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Systematic Theology – An experiential approach: Core assumptions of my 'Invitation to Systematic Theology'

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Nürnberger's 'Faith in Christ Today: Invitation to Systematic Theology' is meant to serve the proclamation of the Word of God in modern times. Based on 'experiential realism', as used by science, it restricts itself to immanent reality, avoids the reification of idealised abstractions and biblical metaphors and follows an emergent-evolutionary hermeneutic. God's self-disclosure manifests itself as (1) creative power in the cosmic process as explored by science, (2) benevolent intentionality as proclaimed on the basis of the Christ-event and (3) a motivating and transforming vision in the community of believers. Classical doctrines are reconceptualised in action terms, rather than ontological terms. Christology: The ministry, death and elevation of Jesus of Nazareth as God's messianic representative manifest God's redemptive intentionality. Trinity: The God manifest in Christ is identical with the God of Israel and the Creator of the universe and the divine Spirit transforming and empowering the community of believers. Eschatology: The thrust of God's vision of comprehensive optimal well-being moves through time like a horizon opening up ever new vistas, challenges and opportunities.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The task of Systematic Theology is to offer as comprehensive and consistent a presentation of the Christian faith as possible under current circumstances. This involves the retrieval of the biblical message from its ancient conceptualisations and to repackage it in current world view assumptions. To reach a readership informed by modern science, technology, commerce and the consumer culture, Nürnberger's Systematic Theology applies the approach of experiential realism as practised by the positive sciences: restricting its analyses to immanent reality and avoiding metaphysical constructs. It follows a consistent emergent-evolutionary hermeneutic and works on an interdisciplinary basis, using insights from modern physics, biology, neurology and sociology. God is conceptualised as the transcendent Source and Destiny of experienced reality. The core of the Christian message is God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable, which involves us in its dynamics. It is geared to transformation rather than perfection. It is applied to all aspects of reality, including, for example, entropy, death and natural evil and so on. In this way, the author hopes to help Christians to regain their intellectual integrity and the credibility of their message.

Introduction

I am more than grateful for the unexpected attention given to my Systematic Theology by my colleagues at this seminar and for the opportunity to present my point of view in a nutshell.[1] This article is meant to spell out the rationale of 'experiential realism' in theology and its consequences for important theological topics. At the end of the essay, my methodological assumptions are, once again, summarised.

As I see it, theology is at the cross roads. Do we want to continue with an obsolete symbolic universe or take modern insights on board? At a railway station somewhere in Johannesburg is a switch. Thrown to the right, it will lead a train all the way to Cape Town; if thrown to the left, the train will end up in Durban. What are these switches in theology?

Theology – Explicating a doctrinal system or empowering God's mission?

Systematic Theology is meant to provide as comprehensive, consistent and plausible presentation of the Christian faith as possible under current circumstances. What is the goal of such an exercise?

1.A seminar held on 29 January 2018 at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria featured nine inputs by colleagues on various aspects of my Systematic Theology (Nürnberger 2016a and 2016b) and my responses.

A synthesis of biblical traditions? Explicating doctrinal orthodoxy?[2] Apologetics? Rational coherence? Contemplation? I take it that the task of theology is to facilitate and empower the *proclamation and enactment* of the 'Word of God' in changing situations and contexts. It has a *missionary*, redemptive and transformative agenda.

The biblical tradition – Timeless truths or divine responses to human needs?

The content of the 'Word of God' is derived from the biblical tradition. Does the Bible provide us with a system of timeless truths that are valid for all people at all times and in all situations? Or is the Word of God the living address of the living God to a living community of believers that, again and again, responds creatively and redemptively to changing human needs, predicaments and depravities?

My research led me to the second alternative (Nürnberger 2002). All concrete formulations of the Word of God, whether biblical or contemporary, are *contextualisations*. Theology must retrieve the intended meaning of a text from its ancient packaging and recast it in a contemporary idiom. We have to 'become a Jew to the Jews and all things to all people' (1 Cor 9:18–23).

The audience – The faithful few or a humanity entangled in modernity?

We live in a pluralistic world with multiple political, social, economic, cultural and religious commitments. Moreover, individuals have their specific identities, life histories, experiences, convictions, problems and expectations. So who precisely are our interlocutors?

The *current form of modernity* has become the dominant sociocultural force in our time.[3] It is characterised by science, technology, commerce and consumerism – all of which are intensely emancipatory, dynamic, pragmatic, secular and narcissistic. Social processes are accelerating, and spiritual certainties are disintegrating.[4]

My target audience is therefore a population informed to lesser or greater degrees by modern scientific insight, empowered by technological gadgets, motivated by self-interest and increasingly disinterested in the spiritual dimensions of life. Conventional religious convictions and inhibitions are progressively marginalised and ignored in favour of the pursuit of power, wealth, stimulation and enjoyment.

This is serious! The current direction is likely to end up in a creeping and eventually devastating global economic and ecological catastrophe. If theology has a redemptive agenda, this should become priority number one. An autonomous human being is prone to self-absolutisation with its concomitant tendency to subdue, enslave and plunder the world while, at the same time, falling victim to the world, including one's own instincts and desires, social and economic pressures and political authorities.

The method – Explication of a symbolic universe or analysis of faith experiences?

The task defines the tools! My approach of 'experiential realism' is, broadly speaking, the approach of science, technology and commerce in their practical operations.[5] The word 'experiential' indicates that the method confines itself to *immanent* reality, which is the reality that is, in principle, accessible to human observation, imagination, explanation and manipulation. Science, technology and commerce have nothing to say about transcendence and simply ignore it.

Theologians, in contrast, assume that the universe is open towards a transcendent Source and Destiny. However, they too cannot deal with the transcendent *as such*; they can only deal with intuitions, notions or concepts of the transcendent, all of which belong to immanent reality.[6] The task of the theologian is to find as appropriate a *concept* of the transcendent as possible based on its immanent manifestations.

The word 'realism' refers to the assumption that the outside world we experience actually exists and that our sense perceptions, rational faculties and experimental sorties are reliable enough to negotiate our way in this world. While epistemology concentrates on the observing subject and, again and again, ends up in scepticism, science focuses on the observed object and goes on with the job. It is exceptionally successful in doing so.[7]

The world – Closed in upon itself or open towards a transcendent Source and Destiny?

The restriction of science to immanent reality is methodologically indispensable: you cannot investigate something to which you have no access. Naturalism, in contrast, assumes that there is no transcendent reality. Immanent reality is closed in upon itself. Nature is all there is.

2.Peters (2015) is a recent example.

3.This includes the *popular postmodern culture* that is, in my view, a radicalisation of the emancipatory thrust of modernity, rather than a complete break with the latter (Nürnberger 2016b:339–342). Some of its manifestations display the corrosive effects of spiritual–cultural entropy (Nürnberger 2016b:67–68). For three interpretations of postmodernism (radicalisation, complete break, return to premodern assumptions), see Lakeland (1997:8–36).

4.For my analysis, see 2016b, Chapter 20.

5.Related concepts are 'critical realism' (Peacocke 2007:5–11) and 'model-dependent realism' (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010:75–10), though without the naturalistic-atheist association.

6.Revelation, if it happens at all, is *mediated* through immanent processes. If it were not, it would not reach us. 'The revelation of God through the Holy Spirit is real and possible as a determination of human existence. If we denied that, how could we understand it as revelation?' (Barth 1960:305, my translation).

7.This does not mean that experiential realism is epistemologically naïve. It accepts that all human insight is metaphorical, provisional, partial, perspectival, model-dependent and interest-related. But that fact motivates science to relentlessly try and find as close an approximation to 'objective' reality as possible within specific models or parameters. Science also ventures into the unknown with theories based on established facts and then strives to find empirical substantiations of these theories.

This is a metaphysical postulate, rather than an experiential certainty or a scientific finding (Nürnberger 2011:ch. 8–9).

Most humans intuit that immanent reality is *open to a transcendent Source and Destiny* of some kind or other. This intuition is based on the experiences of (1) being *derived*, dependent, vulnerable, mortal and largely ignorant, (2) being purpose-driven, *accountable* and culpable and (3) being embedded in what *ought not* to have become, which calls for a vision of what *ought* to become: authentic human reality operating in an authentic life world.

These experiences inspire *awe, fear and fascination* and trigger the quest for a wholesome relation to what is intuited as the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality.[8] In its most mature form, the latter denotes an embrace of all of time, all of space, all of energy, all of regularity and embedded contingency as we experience them and as science explores them. In theological terms, it is the ultimate source of meaning, validity, acceptance and authority.

Divine self-disclosure – Supernatural revelation or experiential manifestation?

Does God's revelation hit into our consciousness 'vertically from above', or is it mediated through immanent means and events? With the theological tradition, I assume that God's self-disclosure is mediated:

- God's *creative power* manifests itself in the reality that *we experience and that the sciences explore* ('continuous creation'). From an experiential point of view, it is identical with the emergent-evolutionary dynamic of the cosmic process.
- God's *benevolent intentionality* manifests itself in the impact of the message of God's unconditionally redemptive love on our consciousness. It was proclaimed and enacted by Jesus of Nazareth in contrast to the Deuteronomic demand for moral righteousness and the priestly demand for ritual purity.
- God's creative and benevolent *presence* manifests itself in the *life processes* of the community of believers. All three of these manifestations 'reveal' the nature of God *for us*, rather than the transcendent God *as such,* who is beyond our knowledge, observation and imagination.

The concept of God – Conceptual realism or experiential realism?

Medieval theology was based on *conceptual realism*. The approach of science, technology and commerce is based on *experiential realism*, its direct opposite.[9] Conceptual realism lingers on in contemporary theology. To regain its plausibility, integrity and credibility in our times, theology must follow the experiential approach – boldly and consistently. This has direct methodological repercussions:

a) I avoid *ontology* ('being') in favour of *events and actions* ('occurrence'). Ontological statements are abstractions from the flow of reality. They cannot be avoided as linguistic tools, but they should not be reified and used to construct metaphysical or theological edifices.[10]
b) I avoid the *reification of idealised abstractions*. The Platonic approach considers the world of appearances to be the inauthentic manifestation of an idealised universe of ideas.[11] To reach authentic truth you must move from time to eternity, from space to universality, from energy imbalances to harmony, from imperfection to perfection, from existence to essence, from 'things' to concepts.

In Platonic thought, God is conceived as the 'most perfect essence', the epitome of the good, the true and the beautiful.[12] In theology, the so-called 'attributes of God' are derived from this assumption: unconstrained power (omnipotence), unlimited insight (omniscience), unfettered agency (*actus purus*), uncontaminated motivation (holiness), unlimited existence (infinity), timelessness (eternity), uninterrupted constancy (immutability).

These 'divine attributes' are idealised abstractions from the world of experience meant to describe divine perfection.[13] However, divine perfection is an experientially and biblically unsupported postulate![14] The world we know and the assumed manifestations of divine intentionality and agency within this world are anything but perfect.

c) I avoid the *reification of biblical metaphors* such as father, son and spirit. Metaphors are *vehicles* of meaning, rather than ontological entities out there. Our task is to discern what they are meant to refer to. As we shall see, the reification of biblical metaphors has profound repercussions for Christology, the Trinity and eschatology.

8.Compare Rudolf Otto's celebrated analysis of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1923:5–65).

9.Medieval theology moved from Platonism (Augustine) via Aristotelianism (Thomas) to Nominalism (William of Occam), which was a precursor of empiricism. In Platonism, concepts (*universalia*) were deemed realities 'before things' (*universalia sunt realia ante rem*); in Aristotelianism, they were deemed realities in things (*universalia sunt realia in re*); in Nominalism, they were deemed mere names (*universalia sunt nomina post rem*). Much of theology lingered in the earlier stages of this development.

10.Consistent experiential realism will also apply this principle to science. Mathematics is built on abstractions. If reified, they morph into Platonic 'realities' that can lead to bizarre implications. The spatialisation of time as a 'time line' in a geometrical model, for instance, implies the reversibility of time, the timeless simultaneity of all events and the construction of a 'block universe' (Greene 2003:51–58, 128–142, 448–455). See the discussion by Isham and Polkinghorne (1996:139–147).

11.In Aristotelianism, the world of (idealised) *ideas* morphs into a world of (idealised) *forms* within the world of appearances that strain towards perfection.

12.'Protestant Orthodoxy' of the 17th century defined God in Hellenistic terms as 'infinite spiritual essence' or 'most perfect essence' (Schmid 1961:112, 117). Note the words: 'infinite' (not fleeting, mutable, mortal), 'spiritual' (not part of material reality), 'essence' (not existence), and 'perfection' (not part of an evolving historical reality).

13.Protestant Orthodoxy arrived at these characteristics of God by attributing all 'perfections' found in experienced reality (righteousness, beauty, life, constancy and so on) to God, and excluding all 'imperfections' (Schmid 1961:117–119).

14.The concept of perfection found in the biblical documents refers (mainly) to God's trustworthiness, righteousness and justice (formulated as divine law, summarised as divine love) in the ongoing flow of history, rather than to a divine ontology. Believers should emulate divine righteousness. Apocalyptic casts its expectations deliberately into improbable symbols to highlight God's benevolence and recreative power: no sun, no sea, no death, no tears, no evil, no temple and no closed gates (Revelation 21).

d) I avoid the imposition of a *Hegelian dialectic* on the theological tradition, in favour of *experiential and empirical analysis*. Hegelian thought is an influential modification of Platonic idealism that continues to determine much of theology.[15]

So far the methodological approach I follow in my theology. Now for an indication of how this approach translates into my interpretation of classical theological topics!

God's creation – Revealed by ancient texts or by scientific research?

The roots of the Christian tradition lie in a pre-scientific age. Science can update, enrich and empower theology in its quest for the most appropriate intuition, notion or concept of God's creative power under current circumstances.[16] Scientific theories are in constant flux, thus partial and provisional, but they offer the best observations and explanations currently available.

Theology has neither the competence nor the mandate to compete with or supplement science at its own level.[17] Science, in turn, has nothing to say about ultimate meaning, acceptability, authority and vision, which belong to the mandate of theology. My theology integrates three of the most basic and plausible scientific theories of today:[18]

- The theory of *cosmic evolution*, which covers all of reality, including physical, biological, spiritual and social phenomena. This implies a consistent and inclusive evolutionary hermeneutic.
- The theory of *emergence*: Evolution proceeds in levels of complexity in which, at each level, a network of lower level components forms a higher level with new characteristics and regularities.[19]
- The law of *entropy***:** The energy needed for evolutionary processes is provided through the dissolution of energy conglomerations elsewhere in the system. There is no construction without dissolution, no life without death and no freedom without constraints.[20]

15.Karl Barth's methodological approach, for instance, posits a divine subject (thesis), a human subject (antithesis) and a human subject embraced and authenticated by the divine subject (synthesis). This is most clearly spelt out in paragraph 17 of his Church Dogmatics (Barth 1960:304–397). Pannenberg projects the dialectic onto a quasi-historical timeline: the eschatological future, the historical present and the Christological anticipation of the eschatological future in the present.

16.For detail, see Nürnberger (2013).

17.The concept of 'intelligent design' could be a meaningful anthropomorphic metaphor for the awe-inspiring beauty, complexity and efficiency of the cosmic process, if it were not an apologetic construct developed to counter the challenges posed by science to the biblical worldviews, thus a failure to 'become a scientist to the scientists'.

18.For the following, see Nürnberger (2016b:85–101).

19.The hierarchy of emergences includes *the whole of* immanent reality: energy fields, particles, atoms, molecules, physical structures, chemical processes, organisms, brains, synaptic networks, spiritual phenomena and social structures and processes. For an analysis, see Clayton (20066:1–37).

20.In this work, I deliberately do not venture into the realm of subatomic physics, which has spawned much theological speculation. The operative theological discourse did not originate, and does not operate, at the subatomic level, which was unknown by ancient believers and is still inaccessible to the vast majority of contemporaries.

Omnipotence – Unconstrained power or creative dynamic?

Omnipotence, as commonly understood, suggests a completely open future: the absence of preconditions, causal sequences, laws of nature or 'materials' to be formed, thus total freedom and unconstrained power (*actus purus, creatio ex nihilo*). I consider this to be wishful thinking, not only in scientific, but also in theological terms. God's power can be conceptualised in at least three ways:

- The *biblical* discourse has a *pastoral* and *ethical* agenda. In dire situations, believers are reassured that their limits are not the limits of God. Conversely, believers are warned that God can respond to their unfaithfulness in unexpected and unpleasant ways.
- The *Hellenistic* concept of omnipotence has a *metaphysical* agenda. God is conceptualised as the 'most perfect essence'. Perfection implies unfettered and unlimited power. That is an unsupported postulate, which ventures into the realm of the transcendent.[21]
- An *experiential* concept of omnipotence picks up insights from science. If God is the transcendent Source and Destiny of immanent reality, all energy that constitutes this reality, *including* the regularities according to which it operates, is a manifestation of the creative power of God.[22]

God's creative power, guided by God's benevolent intentionality, leads to a dynamic thrust in which God's vision of comprehensive optimal well-being harnesses the destructive power of entropy for evolutionary construction, unleashes the potentials of life, lunges against all deficiencies in well-being in all dimensions of reality and involves us in its dynamics.

This thrust is in line with the physical tendency of potentials to be realised, with the biological urge of all living things to survive and prosper, and with the human quest for self-realisation, meaning, acceptability and authority. In short, it is in line with the evolutionary-emergentist approach of science.

The Christ-event – Conditional or unconditional acceptance?

Faith in God's benevolence evolved and differentiated over a millennium of biblical history. It culminated in Jesus' proclamation and enactment of the God of Israel as a God of redeeming love, as opposed to the (Deuteronomic) understanding of God as a God of retributive justice and the (priestly) understanding of God as a God of ritual purity.

It is the clash between these two faith assumptions that constitutes the 'Christ-event', the foundational narrative of the Christian

21.In Platonism, idealised abstractions are reified and absolutised *to express authentic reality*, thus constituting an ethical vision. However, inferences are drawn from intrinsically untestable assumptions to construct metaphysical edifices that do not need to touch ground in experienced reality.

22.In the 'primeval history' of the Genesis account, God's creative activity secures a potentially unstable world through dependable foundations, structures and processes that keep chaos at bay. Expressed in modern terms, the laws of nature are God's laws; they are valid; they are indispensable; they are an expression of God's benevolent intentionality!

faith. It led to the rejection, condemnation and execution of Jesus on the cross as an imposter, heretic and insurgent by the Jewish and Roman authorities, followed by God's vindication of the stance and the claim of Jesus through his elevation to the status of God's universal messianic representative. The death of Jesus on the cross is history, his elevation to the status of God's messianic representative is proclaimed as 'good news', accepted in faith and translated into commitment.

The meaning of the cross – Human or divine sacrifice?

To regain legitimacy and continuity with its Jewish precursor, the redemptive meaning of the cross of Christ was expressed in terms of the Jewish sacrificial and messianic traditions. However, the logical and historical incompatibilities of this contextualisation have troubled both theologians and laity ever since. Can a merciful God not forgive repentant sinners without a bloody sacrifice, as already happened in Old Testament times? Did the Jesus of history really sacrifice himself to atone for sins, or was he the victim of his enemies?

In fact, the most prominent theologies of the New Testament turned the original meaning of sacrifice on its head: The death of Christ on the cross was not a *human* sacrifice offered to satisfy an irate Deity, but a *divine* sacrifice offered to a wayward humanity. In his messianic representative, God exposed 'godself' to human incomprehension, arrogance and depravation, not to condone, but to overcome them from within God's fellowship. The cross is the prime manifestation of God's suffering and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable.

The 'resurrection' of Christ – Bodily disappearance or spiritual presence?

God's confirmation and elevation of the crucified Christ, as well as the universal accessibility of his new life to all who believe, is constitutive for the Christian faith (1 Cor 15:13–19). This event was conceptualised in apocalyptic terms as the 'resurrection' of Christ into the eschatological 'age to come', and in messianic terms as the 'elevation' of Christ to the status of God's universal messianic representative.[23]

Written down decades after the event, the traditions concerning the resurrection of Christ had differentiated to such an extent that they do not allow a convincing reconstruction of what precisely happened.[24] Nor does that matter. What does matter is that, after an initial paralysis, the disciples were reassured that Christ lived and empowered to continue with his redemptive work in the world. By implication, God had confirmed the validity of Jesus' proclamation and enactment of the God of Israel as a God of unconditional redeeming love.

That the elevation of Christ implies the universal accessibility of an authentic existence 'in Christ' merits special emphasis. While Jesus of Nazareth was subject to the normal human constraints of space, time, energy, culture and religious tradition, participation in the new life of Christ in fellowship with God is now proclaimed universally valid and accessible for all of humanity. This proclamation is firmly rooted in the message of God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable as proclaimed and enacted by Jesus of Nazareth.

From an experiential-realist perspective, therefore, the point is emphatically not that Jesus Christ departed and now lives 'somewhere' in a transcendent and inaccessible realm ('heaven above') only to reappear on the earth in the distant future. Even the apocalyptic future envisaged by the first Christians was deemed to be 'at hand', expected to break into the present at any moment (*Naherwartung*).

As far as science can tell, there is no such distant and alternative realm or time that could be relevant for us here and now on planet earth. But this view is problematic also for theological reasons. It would be counterproductive in terms of the creative and redemptive agenda of the Christian faith, if 'resurrection' and 'ascension' implied the disappearance and absence of Christ at a time when his followers needed his presence most, rather than the presence of Christ for us here and now.[25]

The Church – Institutional home or collective acceptance of the unacceptable?

In my ecclesiology, I elaborate the Protestant tradition.[26] The church is the community of believers constituted, sustained, liberated, transformed, empowered and sent out into the world by the Word of God acting in the power of the divine Spirit. My emphasis lies on the critical *content* of the Word of God, namely the gospel of God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into God's fellowship. This has critically important consequences.

Firstly, the gospel develops a missionary dynamic (Nürnberger 2016a:196–210, 217). Its redemptive and transformative thrust reaches into all kinds of human

23.This does not imply a resuscitation of the corpse of Jesus! Paul explicitly rejects such an idea and speaks of a 'spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). 'Spirit' must be understood in terms of Paul's dialectic between flesh (the human being apart from God) and Spirit (the human being empowered by God). Typical Pauline statements: We no longer know Christ according to the flesh; the risen Christ is a (spiritual) 'new creation'; the Lord is the Spirit; who does not have the spirit of Christ, does not belong to him; we are 'members' of his body; we have the Spirit of Christ; we are 'in Christ' which is identical with being 'in Spirit', etc.

24.Was there one woman, two women, three women or no women at the grave? Which women? Did they rush to tell the disciples, or were they too afraid to speak? Were any disciples at the grave or not? Did it all happen in Jerusalem or in Galilee? Could they touch him or not? Could they recognise him immediately or not? Did he give the Spirit in that locked room, or on that mountain, or from heaven after 40 days? It is obvious that, as usual in such extraordinary experiences, legendary overgrowth obscured the historical facts.

25.Paul and John are entirely clear in this respect: Christ is present and active as the Spirit of Christ that permeates, liberates, transforms, empowers and motivates the 'Body of Christ' and its members to continue with his redemptive and transformative mission in the world. That is where the concept of the Holy Spirit must be located. To use Paul's formulations, it is a 'new creation', a new way of being human 'in Christ' or 'in the Spirit', or as 'members of the Body of Christ'. The concept of 'resurrection' in Ephesians 2 corresponds with the concept of 'rebirth' in John 1:13 and 3:3–5.

26.The Augsburg Confession, paragraph 7 (Tappert 1959:32–33).

communities in all kinds of situations, with all kinds of cultural backgrounds and all kinds of convictions. It leads to all kinds of contextualisations and, as a result, to all kinds of syncretism and corruption.

Secondly, the same message of God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable generates an ecumenical dynamic, leading to the gathering of these diverse communities into the one fellowship of God. God's suffering acceptance leads to reciprocal acceptance of the divinely accepted which implies that the Christian community is an open community that willingly suffers such differences.

Thirdly, under the canopy of God's acceptance of the unacceptable, the different assumptions and traditions of the members get into confrontation with each other, challenging, transforming, purifying or complementing each other. Conflicts between members (or potential members) are not only endured, but forcefully addressed under the canopy of mutual acceptance if they seriously disturb the relationships.

In sum, the unity of the church must be based on God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable, rather than doctrinal consensus or institutional uniformity. The unity of the church must be taken as the *point of departure*, therefore, rather than as the goal of ecumenical endeavours (Nürnberger 2003, 2016a:267–274). Based on suffering acceptance of the unacceptable, such a unity will allow for healthy differentiations.

Fifthly, God's acceptance implies the horizontalisation of vertical relationships, thus equality of dignity, equality of opportunity, responsibility for each other and concern for others.[27] This has direct implications for the status and functions of the ordained ministry. Ministers are servants, rather than masters entitled to lord it over the community of believers (2 Corinthians 1:24). These consequences of the gospel have repercussions not only in ecclesial, but also in socio-economic and political terms.

The Trinity – Ontological speculation or coping with contradictory experiences?

In my opinion, the classical Christological and Trinitarian doctrines are the best contextualisation that could have been reached given a Hellenistic (= ontological) frame of reference. Contextualisations are indispensable and, as such, justified. However, the Hellenistic frame of reference imposed fatal constraints and distortions on the original. This is important enough to merit some detailed discussion:

a) The underlying soteriology is *Platonic*. It is all about the 'vertical' contrast between divinity and humanity, rather than the 'horizontal' contrast between the current world and the world to come, the authentic and the inauthentic human being or the wrath and the grace of God. The story of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities leading to his condemnation and execution plays no intrinsic role in the argument. The redemptive rationale of this story – God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable – does not constitute the basis of the Christian faith, as it does in the New Testament and in Protestant theology.
b) The notion of the '*incarnation*' was the pivotal entry point for this Hellenistic contextualisation. It was based primarily on an ontological understanding of the concept of the *Logos* in John 1 at the expense of the action-related traditions found in the New Testament: Paul's flesh-Spirit and law-grace dialectics, the Synoptic discipleship model, the motif of divine love in John, and the priesthood-sacrifice metaphor in Hebrews.
c) Moreover, the motif of the 'incarnation' in John 1 was *misinterpreted*. In this text, it is not *God* who became flesh, nor a *pre-existent Christ*, but the *Logos*. When using this concept, John's Prologue harks back to God's creative decree (Gen 1), or God's unfathomable wisdom (Pr 3:19–20; 8:22–31; Sir 1:9ff; Wis 7:22ff; taken up in Eph 1:8, 3:9f; Col 2:3), or the divine rationality underlying the universe according to the Stoa. It was never meant to refer to a distinct person within the Godhead.

Neither in the Jewish, nor in the Hellenistic tradition is the *Logos* perceived to be a person in its own right! It is God's own creative decree, wisdom or rationality. The point in John 1 is that, in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the creative thrust underlying the universe (the *Logos*) manifested itself as divine 'grace and truth' (later in the gospel as the 'love' of God), rather than the Mosaic law or an abstract rationality (John 1:17).

d) When the Jewish royal metaphor of the (human) 'Son of God' was identified with the Hellenistic metaphor of the (divine) *Logos*, it migrated from the human to the divine level, thus producing two distinct divine 'persons' within God, rather than expressing God's creative power and benevolent intentionality in the person of God's messianic representative.[28] This paradoxical mental construct was then given out as a divine mystery that must be believed, rather than understood.

   The artificiality of this construct can easily be demonstrated: If the metaphor of the 'son' is replaced with the metaphor of the '*logos*', and the *logos* is again understood as divine decree (Gn 1), divine wisdom (Sirach) or divine rationality (Stoa), the entire argument collapses. Now it would have to be the speaker of the word and the spoken word, or the divine person and the divine rationality that were two persons!

This outcome shows that the classical doctrine is based on *conceptual* realism rather than *experiential* realism. The personal

27.This includes gender equity and the avoidance of sexist language. My option to put male pronouns used for God in inverted commas ('he', 'his', 'him', 'himself') was motivated by linguistic considerations. The English language has no gender-neutral personal pronoun. The use of the noun (God) for the pronoun leads to awkward linguistic constructs (e.g. 'Godself'). More importantly, it does not really solve the problem because the word 'God' has inherent male connotations, the female variant being 'goddess'. My usage may not be ideal, but it does present the readers with a constant and irritating reminder of the problematic nature of a male concept of God.

28.It is important to recognise that the 'Son of God' is a Jewish metaphor used for the king (Psalm 2), then for the messianic representative of God, along with other such metaphors, such as Son of Man, Son of David, the Annointed (Mashiach, Christos), Kurios etc.

metaphors of father and son, which indicate the relation between the divine and the human agent in the ministry of Jesus (later also the presence of God in the Spirit), became reified as agents *within* the one God whose relationships had to be defined.

e) In line with the Hellenistic concept of God as the most perfect being, the relations between these 'divine persons' had to be '*eternalised*': the father 'eternally' generates the son (*generatio*); father and son 'eternally' exhale the spirit (*spiratio*). Can actions be timeless? Moreover, the verbs used suggest actions originating in the Father and moving to the Son, and on to the Spirit. However, because no ontological status differences could be allowed between them, the three persons were presumed to be 'eternally' moving about 'within' each other (*perichoresis*). Which is a set of square circles!
f) The internal relations of the divine persons to each other (*opera ad intra*) now take the place of God's creative, redemptive and transformative actions in the world (*opera ad extra*). The latter are taken to be indistinguishable (*opera ad extra indivisa sunt*). This idea turns the biblical original on its head. What matters in the biblical original is precisely God's 'works' in relation to us: the creative action, redeeming love and redemptive presence of God for us here on earth. Moreover, because we have no business in the internal workings of God, a differentiation between persons within God is irrelevant for us.

Trying to express divine actions, as found in the Bible, in timeless ontological categories, the classical rendering of the Trinitarian doctrine not only ventured into the transcendent, but also produced an incomprehensible logic, given out as divine mystery. Blind faith in the truth of these formulations was then taken to be the preconditions of eternal salvation – turning God's unconditional acceptance into conditional acceptance.[29]

In recent times a great amount of spiritual and intellectual energy was invested by prominent theologians to 'revitalise' Trinitarian thought. I confess that I have not been able to generate the enthusiasm needed to appreciate the creativity and fecundity of these efforts. Time and again I sensed that the validity of the classical formulations was taken as a self-evident point of departure and that the basic problems mentioned above had not been resolved.[30]

29.This is most blatantly the case in the so-called Athanasian Creed (Tappert 1959:19–21).

30.Karl Barth, to begin with, avoids the concept of 'three persons' in favour of three 'modes of being'. As in all Platonic approaches, the 'infinite ontological difference' between (the concepts of) Creator and creature (Barth calls it the 'Lordship' of God) is the point of departure. The relationship between these modes of being is determined by differences in their 'origination' – which is, for Barth, again, located in the *concepts* of fatherhood, sonship and their relationship with each other. As Barth concedes, this is a conceptual rather than an existential or experiential derivation (Barth 1955:373–388). Rahner's identification of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity must be applauded (Peters 2015:256), but it raises the question why the former cannot be scrapped. It is either an abstraction from what happens on the earth (which should not be reified), or it expresses the eschatological goal of the latter; thus, the discrepancy between what has become and what ought to become (as in Moltmann's proposal according to Peters 2015:218–219). Another common argument is that God is not monadic, but relational within Godself. How can we know that? The Bible deals with God's relation to creation and humanity, including interhuman relationships, not with a relationship within God. If we assume such relationships within God, this may very well be a Feuerbachian projection from the human sphere into an idealised divine sphere – with the additional problem of being based solely on the reified metaphors of father, son and spirit.

In my view, then, the classical conceptualisation of the Trinitarian doctrine is no longer functional – if it ever has been! Moreover, its 'mysterious' character spawned endless metaphysical speculations, prompted dialectical plays on concepts, mystified countless believers, antagonised both Jews and Muslims and rendered the Christian faith irrational for secular thinkers.

More consequential is the fact that the ontological frame of reference arrested the missionary dynamic of the biblical tradition, preventing new and more appropriate contextualisations. To restore our integrity and the credibility of our message, we must go back to the biblical original and come up with a contextualisation that is appropriate for our times.

My own suggestion is straightforward: The God who manifested God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ is proclaimed to be the very God who is the Source and Destiny of experienced reality, as well as the very God whose creative and redeeming presence makes itself felt as the divine Spirit that authorised, motivated and empowered Jesus and that now operates in the Body of Christ, the community of believers.

Expressed in the classical order, Christians believe in a God (1) whose *creative power* is manifest in reality as a whole, (2) whose unconditionally *benevolent intentionality* was manifest in Jesus of Nazareth and (3) whose creative and redemptive Spirit is *present and active* in the community of believers. There are no mysteries or irrationalities in this reconceptualisation!

Theodicy: Insoluble riddle or a determined faith?

Thus formulated, the Trinitarian faith expresses an inescapable impasse, namely the apparent clash between the experience of a highly ambiguous existential, social and cosmic reality attributed to God's creative power, on the one hand, and the proclamation of the unconditionally benevolent intentionality of the same God as manifest in Christ, on the other hand. That the Trinity in fact addresses the problem of *theodicy* is hardly ever recognised.

It is not a metaphysical construct, but an expression of the affliction that has been inherent in the biblical faith from its very inception. In Deuteronomy, fateful developments were attributed to the sins of the Israelite covenant partner of Yahweh. This solution proved to be untenable because there was no neat causal link between sin and fate, righteousness and prosperity. The Book of Job provides a vivid picture of the agony felt in late post-exilic Judaism.

Theodicy becomes even more pressing when God is no longer perceived to be an incorruptible Judge, but a God with unconditionally redemptive intentions. If God has both the intention and the power to redeem, why did God not eradicate all moral and natural evil with one almighty

decree – and that a very long time ago? Eschatology seemed to offer a way out but, as we shall see below, it proved to be no less problematic.

Faith in the Trinitarian God is the determined, stubborn, rebellious commitment to the validity of the proclamation of God's benevolence *in the face of* the experience of a less than ideal world attributed to God's creative activity. It is a 'struggle of God against God' in the consciousness and the active commitment of the believer. It is geared to the dynamic process of transformation rather than the illusive concept of perfection. It is this rebellious assurance that accounts for the transformative thrust of the Christian faith![31]

Christology – Ontological paradox or mediation of divine benevolence?

The classical formulations of the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines are dysfunctional for the same reasons. That Jesus was a human being was, in the Jewish and Jewish-Christian context, never questioned by any of the parties. It was taken for granted that the transcendent God works through immanent reality, in this case God's messianic representative.[32]

The question was, rather, whether Jesus was the *authentic* human being, that is, the authorised messianic representative of God, whose proclamation and enactment of the God of Israel as a God of unconditionally redemptive love was valid, or a heretic undermining of the law of God with spurious claims to divine authority as his opponents argued. That is the essence of the Christian narrative.

When the gospel message entered the Hellenistic world, it was translated from action terms into ontological terms. Moreover, Platonic assumptions defined the (perfect) divine and the (imperfect) human being as ontological opposites. How then could they relate to each other in the Christ-event? After heavy and often violent conflicts, the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) formulated the classical Christological doctrine as follows: In the one person of Christ, a divine and a human nature subsist, each in its full integrity, not to be confused with each other, nor separated from each other.[33]

This contextualisation produced an insoluble logical impasse. When Jesus prayed, did God pray to God? Or did the human nature pray to the divine nature within Jesus, or to a divine Father above Jesus? To whom must we direct our prayer: to the Father, or to the divine nature in Christ, or the human nature in Christ? Endless attempts were made to sort out this contradiction, but without success.[34]

To solve the riddle, we must go back to the narrative of the conflict that led to the death of Christ on the cross. Here, the Christ-event was either rejected or accepted as the dynamic historical manifestation of God's creative and redemptive intentionality in the life, ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

In sum, Christians maintain that, in the Christ-event, the *true God* (the God of unconditional redeeming love) manifested God's benevolent intentionality through the words and actions of the *true human being* (the human being who became the channel of God's unconditional redeeming love), and continues to do so in the *Spirit*, liberating, transforming and empowering the community of believers to continue with the mission of Christ in the world.

Eschatology: Perfection or transformation?

Eschatology emerged as a response to the problem of *theodicy* as described above: current experience is highly ambivalent, registering in various intensities what ought *not* to be, and calling for the realisation of what *ought* to be, that is, an authentic humanity within an authentic life world. The gospel proclaims God's unconditionally benevolent intentionality, which motivates believers to transform what ought not to be in the direction of what ought to be. At the same time, it generates the hope that what *ought* to be *can* be and *will* be realised in one form or another through divine action. Redemptive action and undeterred hope are part of the same commitment to reach what ought to be.

Human consciousness in general reaches beyond what has become towards what ought to become, even towards the improbable and the seemingly impossible. This typically human propensity has led to the most dramatic strides in the scientific, technological, medical, social, cultural and political spheres of life. However, depending on how what ought to be is being intuited and conceptualised, it also led to the most catastrophic outcomes: drug addiction, ecstatic imaginations, imperial conquests, deployment of nuclear weapons. What ought to be is a highly contentious, ambivalent and explosive topic that needs urgent and continuous attention!

Apart from goals and purposes, expectations and objectives can seriously overshoot the constraints of the probable and the possible. Potentiated by a literal (fundamentalist) interpretation of radical biblical statements in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature, they can lead to irrationalities with dire consequences. It is imperative therefore that we

31.The concept of faith as a struggle of 'God against God' is prominent in the theology of Martin Luther (Ebeling 1964:259ff; Nürnberger 2005:17-27).

32.As mentioned above, all the titles applied to Jesus were royal titles, morphed into messianic titles: Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, the Anointed (*Mashiach, Christos*), Kurios, Shepherd. In the Ancient Near East (ANE), the king was proclaimed 'Son of God', a motif found in Psalm 2. It is applied to other gods (Ps 82) and Satan as the 'public prosecutor' in God's government (Job 1:6). The image appears in the narratives of the baptism and the glorification of Jesus. In Romans 1:4, it is applied to the risen Christ. The 'Son of Man' of Daniel 7 and the 'Suffering Servant' of Isaiah 53 too were perceived to be humans, rather than divine beings. In the polymorph spiritual atmosphere of the Ancient Near East the underlying concern was often mythologised.

33.Historically speaking, this formulation was a compromise between the Alexandrian and the Antiochian versions of the relation between the divine and the human element. In the Alexandrian version, the divine nature swallowed up the human nature; in the Antiochian version, the human nature retained its full integrity, yet inextricably 'glued' to the divine nature. The formula was also applied to the divine and the human will of Christ (= his intentionality) by the Council of Constantinople (AD 680/1).

34.An example is the ancient notion of a 'sharing of attributes' between the human and the divine (*communicatio idiomatum*) which was employed by Luther. But was Jesus omnipotent or immortal? Was God able to die on the cross?

analyse the intentions of the biblical statements carefully within their various historical contexts.

The biblical original

My studies in biblical hermeneutics revealed (to me at least) that throughout the millennium of biblical history the 'Word of God' functioned as God's redemptive response to changing human world views, needs, predicaments and depravities (Nürnberger 2002). As the story is told, it produced a long, evolving trajectory of future expectations. It began with elementary and immanent needs – the promise of progeny and land to Abraham, the prime ancestor of Israel. As history unfolded, it gained wider horizons and greater depths until it reached the radical and universal visions of apocalyptic literature.

The favoured clan became the tribe, then the chosen nation, then all nations and finally a universe governed by cosmic powers. The patriarch became the tribal elder, then the king of Israel then a pagan emperor, and then the universal ruler. The gift of progeny, pasture and fertility changed into national sovereignty, then international dominance, and then a totally reconstructed cosmos.

As older expectations lost their traction, they were reinterpreted or abandoned. Land and progeny, the return of the diaspora, Israelite world domination, the sanctuary, the priesthood – these once decisive facets of the Israelite–Jewish faith no longer play a role in the New Testament. In apocalyptic, at the very latest, future expectations overshot the runway – and, as mentioned above, deliberately so.

In the New Testament, the original models were turned upon their heads: the king as tyrant (Ps 2) became the messiah as a servant (Mk 10:35–45). Conditional acceptance (Dt 30:15–20) turned into unconditional acceptance (Eph 2:1–10). The exclusion of pagans from the people of God (Dt 7) turned into their inclusion (Eph 2:11–22). Human sacrifice turned to divine sacrifice (Rm 8:3–4; Jn 3:16).

The imminent arrival of the 'Kingdom of God', so fervently expected by the first Christians, never materialised. In time it was relegated to the far end of history and replaced with a powerful feudal hierarchy under the leadership of the Pope, presumed to be the representative of the heavenly King (*vicarius Christi*), on the one hand, and a spiritualised existential relationship with God in Christ, on the other hand.

It is one of the most urgent tasks of the theological enterprise to establish the valid concerns underlying biblical eschatological texts and reconceptualising them in such a way that they lead to a fervent, productive hope, on the one hand, while avoiding irrational overshoots, on the other hand.

My reconceptualisation

Modern scientific insight suggests that while the universe may indeed come to an end in the distant future, it will hardly be replaced by an ideal world without sin, suffering and death that is in continuity with the world we know. The entropic process discussed above makes this expectation illusory. While in powerless and desperate situations apocalyptic eschatology may offer some comfort, it can also draw the spiritual energies of believers away from the tasks in this world to a never-never land. In short, it is a historically important, but now obsolete contextualisation!

I suggest that the underlying concern is best expressed as God's *vision of comprehensive optimal well-being*, which translates into God's *redemptive concern for any deficiency* in well-being in any aspect of life. This vision *moves on like a horizon* as we approach it, opening ever new vistas, challenges and opportunities. Driven by God's redemptive love, it *motivates and activates* the community of believers, rather than leading it into fatalism and despondency. Formulated in this way, it covers the entire trajectory of future expectations in the Bible, rather than restricting itself to a radicalised apocalyptic expression.

It also does not jar with scientific insight. A vision is not a prediction! The world as we know it is not designed to reach perfection. Evolution depends on entropy, construction on deconstruction, life on death, freedom on structures and truth on the abandonment of alternative truth claims. This again implies a *sacrificial understanding* of God's intentionality and agency. Reality as we know it has its costs. God is willing to bear these costs and expects us to join God in doing so.

Resurrection – Judgement or transformation?

Like its cosmic (apocalyptic) counterpart, the assumption of an individual resurrection from the dead to face judgement was a latecomer in biblical history. There was no such expectation in pre-exilic Israel. It emerged in the 2nd century BC as a concern for God's justice, rather than for human longevity or immortality: the sinner would not escape punishment and the righteous would not forfeit their reward.[35]

The attempt to integrate various traditions, notably Parsist dualism (the historical triumph of good over evil) and Platonic dualism (the triumph of spirit over matter), produced a complex and unlikely construct that led to confusion and speculation.[36] More importantly, it struck anxiety, even terror, into the hearts of countless believers: Shall I spend an eternity in the fires of hell? This fear was deliberately fired up by Catholic hierarchies and Protestant Evangelists alike to gain control over the souls and the finances of believers. We have to distance ourselves from such abuses.

35.The first canonical instance of the notion of a judgement after death is found in Daniel 12:1–4, which is usually dated between 168 and 164 BC. Here the promised reward is 'shining like the sun and the stars forever' due to a wisdom that leads others to righteousness. It refers to status and significance rather than continued existence. Correspondingly, the threatened punishment does not consist of an eternity spent in the fires of hell, but of 'lasting shame and contempt'. Both are a reflection of what ought to happen while we are alive.

36.This construct is schematically depicted in Nürnberger (2016b:513–518).

In scientific terms, the law of entropy precludes the perpetual continuation of bodily life. The theory of emergence precludes the existence of a spirit that does not depend on its bodily infrastructure. In theological terms, the idea of the 'fires of hell' is out of step with the 'good news' of God's unconditionally redemptive intentionality as manifest in Christ, even though it occurs in the New Testament. The gospel forgives, reassures and comforts those troubled by their sins and their impending death.

In Paul, death leads to the end of the sinful existence of the 'flesh' and resurrection leads to a new creation in the 'Spirit', both of which are anticipated in our life here and now. In John's gospel, eternal life is *authentic* life lived here and now.[37] Authentic life is, in both cases, a life lived in fellowship with a benevolent God through Christ and in Christ, granted by the Spirit.

The concern for everlasting bliss is also out of step with participation in the sacrificial love of God, as manifest in the cross of Christ. God continuously sacrifices parts of reality to make the emergence and development of other parts possible. And God expects us to participate in God's sacrificial motivation. The seed must fall into the ground to produce abundant fruit!

If that were taken seriously, it would help us to appreciate the gift of life, shed our entitlements, become more modest in our expectations and accept our vulnerability and mortality. This would have dramatic existential, social, economic and ecological consequences.

Eternal life – Longevity or authenticity?

In experiential–realist terms, life has a beginning, a duration and an end. Having emerged from the cosmic process in the form of an individual and intentional consciousness, a lived life remerges into the cosmic process. A network of causes preceded it; a network of consequences follows it.

The decisive question is whether, and in how far, a lived life facilitated God's creative and benevolent intentionality or obstructed its operation. That is what the concept of the 'last judgement' articulates. It is in the hour of death that the graceful forgiveness of God – God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable reaches its experiential climax.

However, once life reaches its end, it is complete. Nothing can be added, subtracted, changed or repaired. Nothing can make it undone. Nothing can remove a lived life from its 'place' in cosmic history. Using an anthropomorphic metaphor, we can say that nothing can remove what has happened from the memory of God.

37.John 3:16–21; 5:24; 11–25.

Conclusion: Unique characteristics of my Systematic Theology

The experiential roots of typical theological themes such as soteriology, Christology, Trinity and eschatology are experiences of *what ought not to be*, and the proclamation of a divine vision of *what ought to become.* This is God's vision of comprehensive optimal well-being, translating into God's concern for any deficiency in well-being in any dimension of life, which in turn mobilises and empowers our intentions and actions, rather than paralysing them with the expectation of an illusory perfection.

My theology follows a *missionary*, rather than a doctrinal, contemplative or philosophical agenda. Today 'becoming all things to all people' (1 Cor 8:18–23) means responding to the scientific, technological, commercial and hedonistic world view of *modernity*, which is the dominant culture in the world today.

Following the approach of 'experiential realism', as practised by the positive sciences, I restrict my observations to *immanent* reality, respecting the fact that the transcendent as such is inaccessible to our observation, explanation and manipulation.

This implies that theology cannot deal with the transcendent God as such, but only with *intuitions*, *notions and concepts* of God, which are part of immanent reality. The question is not therefore whether God exists, but what the qualitative *contents* of our concepts of God are in terms of what is deemed ultimate and fundamentally significant.

For Christians, it is a *particular content* – God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable – that was revealed in the Christ-event and that constitutes the Christian faith. Believers assume that God, the Source and Destiny of all of reality, uses this historically emergent content to disclose God's benevolent intentionality.

The *theory of emergence* says that cosmic evolution led to a hierarchy of levels of complexity. At each level, a network of lower level components constitutes a higher kind of reality with its own characteristics and regularities. The spiritual level of emergence is as real as the subatomic, physical or biological levels. God is the transcendent Source and Destiny of all levels of emergence.

Emergent cosmology leads to a consistent *evolutionary hermeneutic*. The biblical tradition is part of cosmic evolution at the *spiritual* level of emergence. 'Revelation' takes the form of a series of emerging insights and their further contextualisations rather than timeless truths.

It is driven by the 'Word of God' which operated as the *creative and redemptive response* of God to changing human needs, predicaments and depravities throughout the millennium of biblical history and continues to do so.

While God's *creative power* manifests itself at all levels of emergence, God's *benevolent intentionality* manifests itself specifically at the personal (spiritual) level of emergence. However, touched by the proclamation, believers trust that all of God's creative activity is motivated by God's benevolent intentionality, even if that does not seem to be the case.

God became a person for humans because humans are persons. However, as the Source and Destiny of all of reality, including the impersonal levels of emergence, God is much *more than a person*, just as humans are much more than persons. Our experience of God's action is staggered according to the hierarchy of emergences: from the quantum level to the spiritual and the social levels.

This helps us resolve the tricky problem of theodicy: a tsunami is not caused by an intentional divine act, but by the operation of the laws of nature. Being indispensable for reality to exist and function, these laws also reflect the benevolent intentionality of God.

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