

The Timeliness of Speaking of God

Freedom and Communion as Basic Concepts of Theology

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I am happy to be once again in the United States and to have once again the opportunity to exercise my very own craftsmanship, that is, to give lectures at universities, as I had done for almost thirty years, for some time also in this wonderful country. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for the invitation to come to this renowned and distinguished university, which I consider an honour, and I thank you for the warm welcome you have given to me.

Before I came here I was told that in the US you have to speak about the real problems, not about the mystery of God but about the mysteries of the Vatican. But there is no shortage of speakers on such kinds of problems, and I do not want to carry coals to Newcastle. So I have chosen another issue, which I think is the most central and fundamental question of theology and perhaps also the most challenging problem for theology today: not the Church question (as important it may be) but the God question. Because I am convinced that not only our personal existence, but also all that we may say about the Church or that we may say about ethical values depends on the God question, i.e., whether God is a reality and how we speak about this reality, which we call God.

I. A CHANGING SITUATION AS NEW CHALLENGE

All traditional cultures presuppose the reality of the divine. But as the famous Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote: “God is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated. ... Human beings with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their finger marks and their blood. ... They draw caricatures and write ‘God’ underneath; they murder one another and say ‘in God’s name’.”¹ These lines were written more than fifty years ago, but today they are more acute as perhaps never before. God can not only be understood in very different ways, but the name of God can also be used and misused in various ways, and misusing the name of God can be more dangerous than denying God. Modern atheism is to a great extent a reaction to such misuse of God in order to legitimate oppression, unjust power structures or wars.

¹ M. Buber, *Begegnung. Autobiographische Fragmente*. 2. ed. Stuttgart 1961, 43.

As a consequence, at least in Europe, practical and theoretical atheism alike were for a long time regarded as the keynote of the age.² The Second Vatican Council, too, considered atheism to be among the most serious phenomena of our time.³ Then in the 70s and 80s in Western Europe the secularisation thesis was able to gain a firm foothold, claiming that the inexorable march of modernisation processes would by its very nature inevitably result in progressive secularisation. So faith in God seemed to be a lost cause.

Today atheism is by no means dead; it has reappeared in the guise of science, and with nothing short of missionary zeal. Books such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* rank on the bestseller lists.⁴ We can of course question whether this kind of atheism is not itself a lost cause. It reiterates in a heavy-handed and distorted manner 19th century positions which have long been considered a thing of the past; it is essentially an atheistic fundamentalism.

In serious publications the secularisation thesis, which enjoyed a boom in the 70s and 80s, has since been largely abandoned. Within Western Europe these developments are interwoven with self-critique, in the form of a "Dialectic of the Enlightenment",⁵ which has also led to a dialectic of secularisation. This was the theme of a famous public dialogue between the then cardinal Joseph Ratzinger with the well-known philosopher Jürgen Habermas in 2004.⁶

All the ideologies and utopias of progress of the 19th and 20th centuries have failed; this is true with regard to Marxism and to Western theories of unilateral scientific and technological progress as well. The internal ambivalence of modern progress has been recognised; it has become evident that it cannot be had without a cost, that in fact each gain has to be paid for with a loss. That is most clearly manifest in the serious ecological problems we face and which are the price we pay for technological progress. It is also doubtful whether the development from the slingshot to the atom bomb can be defined as human progress. One-sided rationalism causes the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of humanity to atrophy, and cannot answer the existential quest for meaning, which constitutively belongs to the human existence and makes it precisely human.

There are very few people who want to live in a purely rational, technologically functional world. So the dimensions of the emotions and aesthetics are sought once more, extending as far as a renewed interest in myth. Furthermore, rapid change in practically all spheres of life gives rise once more to the question of what is permanent, what we can hold on to.

So the primordial religious questions of meaning and security have once more become burning new questions for many. Religious and spiritual questioning and seeking are on the

² Individual references in: W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (1982), reprint Freiburg i. Br. 2008, 50 f.

³ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 19.

⁴ R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2007. For analysis and critique see: A. McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, Oxford 2004; and McGrath *Der Atheismuswahn. Eine Antwort auf Richard Dawkins und den atheistischen Fundamentalismus*, Asslar 2007.

⁵ M. Horkheimer-Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik of Enlightenment*, New York 1973.

⁶ J. Habermas–J. Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg i. Br. 2005 (English translation: *The Dialectic of Secularization*, San Francisco 2006).

increase. There are many people, more than we think, who can be described as seekers and ‘pilgrims’. God has, as it were, become socially acceptable once more. Religion and the religions have to a large extent not declined as envisaged by the Enlightenment critique of religion, but have been shown to be virtually anthropological constants. That is a theological and pastoral opportunity which we must grasp by offering compelling theology and proclamation.

This new situation is of course ambivalent. It has given theology and the churches some breathing space, but it does not by any means signify that we are out of the woods. As we have seen, we are witnessing not only the return of religion but also the return of atheism and atheistic propaganda. Therefore, it is debatable whether we are speaking of a post–secular situation,⁷ or a so–called return of religion or even a mega–trend towards religion.

In any case, the so–called return of religion does not simply lead back to Christian faith in God. Often it leads to an individualistic invisible religion, to a vague, diffuse, free–floating religiosity, a syncretistic do–it–yourself, what–you–will religiosity which narcissistically seeks the divine not above us but in us. To some extent also the so–called third wave of Christianity belongs in this post–modern context, i.e., the charismatic and Pentecostal churches, the proliferation of independent churches and similar phenomena, which are growing very fast and nowadays can be found all over the world. They too represent, even if practised in so–called mega–churches, an individualistic religiosity of people who feel lost and lonely in a society where former solid social and religious institutions and sense of belonging are breaking down.

Finally, God can be and is often politically used as cement and sanction of a given society, of a culture or a nation and even of wars, which then become ideological crusades against the evil in the world. Or we find under the banner of a return to religion the phenomenon which is rightly observed by many with great fear and anxiety: a fundamentalist religion which out of hate commits violence and distorts religion into its demonic opposite because violence is an offence to God and to human dignity.

So it is right to question: Is it really always and in every case God who is returning, are we not in many instances dealing instead with the return of old and new gods? Max Weber wrote: “The old gods ascend from their graves, they are disenchanted and thus take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.”⁸

In this situation theology has a chance; there is a new openness to the religious message. But theology faces also a new challenge. Theology cannot become involved uncritically in the so-called religious mega-trend and its ambiguities. In this situation theology must be aware of its own hermeneutical principles and only in this way it can have a critical

⁷ Cf. J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, especially 116-118; also, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001. Cf. P. Walter (ed.) *Gottesrede in postsäkularer Kultur* (QD 224), Freiburg i. Br. 2007.

⁸ M. Weber, “Wissenschaft als Beruf”, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 4. Auflage Tübingen 1973, 605.

and at the same time a constructive standpoint of its own and open itself in a responsible way to other faiths.

Theology means rational responsibility for speaking of God. Indeed, theology means nothing other than *logos of theos*. The term *logos* tells us that theology is not rhetorically dynamic or charismatically ecstatic speech about God; and it is certainly not *theolalia*, babbling about God. Faith is, as St Paul tells us, intellectual worship (*logike latreia; rationale obsequium*) (Rom 12:1), faith should give account (*apologia*) of the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3:15).

So already the first Fathers of the Church, for example Justin, did not refer to what the ancient world understood as theology, the mythical or poetic way to speak about God or gods; they knew that not only faith but also reason is a gift of God and therefore they referred to the enlightened ancient philosophy and its rational God-talk. They did so when they identified the name of the God Yahweh, who was revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:14), with the understanding of the God of Hellenistic philosophy. Therefore according to Augustine⁹ and Anselm of Canterbury, the Father of medieval scholastic theology,¹⁰ theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Saint Bonaventure, the great theologian alongside Thomas Aquinas in medieval theology, tells us of the inner reason why faith seeks understanding. He tells us that what we love we want also to understand.¹¹ Theology therefore is logical rational speech about God.

In recent times already Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (1999) reminded us and then anew Pope Benedict XVI in his well-known Regensburg lecture (2006)¹² emphasised this logical structure of Christian faith, which excludes any purely emotional, or any fundamentalist and fanatical and much less so any violent expressions of faith. Christian mission is intrinsically dialogical, i.e., it respects the personal conviction of another person and tries to convince him or her with arguments and with the personal witness of one's own life.

II. THE LIBERATING GOD OF JESUS CHRIST

At this point we have to add another fundamental aspect of Christian God-talk. We can speak of God in many different ways. The God of the Bible is not an intuitive intimation of a divine being which remains vague and indeterminate, no pale idea of a divinity as an ultimate but ultimately incomprehensible horizon in or beyond all things, no irrational remnant in the face of the ineluctable contingency of existence. The God of the Bible reveals himself in concrete history, i.e., he communicates not something but himself in concrete time and space.

Christian theology therefore has to speak of the God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:6–14), of the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and of the “God of

⁹ Augustinus, *Sermo* 43,7,9.

¹⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, Prooem.

¹¹ Bonaventura, *I Sent.* Prooem. quaestio 2, 6

¹² Benedict XVI., *Glaube und Vernunft*, Freiburg i. Br. 2007.

Jesus Christ". In Jesus Christ God entered into our history, becoming frail human flesh (John 1:14), like us in all things except our sin; he can feel with us (Heb 4:15). A benevolent and merciful God has been shown upon the countenance of Christ, who has made God manifest to us as his father and our own,¹³ and in so revealing himself he revealed also what we are, i.e., sons and daughters of God.

But immediately a grave objection is raised against this historical premise. The question is: in focusing on the Judeo-Christian tradition, do we not banish ourselves into a Judeo-Christian ghetto where we are no longer able to dialogue with other religions and to perceive the many other diverse ways of speaking of God, barricading ourselves into an arrogant exclusive claim to own the absolute truth, and then running the risk of behaving in a fundamentalist way fanatically, if not violently, against others? Today the monotheistic religions have come under suspicion of being violent, a charge which is directed against Islam and Christianity as well. The theme of "God and violence" or "religion and violence" has become topical particularly since 11 September 2001. We sense a new wave of intolerance against a presumed intolerance of Christianity.

One way out is offered by the proponents of a pluralistic religious theology.¹⁴ Their thesis that there are multiple approaches to the divine, which all in principle have equal rights and must abandon any claim to be absolute because the divine remains transcendent in the face of all cognitive comprehension, seems at first glance to be plausible. But one must of course be aware that all conflict-avoidance of this kind is only possible at the price of the preceding suicide of the monotheistic religions.

Confessing the one and only God is constitutive for both the Old and the New Testaments (Deut 6:4 f; Mk 12:29), and the primary commandment, to love this one God with all our heart and all our strength (Mk 12:30), excludes all polytheism or theoretical religious pluralism. Thus an irrevocable claim to absolute and universal validity is a defining characteristic of Judeo-Christian and Islamic monotheism alike. To abandon it would not serve dialogue, but would instead rob dialogue of all substance; before commencing dialogue, not only would the monotheistic dialogue partner have been abolished, but the door would be opened to a general religious relativism.

The biblical testimony to God directs us along another path. On the first page of the Bible we already find a viewpoint, which is in no way particularist but rather universal. There the God of Israel is introduced as the creator of heaven and earth. Thus in the whole of reality, traces of his wisdom are to be found.¹⁵ In the religions and cultures of all peoples, seeds and fragments of the one *logos* are found, as the Church Fathers later asserted.¹⁶ In a particular sense according to the creation narratives God has created all human beings in his image and likeness (Gen 1:27) so that regardless of their ethnic, cultural, religious or national adherence they each have their own unique dignity, which cannot be at anyone's disposal. God, who

¹³ This thesis in *Jesus der Christus* (reprint 2007) and in *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (reprint 2008) is also the basic thesis presented by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI in his book *Jesus von Nazareth* (Freiburg i. Br. 2007).

¹⁴ J. Hick, P. Knitter, P. Schmitt-Leukel and others.

¹⁵ Prov 8:22–31; Sir 24:3–12.

¹⁶ Justin, 1 Apol 46; 2 Apol 7; 10; 13.

reveals himself in his revelation as a mystery, safeguards at the same time the mystery and dignity of humanity.

For Christians Jesus Christ is the culmination of God's self-revelation. In Him the *logos*, in which all things were created, became man (John 1:3 f, 14; Col 1:15). So the fourth Gospel calls Him the light of the world (John 1:4 f. 9; 8:12). In this sense for Christians Jesus is the key to the interpretation of all reality and the foundation for interreligious dialogue. In the light of Jesus Christ and confessing Him as the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6) the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. Although they are different in many ways, they nevertheless reflect often a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.¹⁷

From this perspective the debate about God becomes a debate about reality, or more precisely, a debate about whether belief or unbelief is better able to lead to a adequate understanding of reality. *Cum grano salis*: the task is then to prove that God's message is the true enlightenment of mankind and the world about itself. One of the most influential recent philosophers, and one who does not come from a Christian tradition but from the tradition of the modern Enlightenment, Jürgen Habermas, has in more recent publications acknowledged that the religions, especially the Judeo-Christian tradition, have a potential for language and interpretation of reality which should not be dispensed with in public discourse.¹⁸

We can go a step further and say: In binding himself or herself unconditionally to the one God alone, man becomes not a slave but becomes free in the face of all other reality and all self-made gods and idols. So attachment to God and communion with God renders humans free with regard to all other reality. Even the most intimate unity with God in Jesus Christ does not extinguish or oppress the human reality. According to the dogma of Chalcedon (451) the divinity of Christ is intimately united with his humanity, but it does not absorb his humanity; rather, it sets it free.

Proceeding from such insights Christian theology has undergone a process of purification through a process of self-criticism and constructive confrontation with the modern Enlightenment and modern philosophy of freedom. Modern philosophy can no longer be seen only as decadence; in modern philosophy, too, there are many seeds and fruits of Christian understanding of freedom so that we can enter into a constructive dialogue.¹⁹ It would be misplaced to read this new self-understanding of theology and the churches as an expression of weakness or to even suppose a cheap compromise. On the contrary, it is precisely the God of the Bible who addresses humanity in absolute freedom and invites it into communion with himself, opens up the possibility of thinking of the world as a place of freedom, to acknowledge freedom, to grant freedom to others and to commit oneself to a social order based on freedom.

Thus, Christian churches have overcome their former integralism and recognise with the Second Vatican Council the distinction between church and state and the rightful

¹⁷ Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Nostra aetate*, 2.

¹⁸ J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001. Cf. footnotes 6 and 7 above.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Kasper, *The Christian Understanding of Freedom and the History of Freedom in the Modern Era*, Milwaukee (Wisc.) 1988.

autonomy of earthly affairs and of all spheres of secular culture (art, science, economy, politics, technology, etc.) without falling into the opposite trap of secularism, which instead of a rightful distinction between both spheres puts a separation and an opposition.²⁰

This new attitude opens up to the legitimate freedom of culture and sciences. The main Christian churches today no longer have difficulty in reconciling creation and evolution. This does not mean that Darwin becomes a new Father of the Church and evolution a new dogma. Evolution is and remains a scientific theory or hypothesis and not a matter of faith. So those who believe they have the evidence can deny evolution, but they cannot do it in the name of Christian faith. In this sense theologians of all the main churches now leave it to the fundamentalist Christians, as well as the fundamentalist atheistic movements discussed above, to see belief in creation and the theory of evolution as mutually exclusive alternatives, and to counter the theory of evolution with creationism – a literal understanding of the biblical creation narrative. Theology which deserves to be taken seriously knows how to distinguish the assertion of belief *that* God created the world from the scientific question of *how* the origin and development of the world came about.

Today, the question of political freedom has become much more controversial than the freedom of science. We have already looked at how all Christian Churches profess freedom of religion, avoidance of violence, tolerance, and respect towards other religions and how they make the distinction between religion and politics. They clearly affirm that the Christian faith does not allow a political program to be derived from the Gospel. But this does not mean limiting religion to the private sphere, as laicism would like to have it, but it does wish to locate politics within the over-arching horizon of freedom and promotion of freedom, justice and solidarity, and to resist a one-sided orientation of politics determined by economics and private interest. Pope Benedict XVI speaks in his last Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* (2009) of the necessity of a new humanistic synthesis (no.21).

Such a humanistic synthesis resists a purely naturalistic understanding of mankind, which entails a purely objective view of the human being disregarding his or her inalienable dignity as personal subject. This danger is present in today's debate on abortion and bioethical issues. In these debates it becomes clear that the Christian interpretation of the world and of human life is not at all a harmless thing. Speaking of God it defends at the same time the ultimate dignity of the human person. It takes up what is good, but at the same time it denounces all that is contrary to human dignity, whereas the secularized understanding of freedom in the name of tolerance often becomes intolerant and oppressive.

So today we are witnesses and agents in a battle not of freedom against stubborn Catholic conservative ideology but in a battle on what freedom means and what a free society is all about. Speaking of God can be and must be the “salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13), “light and power”²¹ for the construction of a new humanism and a civilisation of life and love.²²

²⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, 36; 41; 56; 76.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in misericordia* 14; *Centesimus annus* (1991)10; *Evangelium vitae*, 95; Message World Day of Peace 2004; Benedict XVI Encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (2009) 33.

III. THE TRIUNE GOD – A SYMPATHETIC GOD

Let me now come to a further point. In their commitment to human rights, justice, solidarity and the safeguarding of creation, Christians can and should work together with representatives of other religions and with all people of good will. But they also owe it to others to testify to the God of Jesus Christ, that is, the Trinitarian God who is love. This brings us to an aspect of discourse about God which has been neglected for a long time. After a period resembling the sleep of Sleeping Beauty, the doctrine of the Trinity in Catholic and in Protestant theology as well has regained actuality once more, with regard both to historical research and systematic analysis alike. We are indebted for this also to Orthodox theology.²³

Nevertheless there are also still problems of understanding this doctrine which seems for many to be far from their reality and hard to understand. There are also reservations and reserves for the sake of the interreligious dialogue with Judaism and Islam, which accuse Christianity of hidden polytheism. So we have to be careful in our interpretation.

Self-evidently the doctrine of the Trinity is not a matter of a numerical problem or a kind of higher mathematics attempting to show how one and the same reality can be one and three at the same time. The Trinity can only be made comprehensible – as among others Augustine and Bonaventure saw and great idealistic thinkers like Hegel have shown again – on the basis of the nature of love.²⁴ Love wants to be one with the other without dissolving into the other. Love does not absorb the other; it means being one while maintaining its own identity as well as the identity of the other. It is so to say the paradox of love to find his or her ultimate fulfilment by being one with the other while acknowledging at the same time the otherness of the other. But it does not stop at intimate duality but instead progresses beyond its own boundaries into a shared third entity in which it represents and fully realises itself.

In this sense the doctrine of the Trinity is a precise explication of the Biblical expression “God is love” (1 John 4:8–16). God is not a solitary God, he is in himself communion (*koinonia, communio*), and only thus can he bring us into his communion with Him and with one another, and just in this way fulfil the ultimate desire of the human heart. In a Trinitarian perspective, freedom and communion are inseparably linked. Freedom exists in communion and communion is the realm of freedom.

This is much more than pious rhetoric. On the contrary, the doctrine of the Trinity enables a new approach to the most difficult existential question of the doctrine of God, the problem of theodicy.²⁵ I mean the question: Why is there so much innocent suffering? How can God, if he is omnipotent and loving, permit such suffering? Why does he not intervene? If he is loving but not almighty, then he is not God; if he is almighty but not loving, then he is

²³ It may suffice to mention names such as K. Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, G. Greshake und C. LaCugna from Catholic theology; K. Barth, J. Moltmann, E. Jüngel, W. Pannenberg from Protestant theology; and S. Bulgakov, V. Lossky and J. Zizioulas from Orthodox theology.

²⁴ See W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, 31–33; 469–473.

²⁵ On the theodicy question: Th. Pröpper - M. Striet, *Theodizee*, in: LThK IX (2000) 1396–98; G. Neuhaus, *Frömmigkeit der Theologie. Zur Logik der offenen Theodizeefrage* (QD 202), Freiburg i. Br. 2003. On the actuality of this question for the problem of monotheism: M. Striet, *Monotheismus und Kreuz*, in: IkaZ Communio 32 (2003) 273–284.

an evil demon. Such questions have become a burning issue again with such tragic experiences as the Shoah; they also arise when we are confronted with natural disasters, such as tsunamis, earthquakes and other catastrophes.

Obviously the doctrine of the Trinity cannot solve these questions. Nobody can answer them. Faith too must bear up under the darkness of God's unfathomable mystery, as the book of Job tells us in its final chapters (40:4-5; 42:1-6). But faith can shine a light in the darkness, and it can help us to survive the darkness of suffering and dying. It can show – as great literature has always known – that love and renunciation, love and death belong together.

That is also true of Trinitarian love. The divine persons are, like everything in God, infinite; they must therefore make room for one another; they must as it were relinquish themselves to make space for the other person. This kenotic, self-relinquishing mode of existence enables God on the cross to identify himself with that which is most alien to him and to enter into his opposite, into the night of death. God can take this death upon himself without being conquered by it, but instead thereby vanquish it and establish the foundation of a new life. Thus the cross is the utmost that is possible to God in his self-relinquishing love, it is the *id quo maius cogitari nequit*.²⁶

The doctrine of the Trinity does not thereby give a direct answer to the question of innocent suffering. How could it?! But it is able to be light in the darkness, that helps us not to despair of God in our utmost need and distress, but to know that in our extreme helplessness the crucified God stands by us, so that in all our cries and despair “*de profundis*” we are able to bear all in faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is the form of monotheism which permits existential survival in the face of the enormous extent of suffering in the world.

But can God suffer? Can he suffer with us? The mainstream of traditional theology has always denied this. It has understood suffering as a deficit and therefore excluded the possibility that God could suffer. On this point a shift has occurred in a large part of more modern theology.²⁷ Self-evidently, if God suffers he does not suffer in a human but in a divine manner. For God suffering cannot be something external which befalls him. God's suffering cannot be a passive accident, nor can it be the expression of a deficiency, but only the expression of sovereign self-determination. God is not passively affected by the suffering of his creatures, he allows himself in freedom to be affected by the suffering of his creatures, he allows himself to be moved by sympathy (Ex 34:6); indeed, as the prophet says, his heart recoils in the face of the misery of his creatures (Hos 11:8). He is not an apathetic but a sympathetic God, i.e., a God who can *sym-pathein*, who suffers with us.

God does not glorify or deify suffering, nor does he simply eliminate it, he redeems and transforms it. The cross is the passage to resurrection and transfiguration. So the theology of the cross and kenosis conceptualised in Trinitarian terms becomes an Easter theology of transfiguration, it becomes a hope against hope in the living God who gives life (Rom 4:18).

²⁶ Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Mysal III*, 152 f; W. Kasper, *Das Kreuz als Offenbarung der Liebe Gottes*, in: *Catholica* 61 (2007) 1–14.

²⁷ Notable examples in Catholic theology: H.U. von Balthasar, S.P. Breton, E. Przywara, H. Küng, J. Galot, H. Mühlén and others.

“*Spe salvi*”, (Rom 8:20–24; 1 Pet 1:3) we are, so Scripture says, redeemed in hope. “Saved in hope” is the title of the second encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI.

To speak of hope brings us still a step further. For hope stretches out not only to engage personal fulfilment and happiness but also the fulfilment and the well-being of the whole of reality in justice and peace, what the Hebrew Bible calls *shalom*. God as the creator of heaven and earth is not a reality apart the world, he is the all-determining reality. So if we take seriously the words that God is love, then their logical conclusion is that love is the all-encompassing horizon of reality and the meaning of existence. With this we have the thesis that love is the horizon and the interpretive key for all reality.²⁸

This thesis that love is the meaning of existence is not just any harmless pious affirmation; it represents a kind of revolution in the field of metaphysical thought. This insight leads to the realisation that neither the self-subsistent substance of classical metaphysics nor the autonomous modern self-assured subject are the real and fundamental reality; the starting point and the foundation are instead to be found in that which was for Aristotle merely accidental and the weakest reality of existence, namely relation. The theology of the Trinity leads us, as many contemporary theologians teach us, to a relational and personal ontology.²⁹

Just as in God the subsistence of the Trinitarian persons is grounded in relation, so in an analogous manner (i.e., in a similarity which is at the same time more dissimilar) relations are the fundamental reality also in the created realm. The human being must from this perspective be understood as a relational and dialogic being. He does not find his fulfilment in forcible self-assertion but in respectful recognition of the otherness of the other and loving in self-communication, where he or she makes him- or herself a gift for the other and receives love as undeserved gift from the other. This is the fundamental paradox and the dialectic of Christian existence: only he who loses his life will find it (cf. Mt 10:38-39; John 12:25). Only in love and in communion does freedom find its fulfilment. Pope Benedict spoke of the logic of gift and the *principle of gratuitousness*.³⁰ Communion is therefore the realm where freedom is the only possibility. This is a position which goes beyond individualism and collectivism. Some go so far as to call *communio* the new paradigm to understand all of reality.³¹

This principle of *communio* stands also behind the concept of *communio-ecclesiology*, which on the basis of Patristic and Orthodox theology in the last decades, and in

²⁸ That love is the meaning of existence I attempted to demonstrate in my habilitation thesis *Das Absolute in der Geschichte. Philosophie und Theologie der Geschichte in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, Mainz 1965. This interpretation has been confirmed by M. Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809), Tübingen 1971, 107, 154; 211; 223–225.

²⁹ See J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, München 1968, 142–150; K. Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*, Einsiedeln 1976; G. Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, Freiburg i. Br. 1997, 457–460; M. Schulz, *Sein und Trinität*, St. Ottilien 1997. Similar approaches to a Trinitarian ontology are found in more recent Orthodox theology (W. Solowjev, N. Berdjaev, S. Bulgakov, J. Zizioulas etc.) and in the recent Anglican theological trend known as Radical Orthodoxy (R. Williams, J. Milbank, etc.).

³⁰ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* (2009) 34; 37.

³¹ J.C. Scannone and others, *Comunión: ¿Un nuevo Paradigma?*, San Benito 2006.

both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology, has emerged progressively as a promising ecumenically common approach.³² But *communio*–ecclesiology cannot and should not remain a theory or become even an ideology; it must find its way into ecclesial practice, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. *Ad intra* in communication on all levels of the Church, that which Orthodox theology calls synodality; *ad extra* in dialogue and solidarity with the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of humanity in our times.³³

Moreover, the Church does not find her identity and her rightly understood catholicity by anxiously closing her doors and windows, but on the contrary by opening them and entering into dialogue with other faiths, never abandoning her own faith but making it inviting, convincing, lively and fruitful. This can be done in a trustworthy and credible way only when the relations *ad extra* reflect the internal life of the Church, i.e., communion and communication, solidarity and subsidiarity within the Church herself.

In a relational ontology identity can be understood only as an open identity combined with solidarity. This means that neither personal nor national distinction, neither ethnic affiliation nor even academic greatness, nor force, money, power and influence, nor the self-assertion “of the fittest” will be what counts in the end, but instead tolerance, respect, solidarity, forgiveness, goodness and tangible love will be what remains as the definitive reality.

Thus the doctrine of God and the Trinity gives rise to perspectives which by no means have yet been taken to their logical, ontological, ecclesiological and practical social conclusion. Thought on the doctrine of God and the Trinity as the sum of all theology still represents a big challenge and an unfulfilled and rewarding task.

So I can sum up: It is time to speak of God, to testify and to think about God. If theology wishes to gain a hearing amidst the contemporary pluralist Babel of voices and opinions, it must firstly and above all know what it is. It can only have relevance if it steadfastly maintains its own identity, that is, as speaking of God in a distinctive and at the same time in an engaging manner. If it does not do so, theology and the Church will be relegated to the role of ethical or moral institutions which in the end no-one wants to listen to. If on the other hand it speaks in a new and fresh way of the living God who is love, then it will render a service to life, freedom, justice, solidarity and love, then it can serve the dignity of humanity and the truth of reality, and open up perspectives of hope in all the aporia of the present.

Therefore I reiterate the timeliness of theology: For the sake of man it is time, it is the right time, to speak of God.

³² Cf. W. Kasper, *Die Kirche Jesu Christi. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie I* (WKGS 11), Freiburg i. Br. 2008, 31–34; 405–425.

³³ *Gaudium et spes*, 1.