defining theology's project as merely functional to the training of pastors.¹⁰

The challenges that theology encounters in the academy, and which are also clearly linked to the developments of Christian faith in society, not only result in strategies of withdrawal into the academy (often turning theology into religious studies). They also lead to attempts to safeguard theology from these challenges by pointing to its specific 'ecclesial' or 'confessional' character. Likewise, attempts to secure the control of the Church over theology venture off in that direction. Because of its 'ecclesial' or 'confessional' nature, then, special rights and exceptions are claimed (e.g. in the procedures of appointing academic staff, in applying the Bologna agreements, etc.).

In line with what we said before about its theological finality, there is of course something to be said for pointing to theology's specificity. Such arguments, however, also seriously run the risk of resulting in their opposite form: that is, the isolation of theology from the academy, and its consequent full withdrawal into the Church. That this could be harmful for the position of

¹⁰ Cf. again my *Mutual Interruption. Toward a Productive Tension between Theology and Religious Studies*.

theology in the academy, and also for the academy itself, we already pointed to in the first part.

However, it also endangers theology's project itself. Although being different from other sciences, and from religious studies, theology nevertheless relies on them to succeed in its task. Precisely to pursue its theological finality, theology is required to work from the intra- and extra-theological interdisciplinarity it is situated in. In this regard, theology's place is in the academy. Furthermore, it also limits the role theology can play in the recontextualisation of Christian faith, and thus the opportunities of the Christian faith and the Church to deal with today's context. Attempts by the Church to isolate theology in the academy, therefore, in the end, turn out to be counter-productive. Through the full withdrawal of theology into the Church, it is the Church itself which cuts itself off from the critical-constructive assistance of theology to live and proclaim the Gospel in the society of today.

b. Theology and the magisterium

Our second point of attention, theology's relation to the magisterium, is immediately related to the first. Although it has been different in the past (Örsy 1987, 46-49), at present the task and responsibility of theology is different from those of the magisterium in the Church. In this regard, theology today is neither a second magisterium, nor should it wish to be. At the same time, however, it is not merely the instrument of the magisterium, confined to preparing and explaining what the magisterium teaches. At its best, theology's project is not a programme of individual theologians, but of a theological community, in critical-constructive conversation with each other, and anchored in the community of the Church. It is a process of seeking and discussing, of arguing and convincing, of conflict and confrontation, of mutually purifying and correcting, of growing in understanding and faith. For sure, this task is situated in a dynamic, because mutually critical-constructive, relation to the Church's magisterium.

In recent years, as Bradford Hinze (2009) has illustrated, a number of theologians have again entered into difficulty with the magisterium, with consequences varying from not receiving a 'nihil obstat' or the 'mandatum' to notification, censure and condemnation. Complaints about the transparency of juridical procedures in the meantime have not really led to more legal certainty for the theologians concerned. From the side of theology, the whole of this is disheartening, primarily for three reasons.

The first is linked to an observation that the overall theological quality of some of the documents, criticisms and notifications, does not live up to what one might expect from an intervention of the supreme magisterium in a theologian's

work, as Peter Hünermann has shown (Hünermann 2007, 184-188). The Notification to Jon Sobrino in 2007, for example, as the European Society for Catholic Theology observed in its message of March 16 of that year, 'reveals in this regard some problematic aspects, of which the disregard of the theological developments of the last fifty years would seem to be the most serious and disturbing one. Irrespective of the results of recent exegetical, historical-theological and systematic-theological research, the text develops a foremost deductive argument which suffers from a remarkable lack of hermeneutical-theological consciousness. For example, quotations from Scripture, Conciliar documents, and recent Papal statements are indiscriminately put together with theological concepts and arguments from a diverse provenance. In the first instance, the particular historical nature of the questions, along with the hermeneutical complexities, concerning the self-consciousness of Jesus and the way Jesus might have interpreted the salvific value of his own death, seem to be overlooked, at the risk of causing confusion between historical and theological discourses'. The statement of the Society concluded: 'The challenges for theology contained in Sobrino's thought indeed are important for the life of the Church. More than an official reprimand, however, these challenges need further exploration and discussion. The Notification appears to foreclose the opportunity to do so' (ESCT 2007).

This last sentence leads us to the second reason for sadness. The main consequence of such an intervention is that the theological discussion of a particular issue is interrupted by it. Likewise in a lot of cases theologians themselves see the disputability of certain positions, or know the problematic nature of certain considerations and discussions. It belongs to the task of theology, however, to deal with them and to thoroughly discuss them, and by so doing bring to the fore theology's mechanisms of self-correction. When the teaching authority of the church intervenes too rapidly, however, certain still urgent questions are no longer treated, or are even forbidden to be treated. By this action, the questions themselves, however, have lost neither their prominence nor their relevance. Moreover, with each premature intervention, the mechanisms of self-correction within academic theology are disturbed or even blocked, and other mechanisms, like self-censorship or alienation, pop up. Such a situation is not only damaging to theology but also to the Church.

The third reason for sadness is that magisterial interventions and sanctions to individual theologians feed into the legitimacy problems which theology meets in the academy, because they are clearly at odds with academic procedures. As a result, this lends support to theology's isolation, or to its being replaced through religious studies, be it by theologians who no longer wish to be subject to Church control or are no longer allowed to teach theology, or be it by academic institutions themselves which wish to dissociate themselves from what they conceive as illegitimate tutelage.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the discussion concerning theology's place and role within the Church, the actions of the magisterium vis-à-vis theology included, does not stand on its own, but is linked to the difficulties that the Christian faith itself, and the Church, encounter in contemporary society. More specifically, it is especially a discussion concerning the best way to deal with these difficulties that appears to be at the origin of a lot of animosity, and that often ends in unhealthy oppositional schemes without a way-out – progressive-conservative, modern-pre/postmodern, correlational-anticorrelational, *aggiornamento-ressourcement*, etc (Cf. Conway 2006). Within the Church this discussion prominently comes to the surface in the discussion about the appropriate positing and reception of Vatican II, both as an event and as a body of texts: did Vatican II bring about refreshing newness with its *aggiornamento*, or is the Council first and foremost to be understood in continuity with the past?

In the meantime, a new generation of theologians have become active, ones for whom the event of Vatican II is no longer something they themselves lived, but something they have been introduced to through the work of its protagonists and commentators, through its reception, and the fruits and conflicts, opportunities and ambiguities with which this came along. For this generation of theologians, Vatican II is an event of the past, for a growing number something that had happened before they were even born. Instead of being a lived history, Vatican II has to become a living tradition, a past normative for the future through its reception in the present. As we are on the verge of a series of jubilee-festivities which will mark (in the coming years) the 50th anniversary of the announcement, preparation, opening, and closing of the Council, the historical events which occurred, the promulgation of its distinctive documents, and so on, for this generation an invitation is outstanding to engage afresh in this reception. It is an invitation, in respect to our historical distance from the Council, to seize the event of Vatican II as a theological event, both continuing and renewing the tradition it has come to belong to. In-between largely historical reconstructions and too rapid theological recuperations, this new generation of theologians are called to investigate and reflect on its revelatory nature, borne witness to in its histories and texts, its witnesses and documents – however, given the theological nature of revelation, surely not reducible to these.

3. Theology in Society

What is relevant for theology in the academy is also true for theology in society, inasmuch as the fate of the Christian faith in society is one of the main causes of the questioning of theology's place in the academy. Modern processes of rationalisation and secularisation, and postmodern developments of detraditionalisation,

individualisation and pluralisation have largely changed our societies into a post-Christian and post-secular context. The *de facto* monopoly position which the Christian faith possessed in the formation of collective and individual identities in many European countries, and which it sometimes still claims to possess, has become untenable. One of the main challenges of the Christian faith, of the Church, and thus also of theology, is to come to terms with this new situation, and to find out where, when and how God is revealed today, how to proclaim the Gospel anew.

We have already recalled that a lot of the discussion in theology, and that concerning theology, which has come to characterise the last few decennia, has dealt with the way in which the modern and postmodern context could be approached. In short, the dilemma consisted of the question of whether strategies of continuity or of discontinuity had to be put into place. Often based on more optimistic theologies of creation and incarnation, strategies of *continuity* sought to construct links between the Christian tradition and the best of modernity. This resulted in a variety of so-called 'correlationist' theologies, ranging from quite naive attempts of adaptation to the critical-constructive conversations with modernity on the part of political and liberationist theologies (Tracy 1989). Strategies of *discontinuity* rather focused on the claims to absolute autonomy and emancipation ventured in modernity, and – often inspired by theologies of the cross – advocated the conversion of modernity. The starting point for these strategies is indeed the alienation of the modern subject in society and its irreconcilability with a Christian anthropology. The intention of these anti-modern theologies is to correct modernity through an appeal to inspiration and the thinking patterns of pre-modern theologies. Such anti-modern theologies have been joined in the last decennium by, for example, postmodern communitarianisms and neo-augustinisms proposing an encompassing Christian worldview as an alternative to the fallen modern and postmodern world (Boeve 2009b).

Both strategies tend to start from a one-to-one scheme between Christian faith and the modern world, but differ in their evaluation of the relationship between the two, in terms of either conversation (continuity) or opposition (discontinuity). In an earlier work I argued that a contemporary theological recontextualisation should go beyond this divide, and this both on cultural and theological grounds.¹¹ Culturally speaking this one-to-one scheme is no longer appropriate to consider the place of Christian faith vis-à-vis a context marked by detraditionalisation and pluralisation. The overlap between culture and Christianity has shrunk, and a variety of other religions, worldviews, and identities have come in its place. Theologically speaking, it is more appropriate to

¹¹ This is the main issue with which my *God Interrupts History* is concerned.

accentuate both the continuity and discontinuity of the Christian message for today's world, both speaking in a world it belongs to and to which it wants to proclaim God's salvation.¹²

At this juncture and again as in the foregoing, although many more could and should be said, I would like to add only two considerations which pertain to the tasks of theology in this regard. The first deals with the importance of an appropriate analysis of the current context for Christian faith and thus theology; the second, continuing on the first consideration, deals with the way that Christian faith may address the current context again.

a. The current context for Christian faith and theology

The processes which in the past years have changed our society do not halt at the door of the Church. Detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation not only determine the context which Christianity finds itself in but also the way in which the Christian faith itself functions today. It is in this regard that a *fundamental distinction* has to be made between these processes as *descriptive categories* (categories ending on '-isation'), and other *normative positions* prescribing the way one should deal with these processes and their consequences ('-isms'). One of the fundamental mistakes of both optimistic and correlationist approaches and more pessimistic and oppositional analyses of the current context, consists precisely in confusing them. It comes to contemporary theology, I would claim, to critique such a confusion, and to suggest ways to deal with the changed context (the '-isations') without either refuting it, or falling prey to these '-isms'. It also prevents theology from choosing, either for a full withdrawal into society (continuity) or into the Church (discontinuity), but rather to remain on the crossroads.

In this regard *detraditionalisation* refers to the fact that traditions of any kind (religious as well as class, gender, etc.), are no longer able to pass themselves on effortlessly from one generation to the next. Identity formation no longer happens quasi-automatically. This applies to the Christian tradition as well as to other traditions, and structurally changes the way identity is to be constructed. This structural development is to be distinguished from the ideological positions which strive to overcome tradition as such, or at least to diminish the impact of certain preferential traditions. The latter should be analysed as a particular strategy, but not the only one, to cope with the thus changed situation. The structurally changed attitude towards tradition and its self-evident authority over

¹² In my own work, I introduce hereto the category of 'interruption' (borrowed from J.-B. Metz, but reconfigured to suit my rather different cultural-theological analysis) to think God's engagement with history in a contextually appropriate and theologically plausible fashion.

people therefore does not equal the loss of any belonging to tradition, let alone an automatically implied aversion to, or alienation from, tradition. In short, the consciousness of tradition rather has become more reflexive, and theology's dealing with it should take this into account.

This reflexivity is at the same time linked to the processes of *individualisation*. Because traditions no longer automatically steer the construction of identity, they have become, together with other resources, available options, from which individuals choose. Whether such choices are really perceived as conscious choices, as impulses or even as vocation, does not do away with the structural nature of this process, neither does the fact as to whether such choices are influenced by parents, peers, media or the market. This is also true for more classical or traditional options, such as becoming a Christian, precisely because the relationship to tradition has changed. To one degree or another, people have become quite well aware that their choices – at least in principle – could have been very different, and that contingency, opportunity and context play an important part in their making. Here again, individualisation is a descriptive category and should not be confused with individualism, which claims that in making choices it is the needs, values and views of the individual (and only the individual) which should be the norm in the processes of identity construction. Again, the latter is to be considered as a strategy to cope with the new situation of identity construction.

Together with detraditionalisation and individualisation, religious *pluralisation* has also become a distinctive feature of the European landscape. From a situation in which one roughly distinguished between Christians and non-Christians, this landscape progressively turns into a plural field of religious and other fundamental life options. Even in largely classical European settings, the reality of migration, tourism, and the communication media have raised the consciousness of religious plurality, confronting identity construction, regardless of its affiliation, with religious diversity. At this point again, it is important to make the distinction between pluralisation as a descriptive category, and pluralism and relativism as strategies of relating to pluralisation. Similarly, when the Christian faith rejects the latter, it is challenged nonetheless, on account of pluralisation, to reconsider its own position in light of religious plurality. More than has hitherto been the case, the encounter with a diversity of religious others makes Christians aware of the particularity of their own tradition. As a result, in the same way as with individualisation, pluralisation invites Christian identity formation to integrate a larger degree of reflexivity.

When one fails to distinguish between structural processes, on the one hand, and strategies to deal with the resulting situation, on the other, reactions first and foremost depend on the evaluation of the strategies, rather than dealing with the changed context. More pessimistic analyses of the current European society

then too indiscriminately identify it with nihilism and individualism, pluralism and relativism – with loss and decay. Consequently, the relation of Christianity to that context is considered all too often as being foremost oppositional, perceived even as a ‘clash of cultures’. Strategies stressing continuity, on the contrary, will embrace often as indiscriminately the so-called revival and plurality of the religious, and point to the many opportunities the post-Christian and post-secular religious situation offers for individual spirituality, religious wholeness, reflections on transcendence, etc. – often however without still being able to account for Christianity’s particular claims.

What is overlooked in both cases then is that whatever the religious and or ideological responses to the socio-cultural developments are, the underlying processes also affect individual and collective Christian identity formation today. This is even true in cases where these identities are constructed through oppositional schemes – resurgent traditionalisms and fundamentalism, in this regard, are made possible by these structural developments in the same way as their counterparts of nihilism and relativism. Structurally speaking, Christian identities have also become more reflexive. They are no longer plainly self-evident, but engaged in processes of appropriation and challenge, of choice and responsibility.

It is up to theology to investigate how this affects the handing on of Christian tradition today, and the giving of expression to its understanding of salvation and truth, among others in relation to the plurality of the religions. It urges theology to rediscover what a Christian identity is about and how to understand initiation, conversion, confession, church belonging, community formation, and so on, in a context where Christian images, practices and thinking patterns are no longer self-evident. It is theology’s task to seek ways in which the Christian message may inspire people to construct their identities in Christian ways, and by so doing assist in the development of a church of Christians by birth to a faith community of Christians by choice. So doing, it comes to theology to critique both schemes of opposition and accommodation, neo-traditionalism or fundamentalism and religious pluralism and relativism, by pointing to the underlying developments. These indeed urge a more reflexive Christian identity, both conscious of its own involvement in an ongoing particular tradition, and aware of its more marginal place in the current context. The fact that the Christian faith no longer occupies the centre of our societies, then, is not in the first place a cause for grief and nostalgia, but much more an opportunity to rediscover its newness, strength and inspiration.

b. The contribution of Christian faith to the present context

Such an analysis not only urges theology and the Church to come to terms with the changed context in which the Christian faith is to be lived, but also allows

us to express anew the contribution Christian faith can make to the context. For the distinction between processes and (ideological) strategies does not do away with the sometimes questionable ways of dealing with identity construction which are prevalent in our societies. I will here only mention, on the one hand, individualism, relativism, nihilism, aestheticism, and, on the other, racism, nationalism, traditionalism and fundamentalism. Indeed, both series of strategies seem to be only insidious ways to deal with the challenges for personal and collective identity construction brought about by detraditionalisation and pluralisation. In the former, the loss of pre-given patterns leads to lifestyles in which no meaning, value or truth are taken to be as normative, unless they are the preferences of the individual. For the latter, the insecurity resulting from detraditionalisation, the never-ending task to construct one's own identity, and the challenges of otherness for one's identity is averted by withdrawing into a self-securing identity, offered by one's ethnicity, nation, tradition, or religion.¹³ A Christian reflective identity not only makes us aware of the risk of falling prey to these '-isms', but also motivates Christian critical-constructive contributions to society.

Moreover, the distinction between processes and strategies also allows us to properly analyse the domination of our life-world by the economy and the market. Of all the (cultural) actors and influences that endeavour to steer identity construction at the individual and social level (religions being examples hereof as well), the media and the market appear to be the most significant in this regard.¹⁴

Theology's criticism of such strategies to cope with identity formation in the end is theologically motivated, and leads to the question of where the God of Jesus Christ is revealed today, in the resistance against relativism and fundamentalism and the critique of encompassing market mechanisms, in the care of ecology and sustainability, for the integrity of human life, and the active involvement for the poor and the outcast. In order to express anew its own critical consciousness, theology can learn from its conversation with contemporary critical thought, current especially in postmodern thinkers of difference. As in past conversations with philosophy, theology may critically appropriate categories and thinking structures which enable it to reflect on the way in which God's active and salvific engagement can be thought of in plausible ways.¹⁵

¹³ For a more elaborated analysis and comment on these strategies, see Boeve (2003), chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁴ Such economisation also deeply influences the way in which we relate to religion and tradition. See for example, the important study by V. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Religious Belief and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York, 2004), and European reactions thereto in a special edition on 'Consuming Religion in Europe' in *Bulletin ET* 17 (2006) vol. 1.

¹⁵ See the work of H.-J. Sander and V. Miller, already quoted, and further, e.g., of K. Hart.

As a result of this, its criticism of society will not be conceived of as part of a clash of cultures, nor as the offspring of a massive counter-narrative (let alone in an alliance with the other great religions) against contemporary European culture. It fosters rather a critical-constructive way of coping with a new situation which may inspire Christians and non-Christians alike, to self-consciously live together in a pluralised world, in which meaning and identity are not pre-given as such, but are to be dealt with responsibly and in respect to difference and diversity. Perhaps the fact that theology no longer occupies the centre may set it free to speak out more prophetically in this regard.

With such an engagement with society, theology indeed situates itself at the crossroads – attempting, in-line with *Gaudium et spes*, to read the signs of the times and interpret them in light of the Gospel. Its beneficiaries are both the Church and society. It renews the dialogue of the Church with the contemporary context, engaging in the necessary recontextualisation of the Christian faith. Furthermore, at this point, we also encounter a so-to-speak ‘secular’ argument for organising and funding theology in the academy. If, as a consequence, the reflexive understanding of one’s religion in light of the current situation prevents one from both falling prey to nihilism and fundamentalism, it is society itself which may profit from it.

Conclusion

There are academic, ecclesial and socio-cultural reasons for why theology finds itself no longer situated at the centre of the academy, Church and society. Moreover, there are strategic and political arguments to seek the margins and crossroads to advocate theology’s cause. Ultimately, however, it is for the sake of theology itself, and especially the God it speaks of, that theology should not occupy the centre of either one of the areas concerned, nor can it fully withdraw into either one of them. Belonging to all of them, its place is at the margins, at the crossroads, where they meet, collide, question, transgress, converse. At that place, it is called to speak and reflect on a God who will not let Godself be enclosed in areas, discourses, or narratives, but who rather opens them up when they threaten to close in on themselves. It is from this interrupting God that theology is called to bear witness, anchored in the life and tradition of the Church, living up to the exigencies of the academy and fully aware of the society in which it finds itself. Because today this God also intends to make history with God’s people.

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