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# What Kind of Theology Does the Church of the Future Need? Reflections in a European Context †

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**Abstract:** While Christianity is growing worldwide, especially in various forms of charismatic and Pentecostal churches, membership in the Protestant churches and in the Catholic Church are declining throughout Europe. A theology for the church of the future, particularly a theology for pastoral ministry, needs an understanding of the church that is at once relevant to practical pastoral ministry and congregational work as well as awareness of the processes of change and upheaval. This paper argues that there is a need for a contemporary theology of diaspora. At the center of this paper is the question of how God can be spoken of in a theologically responsible way under present conditions without dissolving all theology into anthropology and ethics. The crisis of faith in modern Western secular societies is essentially a crisis of the language of faith. Theology *in* crisis and a theology *for* times of crisis—both have the task of waiting: waiting for God’s new entry into the world, for his coming, and for him to speak to us in a new way by making the language of the biblical tradition speak and appeal to us anew. Such a theology for times of crisis is precisely not resigned, but highly expectant, as can be learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

**Keywords:** theology of diaspora; Christian talk of God; God’s acting and omnipotence; a theology of waiting



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## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes challenges of contemporary theology in the context of pluralization, individualization, and secularization. Pluralization not only affects general culture, but also characterizes developments in the field of religion as well as in the field of Christianity. The description of the current findings is based, among other things, on the analyses of Detlef Pollack (2003), Gerhard Wegner (2014), and Evangelische Kirche Deutschland EKD (2019). Against this background, this paper argues for a new form of theology of the diaspora. In doing so, it ties in with a recent study by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) (Fischer and Rose 2019). The church crisis, the study found, is not only a crisis of credibility, but also a crisis of faith and a crisis of the language of faith. Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010), this paper sketches out a theology of waiting and the concept of a waiting church in the sense that it guards the heritage of the biblical witness, carried by the hope that it will begin to speak anew.

## 2. The Church between Change and New Beginnings

In many countries of the world, Christians live in the minority. Even in regions where Christianity has traditionally been the largest religion, the number of Christians is declining—especially in Europe—while at the same time their number is growing in other parts of the world. This paper focuses on the development in Germany and the German-speaking world (Cf. Körtner 2019). For Germany, the *Freiburg Institute Forschungszentrum Generationenverträge* (FZG) predicts that the membership of the two large national churches—the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church—will be cut in half by 2060 (EKD 2019).

Accordingly, the number of Protestant Christians would fall from the current 21.5 million to 10.5 million. In spring 2022, the total number of those still belonging to one of the two large national churches in Germany was less than 50%.

Protestantism in the broadest sense of the word covers a wide spectrum of denominations. Not only as a result of secularization, membership in the Protestant churches is declining across Europe but growing worldwide. The same applies to charismatic and Pentecostal churches in their various forms. In Europe, however, Protestantism is declining on a demographic level. This is especially true of the traditional churches that emerged out of the Reformation. Of course, there are also older free churches as well as those more recently formed in this part of the world—evangelical and charismatic congregations—which report growing membership figures (cf. [WCE 2022](#)). Overall, however, their growth by no means compensates for the decline in membership of the Protestant national churches.

The overall picture is, of course, much more complex, and the various denominations, denominational families, and individual churches all ought to be considered separately. From a sociological point of view, different groups and milieus have formed within the large churches. Broadly speaking, in regional Protestant churches (*Landeskirchen*) in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, there may be “pluralistic, missionary-evangelistic and charismatic visions, as well as ecumenical-conciliar and political-emancipatory versions of church” to be found ([Hempelmann 2016](#), p. 5, trans.). Outside and alongside the familiar church and free-church structures, “alternative forms of Christian piety are emerging at the same time, seeking expression in independent denominations and confessions, especially in the evangelical-charismatic sphere” (ibid.). In addition, as a result of migration, there is a numerically significant growth of Orthodox churches, which helps to shape the ecumenical conversation. Moreover, the number of migrant or immigrant churches from other European countries as well as those of Asian or African origin have grown steadily since the 1990s. “A part of worldwide Christianity is living among us. A new stylistic diversity of Christianity is developing” (ibid., p. 6, trans.)

In the eastern part of Germany, only a shrinking minority of the population belongs to one of the two main denominations, Protestant and Catholic. When evaluating population groups, the change in religious demographics due to the migration of non-Christians, i.e., primarily Muslims, must certainly be considered. Nevertheless, a full picture of the overall trend can only be obtained by looking at the absolute membership numbers and not just at the percentages. Likewise, is referring to the mortality rate, which exceeds the birth rate in the Christian part of the population, sufficient as an explanation? After all, one is not born a Christian, but baptized a Christian. The number of baptisms, however, is again lower than the number of births. A further and important factor is religious disaffiliation, especially for Protestant churches wherein the number of people leaving the church is higher in terms of percentage than in the Roman Catholic Church.

As a result of the continuous trend of religious disaffiliation, the religious demographics in the western part of Germany are becoming more and more similar to those in central and eastern Germany. However, the difference between the eastern and the western parts of Germany is that, while leaving the church in the west is a conscious decision, the eastern part has largely been “unchurched” for several generations. Here, people do not turn their backs on the church, but have never experienced a church or religious socialization ([Fincke 2017](#)). Therefore, it is not disappointments or negative experiences with the church that have led to religious disaffiliation, but being unaffiliated with any religious denomination is the norm.

Now, sociologists of religion rightly point out that being unaffiliated with any religious denomination is not the same as being unreligious. What is now called religious indifferentism can come in different shapes and forms. However, there is a widespread habitual atheism that has long since ceased to struggle with the question of God’s character or the problem of theodicy, and has stopped asking after God altogether. As important as it is to distinguish between different forms of religious distance with regard to church work, preaching, pastoral care, and religious education, the proposition of a religious

a priori as an anthropological premise is questionable, because it claims to understand supposedly non-religious people better than they understand themselves, which means that their self-interpretation is not really taken seriously.

Like Gerhard Wegner, I think it is wrong to assume that the change, which becomes palpable in declining church membership, affects only the ecclesiastical form of Christianity, that is, only a certain social form of Christianity, and not Christianity as such or religion in general. Wegner (2014) counters: “The times when it was possible to claim unchallenged that all people basically had religious interests but nowadays cultivate them in a highly individualized way, and that the church’s loss of validity is because its dogmatic and authoritarian style fail to meet people’s needs, are over. Of course, a distinction must still be made between religion and church—however, religious communication is rarely found outside church contexts” (p. 7) (Cf. Pollack 2003).

Critics fear that Wegner’s proposition favors a narrow understanding of church and the warding off of any kind of inner-church and inner-theological criticism (Raatz 2014). However, such a reading is by no means compelling. On the other hand, a theory of religion that declares Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, to be the administrator of modernity shields itself from all empirical evidence and criticism, because its construct of an omnipresent individualistic religiosity, which equates modern subjectivity and religion, is sociologically intangible. It is, ultimately, to use Thomas Luckmann’s (1991) term, an “invisible religion.”

Pluralization, individualization, and secularization are not contradictory. The church and the Christian faith are not only in a time of change, and there are likewise not only new beginnings to report, which awaken faith and the church to new life, but also departures. As justified as the criticism of an impetuous and undifferentiated talk of a break with tradition may be, the magic words “change” or “transformation” cannot hide the fact that there is indeed such a break with tradition, not only outside but also within the churches. In some cases, it is even encouraged within the churches themselves. Wolfgang Huber has coined the term “self-secularization” for this phenomenon (Huber 1998, p. 10). Such “self-secularization” happens not least by moralizing the gospel, that is, when its message is reduced to one of morality or an ensemble of ethical norms and values.

In this situation, it is not enough to—in the tradition of liberal theology—invoke the spirit of the Reformation or to speak of the spirit of Protestantism and, at the same time, to think that one can leave behind the source of Reformation faith and make the perpetual protest of any kind of religious commitment a principle. It was Paul Tillich (1962) who suggested that “perpetual protest” could “lead to the elimination of any concrete content. [ . . . ] Liberal Christianity has not just criticized religion, it has dissolved religion” (p. 136, trans.).

However, the question of what the church is (still) good for is not answered convincingly either if one quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s catchy phrase of *the church for others* and envisions the church of the future as one that is focused entirely on diaconal work and social action, much like a secular non-governmental organization (NGO). Bonhoeffer’s formula is too short-sighted in the sense that it is a truncated description of the nature and mission of the church. To be a church for others, the church must first continue to be a church, namely a community of believers in Christ. Only if it is a church *with others* can it also be a church *for others*, as Wolfgang Huber rightly notes in his Bonhoeffer biography published in 2019 (Huber 2019, p. 85f.). To be sure, the nature of a church is determined by its willingness to stand up for those whose lives are existentially threatened and endangered and whose dignity is disregarded and violated. However, the phrase “church for others” strikes an activist note that easily overlooks the fact that the community of believers, which is to be present for others, must first be formed and constantly strengthened anew.

A theology for the church of the future, specifically a theology for pastoral ministry, needs an understanding of the church that is at once relevant to practical pastoral ministry and congregational work as well as aware of the processes of change and upheaval described at the beginning of this paper. The theological competence of pastors cannot be

tailored solely to the empirical conditions that pastors are faced with in today's ministry. For the sake of its practical relevance, ministry is dependent on a possibly counterfactual or at least normative model of church leadership. For if normative and possibly counterfactual ecclesiological models are replaced by ones that are purely empirical in their outset—that is, a kind of market- or demand-oriented model, where the entire ministry and vision of the church is shaped by the current religious needs of society—the church will eventually become a religious doppelgänger of society, which will sooner or later make itself superfluous.

The fundamental theological question arises as to what extent reform efforts are guided by circumstantial constraints or by decidedly theological principles and criteria that can be justified by systematic theology. Of course, it is not a matter of a top-down application of a normatively prescribed ecclesiology that dictates church practice, but rather of an interplay between theory and empiricism, through which dogmatic-normative statements about the shape, nature, and task of the church are repeatedly put to the test. In short, a systematic-theological theory of the church is in turn to be formulated in terms of church management (“Kybernetik”), so that it can fulfil its steering task in the everyday life of the church and church leadership, which must be recalled anew in the current reform debates. A guiding concept here can be the notion of diaspora, as I will show below.

### 3. A Theology of Diaspora

The biblical term used to designate Christians or a church in a minority position is that of the diaspora. Applied to Christian communities, the Greek word is found in James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1, that is, only in a few places and, moreover, in late New Testament writings. In John 7:35, it is used in the context of Jews outside of their homeland. Acts 8:1 and 4 use the verb *diaspeíresthai* (“to be scattered”) in the context of Christians from Jerusalem who fled from persecution to the regions of Judea and Samaria.

Evidently, the Greek verb and its noun *diasporá* (“scattering”) were adopted from the Septuagint, in which the verb occurs over 40 times and the noun, 12 times. The dispersion of Jews throughout the eastern Mediterranean, however, is terminologically distinguished from exile (Hebrew *gôlā/galut*) in the Septuagint and Judaism (Rajak 1999). The term diaspora also plays no role in medieval or early modern Jewish culture. In modern Hebrew, there is the term *tefuza* (Dan 1999). It denotes the diaspora, wherein one can live a prosperous and protected life, while *galut* stands for a life of suffering, persecution, and despair.

Apart from the few New Testament passages mentioned, it seems that the term diaspora was forgotten in Christianity for a long time. It is no longer used to describe a minority situation. It is only Luther's works wherein one finds the idea of a church that is “hidden and very scattered.” (Luther 1930, p. 505, line 5)<sup>1</sup> Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf used the term diaspora to describe the situation of the members of the “Brüder-Unität” who lived in the territory of a national church (cf. Meyer 2009, p. 71).

In the middle of the 19th century, the term was used prominently in the context of the Gustav-Adolf-Foundation, the forerunner of the Gustav-Adolf-Werk (Fleischmann-Bisten 1999). The counterpart to Protestant diaspora work was the Catholic Bonifatiusverein, from which the Boniface Association emerged. Soon the term diaspora was used not only to signify a denominational, but also a cultural and origin-related minority situation. The different aspects of the term—the theological, cultural, and national or ethnic—became blended in a theologically and politically problematic way. During the Nazi period, the Protestant diaspora theology developed into an ethnic theology with an affinity for Nazi ideology, which only after 1945 was able to free and disentangle itself from the laborious process of self-purification (Röhrig 1991).

Because of its historic stigma, the concept of diaspora has been problematized increasingly in recent decades in theology and the church, and has thus been used less and less in theological discourse. Many minority churches do not (or no longer) use it to describe their situations as religious minorities. Amongst Protestants, however, Wilhelm

Dantine (1911–1981) and Ernst Lange (1927–1974) as well as—amongst Catholics—Karl Rahner (1904–1984) in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s presented groundbreaking outlines of a theology of the diaspora that were based on biblical foundations and critical of any “völkisch”-nationalist echoes. What the above-mentioned authors have in common is an understanding of diaspora existence as an essential characteristic of the church, even in those social contexts in which Christians or a specific church make up the religious majority of the population. The reason for this is that, according to the New Testament understanding, the church exists in the world, but not of the world, and is not supposed to be equal to the world (see below).

For Wilhelm Dantine (2001), who has described the existence of the Protestant minority in Austria as a “Protestant adventure in a non-Protestant world” (trans.), diaspora means the church interspersed in the community of nations. Alluding to John 12:24, Dantine’s theology of diaspora was shaped by his theology of the cross: “‘Diaspora’ means to be a scattered grain of wheat of God in the furrowed field of the world. The grain of wheat bears much fruit when it dies. The Future-minded church becomes a ‘dying church’. [ . . . ] A dying church essentially means to be a church that is willing to die for the sake of its testimony: it rather dies because it does not want to live for its own sake. A church following her Lord is not only a church in the world, but a church ‘for the world’” (Dantine 1966, p. 447, trans.).

Karl Rahner (1988) also deemed the existence of the church in the modern, secular world to be a diaspora existence: “The Christian situation in the present is [ . . . ] characterizable as diaspora” (p. 24, trans.). “For us today the diaspora situation is a [ . . . ] must in salvation history, i.e., we have not only to regretfully acknowledge this diaspora situation as existing, but can accept it as a must wanted by God [ . . . ] and, as a result, uninhibitedly take the appropriate action” (ibid., p. 26, trans.). “We therefore have the right, indeed almost the duty, to reckon with the fact—and not merely take note of it bewilderedly—that the way the church exists in public is changing. That the church is becoming a diaspora church everywhere—a church among many non-Christians” (ibid., p. 32; cf. Rahner 1967). Ernst Lange, on the other hand, described the existence and life of the church as an interplay between gathering and dispersion with the formula “ecclesia and diaspora” (Lange 1965, p. 142f., trans.).

The three authors mentioned above oppose the misunderstanding that diaspora means the withdrawal of Christians or the church from the world into itself—into a kind of inner-church milieu. What they have in common is the view that the church, which by its nature is always a diaspora church, knows that it is sent by Christ into the world. It participates in the mission of God, the *missio Dei*. Therefore, the diaspora existence and the missionary orientation of the Christian existence are two sides of the same coin. Dantine, Lange, and Rahner are also convinced that the diaspora existence of the church must not be understood confessionally, but ecumenically. Like Hermann-Josef Röhrig (1993, 1995), one can almost speak of an “ecumenical diaspora.”

Interestingly, in more recent times, a concept of diaspora that has been completely detached from theological and ecclesiastical usage has been developed in the field of cultural studies (Mayer 2005; Knott and McLoughlin 2010). For example, one speaks of a Pakistani diaspora in Great Britain, a Ghanaian diaspora in Austria, or an African diaspora in the United States. Within cultural studies, the concept of diaspora may include the religious dimension, which is by no means limited to Christian denominations; however, religion is not the decisive factor there. It is, nevertheless, a worthwhile task to relate the discourse on a renewed theology of diaspora to the diaspora discourse of cultural studies.

This task was taken up by a working group of the CPCE, which was commissioned in 2012 to initiate a study “defining the situation of Protestant churches in a pluralist Europe.” The study document, entitled “Theology of Diaspora” (Fischer and Rose 2019), which is available by now, understands “diaspora as shaping fullness of relations in a spirit of Christian discipleship. [ . . . ] While the concept of minority church or minority situation reduces this wealth of relations to a numerical ratio, and tends to imply a deficiency, the



strength of a relationally focused concept of diaspora is that it highlights the polyphony of life relations in diaspora congregations and understands this as an essential part of creative organisation" (p. 142).

As stated in an initial set of theses from the study process, three concepts of diaspora must be distinguished in the discourse on a theology of diaspora: 1. "A descriptive-sociological concept, which refers to the numerically ascertainable situation of churches according to the number of their members within a society. In this respect the concept is used synonymously with a minority situation." 2. "A descriptive concept which describes the self-interpretation of a church. 'Diaspora' then means a particular self-understanding of a church in relation to its minority situation." 3. "A theological interpretative concept which interprets the minority situation of a church/churches from a Christian biblical tradition. In the theological concept of Diaspora, there is always implied a particular theological view of history and a particular ecclesiology" (Diaspora and Identity 2013, p. 11).

The final document links the concept of diaspora with that of strangeness. However, the concept of "strangeness" is indeed central to the New Testament. The biblical foundations of a theology of diaspora therefore extend far beyond the few places where the word group diasporá/diaspeíresthai appears. The CPCE study document sums up the task of a theology of diaspora under the title "Church in a strange land—the strangeness of the church" (Fischer and Rose 2019, pp. 206–13). The diasporic existence of the church as the body of Christ is determined by and grounded in Christology. The Church of Jesus Christ exists in the world, but it is not of this world (Jn 17:16). The wandering people of God—as characterized by the Letter to the Hebrews—have no permanent city in this world, but seek the one to come. They follow Christ, who died on the cross "outside the gate" (Heb 13:12)—outside of Jerusalem. As the Apostle Paul writes, those who follow Jesus are not to conform to this world (Rom 12:2), but to live in it under the eschatological proviso: to have as if they did not, for this world in its present form is passing away (1 Cor 7:29–31), and the citizenship<sup>2</sup> of those who believe in Christ is in heaven (Phil 3:20).

Rudolf Bultmann coined the term *Entweltlichung* ("de-worldization") for the Pauline and Johannine view of Christian existence (Bultmann [1971] 2014, p. 565). Pope Benedict (2011) took up this term in his Freiburg speech in 2011, triggering a lively debate both within and outside the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, he could be understood in terms of constrictions within the church as well as a depoliticization of the gospel. Although the gospel of God's coming kingdom through Jesus Christ has a political dimension, it cannot be reduced to a political message, because humanity's relationship with God goes beyond the political. Bultmann's concept of *Entweltlichung* is therefore correct if it is understood theologically from John 17:16 and Romans 12:2. A theology of the diaspora has to bring a new consciousness for the eschatological hope to attention, which is essential to faith. At the same time, however, it has to keep in mind that the hope of the consummation of redemption, which extends beyond earthly life, does not release us from seeking the "welfare of the city" in the here and now (Jer 29:7). "A theology of diaspora," as the study document of the CPCE states, "also has to keep in mind the concept and phenomenon of 'strangeness'—the strangeness of faith and the strangeness of the God who became human. The tension between 'home' and 'a foreign country' informs diaspora experiences, literally and figuratively, and the way they have been interpreted theologically in history and in the present" (Fischer and Rose 2019, p. 155).

In contrast to a theology of diaspora that relies on the preservation of one's own identity in a foreign land by withdrawing from the world, the CPCE study pleads for a diaspora theology as a form of public theology and encourages the church as well as individual Christians to "engage critically and constructively with society and to be there for people in their present needs and experiences" (ibid.).

#### 4. The Talk of God in Meager Times

According to journalist Matthias Kamann (2017), the social influence that churches continue to have is "based on a specific form of silence" (p. 59) about the decided reasons of

faith on which ethical or political options are based. If they actually focused on theological questions in the narrow sense, their social significance would have been lost long ago. How churches can talk of God and the Christian faith in a new way—that is, a life-changing way that meets people where they are and inspires them—is one of the pressing questions of the present.

The crisis of faith in modern Western secular societies is essentially a crisis of the language of faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's description of the incomprehensibility of the language of faith in his well-known *Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge* from 1944 still holds true: We are "being thrown back all the way to the beginnings of our understanding," because not only the dogmas and theological terms of the Christian tradition, but even the most elementary words of the biblical witness are no longer understood by many people (Bonhoeffer 2010, p. 389).

However, many efforts to proclaim the gospel in a contemporary way end up either moralizing or trivializing it. This is primarily due to the fact that the biblical concept of sin is no longer understood or equated with moral wrongdoing. Those who no longer know how to talk about sin also no longer understand why we humans are dependent on God's unconditional grace in the first place and what that means. On the one hand, this leads to the trivialization of God and on the other, to the trivialization of the problem of human existence. Since being a sinner is no longer taken seriously, then there is no longer a problem in humanity's relationship with God and he no longer demands anything of us humans. The message of Luther and Calvin was: "God loves you, although you are as you are." This sentence is often shortened today to: "God loves you as you are." This, however, is a fatal misunderstanding, because it leads to cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it. According to biblical testimony, humankind and the world must be redeemed from evil and reconciled with God. This, however, cannot be done by humankind themselves but only by God, which is why any reducing of the gospel to moral appeals fails.

By its very name, the task of theology is to speak of God in a deliberate way. It can only do so in a thoughtful manner, by reflecting on the always-preceding talk of Christian faith about God. Modernity's relegation of religion to the private sphere has led to a religion without God in historically Christian countries. Thus, one could be inclined to understand the gradual lapse into silence in the speaking of God as a hint to finally dismiss the topic of God in theology altogether and replace it by discussing a religion that has become "Godless". In contrast, I would like to argue that the future of theology depends on its remaining theology in the literal sense, i.e., daring to speak of God and to reflect on the speaking of God.

Speaking about God is central and indispensable to the Christian faith because faith considers itself, human existence, and the world as a whole as gifts of the unconditional grace and goodness of God. All existence is existence received. The Apostle Paul writes: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7, English Standard Version [ESV]). This fundamental insight was brought to bear anew in an almost revolutionary way by the Reformation as illustrated by Luther's interpretation of the first article of the Apostle's Creed in his *Small Catechism*. *Sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, and sola scriptura* or *solo verbo* found their crystallization in Luther's *solus Deus* (cf. Ebeling 1981, p. 296). "God alone"—"God first" (Dalferth 2018)—is at the center of Reformation theology as an intrinsic consequence and condition of the doctrine of justification. Since the Christian faith is (among other things) a thinking faith, and since the worship of God is also enacted in thought, the Reformation experience and realization that God unconditionally justifies the sinful and godless person resulted in thinking of God anew.

In the present conditions, the possibility of speaking of God obviously does not depend on a generally presupposed questioning after God, but on the memory trace of the biblically attested revelation of God as certain, as there is no natural or evolutionary path from a general concept of religion to the claims to validity and truth of any real monotheism. The question of God does not precede revelation, but is provoked by it in the appropriate way. Otherwise, not even the question about God can be asked adequately. Only when the word

“God” fails, the question about God arises (Fuchs 1963, p. 70; Weder 1986, p. 145). To have recalled this remains the merit of dialectical theology within the history of theology. Only in light of the biblical revelation and the memory that keeps it alive does it make sense to speak of God’s absence and loss in modernity.

The biblical tradition expects us to think of the God who has disappeared from modernity not as absent but as hidden, that is, present and effective despite all appearances, and above all: to believe. “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour” (Is 45:15, ESV). In view of modern experiences of God’s hiddenness, this biblical statement of faith is taken at its word, that is, it is made comprehensible as a promise so that neither a modern skepticism nor a new-religious polytheism will have the last word.

The theological challenges of the present include the problem of a theology of history with the associated topics of God’s actions and works, his election (*praedestinatio*) and providence (*providentia*), and his preservation and completion of creation (*conservatio mundi, concursus divinus*). Even in church statements, e.g., on environmental protection and climate change, faith in God’s continuous creative work and the preservation of the world through him is increasingly lost sight of. Thus, in church appeals for the preservation of creation, the biblical God often only acts as a motivator for human commitment to the protection of nature, as a religious add-on, so to speak, that can be dispensed with if necessary. This is not an argument against the environmental commitment of the churches, but a plea for a theology of creation that is not limited to ethical demands. Such a theology distinguishes the churches witnessing to God and the gospel from an NGO working for environmental protection.

“The spirit of our time or that of the future,” Ludwig Feuerbach noted in 1842/43, “is that of realism. The new religion, the religion of the future, is politics” (Feuerbach 1966, p. 231, fn. 1, trans.). According to Feuerbach, true faith in God no longer exists even in the remaining churches. Believers continue to speak of God’s blessing, but they seek actual help only from people. Therefore, the blessing of God is “only a blue haze of religion in which the believing unbelief conceals its practical atheism” (*ibid.*, p. 233, trans.). If such practical atheism is indeed to be found in the churches, it shows how much the churches, too, are afflicted by the “God crisis” (Metz 1994). Without self-critical examination of this internal crisis of God in the church, as well as the church’s and theology’s unsuccessful speech about God, all attempts to speak of God in a new way will be futile.

To speak of God without dissolving all theology into anthropology and ethics will only be possible if one retains speech about the omnipotence of God. It is here that Christian speech about God stands or falls, as a glance at the creeds of the ancient Church shows. Not only is it noteworthy that both the Apostolicum and the Nicæno Constantinopolitanum explicitly speak of God’s omnipotence (*Deus, pater omnipotens, Greek Pantokrátor*), but that his omnipotence is in fact the only quality that is attributed to God in both creeds. “Therefore, it does not merely express *one* quality among others, but it emphasizes what God truly is, who he is *as God*” (Askani 2018, p. 1, trans.). In the words of Rudolf Bultmann (1969): “Whenever the idea, God, comes to mind, it connotes that God is the Almighty; in other words, God is the reality determining all else” (p. 53).

The “God crisis” and the unsuccessful Christian speech about God originate in a crisis of faith in the omnipotence of God, or rather, in the Almighty God. This crisis of faith results from the experience that God’s omnipotence is not only extrinsically denied by the modern criticism of religion but also through experiences of suffering and evil which seem to call God’s almightiness into question.

There is a fine line between Bonhoeffer’s influential and paradoxical speech of God, which flows out of his theology of the cross and according to which God insinuates that we ought to live in the world as though he did not exist, and the practical atheism Ludwig Feuerbach spoke of. However, in order to reclaim Christian speech about God in our day and age, it is paramount to take this difference into consideration. The biblical tradition requires us to think of the God who was thought to have vanished by modernity as hidden, that is to say, to consider him, despite all appearances, as present—and above all: to believe.



It is no solution to refrain from speaking of the omnipotence of God and to replace it with speech about the powerlessness of God, as happened in many theological texts and methodologies after 1945, when confronted with the theodicy problem. The Christologically justified speech about God's powerlessness cannot be pitted against that of his omnipotence, except at the price of the dissolution of the idea of God. Rather, God's powerlessness is to be spelled out as a mode of his omnipotence. That means: God can only be spoken of in the biblical, New Testament sense if Jesus of Nazareth is spoken of at the same time, and in the way that Jesus is known as the Christ of God.

It is not a vague openness to God, but the confession of Christ that is the decisive "marker" by which the label "Christianity" is recognized on the market of religious possibilities and impossibilities. It is what determines the identity of faith and church. This, of course, also requires honesty when it comes to assessing one's own situation and refraining from whitewashing. When being thrown all the way back to the beginnings of our understanding, it is necessary to ask anew: What does Christ mean for this world, and what does it mean to be a Christian?

The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ establish a specific form of apophatic theology whose *via negativa* cannot consist in speaking abstractly of the world and thus indirectly of God by way of non-identity. Rather, the non-identity of God and the world must first be expressed in the mode of lamentation and repentance. Then it becomes feasible to also interpret this experience in the light of a paradoxical concept of revelation and to open it up for the possibility that God is present in the midst of his absence in a most definite way, judging and saving at the same time.

In contrast, there is widespread talk of a powerless God, who is seen merely as a compassionate companion of suffering people or even as an object of human care and concern. Johann Baptist Metz (1990) rightly wonders "whether speech about a God who suffers in solidarity with us is ultimately not just a more humane psychological projection, just as in former times, in feudalistic times, God was projected as the one who exercises sovereign power as the supreme warlord, as the Almighty" (p. 34).

If the idea of God's omnipotence is abandoned, the transformation of Christian beliefs into ethical appeals amounts to hypermorality (Gehlen 2004). Therefore, "because of the strong interest in change, a theology of the compassionate companion can become – like a reverse omen, so to speak—so overly moralistic that, in its permanent state of indignation, it cannot forgive God for his creation" (Thomas 2019, p. 41).

This has dramatic consequences for the political sphere as well. "In its allegedly structurally necessary and theologically legitimized lack of compromise," a "secularized and politicized kind of eschatological impatience," which manifests itself in the demands for the salvation and betterment of the world through humans, is "ready to de facto dissolve the by necessity antagonistically structured space of the genuinely political that is a *vis-à-vis* to the church" (ibid.). Ideally, a biblically and theologically responsible deliberation of speaking about God from a Reformation perspective becomes an essential contribution to a theology and ethics of the political.

Speech about omnipotence as an essential quality of God appears to have been gained by way of the *via eminentiae*. According to the *via eminentiae*, the experience of human and inner-worldly power is imagined as elevated infinitely. The *via eminentiae*, however, cannot be entered into without the Christologically determined *via negationis*—which, from a Reformation perspective, means a theology of the cross. The omnipotence of God at the epitome of his being, his love and goodness, his knowledge, and his power, are "precisely not only [predicated] on something more within a given schema of comparison, but the blowing up of every comparability between all temporal beings and the God not subjected to temporality" (Askani 2018, p. 2f., trans.). "God is not 'power in itself' [ . . . ], we cannot understand from the standpoint of a supreme concept of power, who God is" (Barth 1949, p. 46f.).

When speech about the omnipotence of God or the Almighty God who determines all reality is not defined by a theology of the cross, the possibility for prayer also collapses.

The crisis of Christian speech about God is also a crisis of prayer, since all speech of God and about God, if it ought not fail, is rooted and culminates in speech to God.

Prayer means “turning towards God” (Barth 1951, p. 95). Prayer is the place of praise as well as of lamentation. Especially the prayer of supplication is to be explored, which, in the Christian tradition, has its origin in and is to be measured against the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is to be understood as the sum of the proclamation of Jesus as well as the sum of Christian speech about God and thus to be unfolded as such. Tertullian already described the Lord’s Prayer as “*breviarium totius Evangelii*” (cf. Körtner 2018, p. 144).

The right way to pray the Lord’s Prayer, or any prayer really that is shaped in the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray, is to pray in a way where “one is certain that the prayer is heard” (Barth 1951, p. 117, trans.). With Barth, however, hearing is to be understood as “the reception and acceptance of human prayer in the plan and will of God” (ibid.).

And now we have come full circle: Without the paradoxical certainty of the omnipotence of God and his presence in the form of his absence, which is determined by a theology of the cross, prayer as an essential way of the speech about God becomes inconceivable. Therefore, also the idea—or rather the eschatological certainty—of the *Providentia Dei* is likewise the condition for prayer in the sense of genuine prayer and intercession, which includes praise and lament. Although, on the other hand, prayer is, of course, also the place where speech about God’s election and providence—his plan and his will—first and foremost becomes apparent as an existential way to speak about God.

## 5. A Theology of Waiting

Theology *in* crisis and a theology *for* times of crisis—both have the task of waiting: waiting for God’s new entry into the world, for his coming, and for him to speak to us in a new way by making the language of biblical tradition speak and appeal to us anew. Such a theology for times of crisis is precisely not resigned, but highly expectant.

The waiting for revelation or the return of Christ to the glory of God and a new heaven and a new earth to come are basic motifs throughout the New Testament. We speak of waiting not only in the sense of biding time, but also in the sense of nurturing and caring (maintenance), in the sense of preparing for what may come, and thus also in the sense of vigilances, which Christians are called to do in the New Testament. Paul writes: “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” (Gal 5:5, ESV).

In view of today’s experiences of God’s silence as a specific experience in contemporary Europe, the task of theology consists not only in keeping alive the memory of faith *that God spoke* to people in the past, but also in taking the biblically attested promise at its word that God will come and not remain silent forever. Where this possibility is no longer seriously reckoned with, theology mutates either into pure ethics or into a form of cultural studies.

Theology differs from religious studies or cultural studies in that it does not examine God’s past speaking solely from a historic or literary perspective. Rather, its contemplation is guided by the hope expressed in Psalm 50:3 wherein even God’s silence does not deny his earlier speaking and the promised future life-creating and salvific works decreed therein. Indeed, even God’s silence should and can be understood as an expressive silence permeated by the language of the Gospel. Even in the mode of silence, God remains salutarily turned toward us humans.

What theology and the church can contribute to the renewal of Christian faith in a European context is active waiting. The practical theologian Birgit Weyel (2020) rightly criticizes a “kind of constant cultivation of agitation à la ‘Something has to be done,’ mostly because supposedly only a relatively short amount of time remains where something can still be changed,” but just as rightly warns against “a simple ‘carry on like this’” mentality (trans.). Active waiting is neither one nor the other. In a letter to his godchild on the occasion of the day of his baptism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010) wrote: “It is not for us to predict the day—but the day will come—when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed” (p. 390). In 1518,

Luther wrote that the time when the Reformation would take place as the work of God was known “only to Him who created the time.” (Luther 1883, p. 627)<sup>3</sup>.

A waiting church in Bonhoeffer’s (1996) sense “waits by working” (p. 397). A theology that is faced with a situation wherein the Christian faith is no longer a given is a waiting theology that does not feel the need to have an opinion on everything and everyone, but can sometimes only remain silent in a qualified way and does not conceal its lack for words even in matters of faith. It is also a waiting theology in the sense that it guards the heritage of the biblical witness, carried by the hope that it will begin to speak anew. A waiting theology also serves a certain kind of practicing of the Christian faith, which according to Bonhoeffer consists of three things, namely not only in praying and doing the work of justice among people, but also in waiting for God’s time.

## 6. Results

The observations and arguments of this paper can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Pluralization, individualization, and secularization are not contradictory;
- (2) It is wrong to assume that the change in religious attitudes and convictions, which becomes palpable in declining church membership, affects only the ecclesiastical form of Christianity, that is, only a certain social form of Christianity, and not Christianity as such or religion in general;
- (3) A theology for the church of the future, specifically a theology for pastoral ministry, needs an understanding of the church that is at once relevant to practical pastoral ministry and congregational work as well as aware of the processes of change and upheaval. In a European context, a guiding concept here can be the notion of diaspora;
- (4) In contrast to a theology of diaspora that relies on the preservation of one’s own identity in a foreign land by withdrawing from the world, this study pleads for a diaspora theology as a form of public theology that encourages the church as well as individual Christians to engage critically and constructively with society and to be there for people in their present needs and experiences;
- (5) The crisis of the church in a European context is also a crisis of faith in modern Western secular societies. The crisis of faith is essentially a crisis of the language of faith;
- (6) By its very name, the task of theology is to speak of God in a deliberate way. It can only do so in a thoughtful manner, by reflecting on the always-preceding talk of Christian faith about God;
- (7) The theological challenges of the present include the problem of a theology of history with the associated topics of God’s actions and works, his election (*praedestinatio*) and providence (*providentia*), and his preservation and completion of creation (*conservatio mundi, concursus divinus*);
- (8) Theology *in* crisis and a theology *for* times of crisis—both have the task of waiting: waiting for God’s new entry into the world, for his coming, and for him to speak to us in a new way by making the language of biblical tradition speak and appeal to us anew. Such a theology for times of crisis is precisely not resigned, but highly expectant;
- (9) A waiting theology for the future is waiting by working. It is a waiting theology in the sense that it guards the heritage of the biblical witness, carried by the hope that it will begin to speak anew.

We can therefore conclude: A theology that is needed by the church of the future in a European context can learn from the Word-of-God Theology following the impacts of Dialectical Theology at the beginning of the 20th century. However, their concerns must be reinterpreted and reconstructed so that it becomes possible to represent with speech of the Word of God a claim to truth that does not turn into authoritarian assertions but takes into account the contentiousness of religious experience and its inevitable plurality.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Thus Luther on Psalm 90 in his *Lectures on Psalms*: “Abscondita est ecclesia et valde dispersa” (Ennaratio Psalmi XC 1534/35, WA 40/3,505,5). Cf. also (Riess 1983).
- <sup>2</sup> Luther and the Zürich Bible translate the Greek *políteuma* as “home”.
- <sup>3</sup> “Tempus autem huius reformationis novit solus ille, qui condidit tempora”.

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