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Abstract

Looking for 'the future of Christian ethics' we have to be aware of different paradigms of theological ethics and its different implications for a theologically reflected notion of future. With regard to the Reformation heritage there can be identified a Protestant paradigm of a Christian moral subject, liberated for a universal rational responsibility related to the future of the human condition on the one hand, and—according to a Lutheran grammar—an ethics of Christian practices within a worshipping community, grounded in God's ongoing creational work. The future of Christian ethics, then, consists of the continuity of this Christian witness as it is rooted in God's promises and faithfulness.

Keywords

Christian practices, Lutheran ethics, moral subject, Protestant ethics, Reformation heritage, responsibility, secularity

'The future of ethics within the Reformation heritage' was the proposed theme for the following contribution. The requested task was to describe 'the current state and the future direction of Protestant ethics and the Lutheran tradition in particular'. This task could lead immediately into a reflection about chances, challenges, advantages and so on of ethics according to the Reformation heritage within a certain social-cultural context and related to our time, where ethics is needed in various ways. Talking about theological ethics we have, however, to clarify the characteristics which are constitutive for a certain model, type or paradigm of theological ethics in its very own logic and we have to see how future is theologically determined by this logic. The characteristics of theological ethics are defined by specific models or paradigms of theological ethics which we find as in other Christian traditions within the Reformation heritage, again differentiated in distinct models or even paradigms like the Protestant, the Lutheran and the Reformed.

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Talking about models or paradigms we take into account that in many cases there have been seemingly indissoluble differences about ethical issues, because those differences are bound to different essential characteristics of the particular model, which lead to different ways of ethical judgment. These elements may be deeply rooted in theological presuppositions which are indispensable for a consistent model of ethics.

The identification of different paradigms cannot be done with categories from any of the diverse discourses, for example communitarian versus universal, or teleological versus deontological. It is necessary to discuss critically the theological contours of various models of ethics as they are connected with particular conceptual issues, for example issues about the moral subject. For a consistent description, however, we need a theologically determined point of departure or context of reference which again must be found genuinely rooted within the theological logic of the Reformation heritage if this heritage is really taken in its theological significance for our ethical reflection and practice. The question here, looking for the future of theological ethics, is especially about the theological logic of future for theological ethics in its—perhaps—paradigmatic appearance. Future, then, has to be seen not only as a more or less important issue connected with other conceptual issues, but as a theologically defined element of the ethical paradigm.

The issues given with the Reformation heritage include the question in what sense theological ethics is related to a natural law, the question about the secular or worldly orientation of Christian ethics, the question about an ethical or moral pluralism, the question for an ethical or moral realism, the concept of an ethical or moral subject, the question about an ethics of God's commandments in distinction to the Christian freedom of the law, and of course the concepts of freedom and justice as they are part of the Reformation heritage. All these issues are effectively present, but the debate is often more or less reduced to general alternatives (like 'church oriented or secular') which are not theologically transparent, and—first of all—there is no significant theological point which may be the constructive focus of the conceptual discourse, except, in some respect, the concept of freedom. This is already characteristic for a common Protestant model suggesting that ethics, and especially theological ethics, has to provide a general or public forum for ethical reflection and deliberation. There is moreover a partly disputed Protestant common sense that ethics is essentially characterised by pluralism in ethical judgements, and this is because of the theologically substantiated concept of the moral subject in its individual status. Some ethicists draw a distinction between undisputable common moral foundations and ethical judgements, which will be different, not only because of various situations, but also because of different convictions, perspectives, or positions, but the programmatic concept of pluralism didn't follow this distinction. Nevertheless it does, of course, include fundamental presuppositions which are constitutive for the paradigm as especially the concept of a Christian moral existence in its relation to God.

Protestant ethics has been explicitly located within the Reformation heritage because of its particular concept of freedom.¹ Freedom is seen as given with the exclusive relation

1 Trutz Rendtorff, *Ethik. Grundelemente, Methodologie und Konkretionen einer ethischen Theologie* (3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). See Oswald Bayer's critical comments, in Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

between human beings and God, becoming present by faith. This relation is considered as constitutive for a human subject, empowered within this relation to be responsible² and to be the origin of ethical judgement and knowledge.³ Therefore pluralistic ethical opinions and convictions are regarded as valuable, because this plurality enriches our common ethical orientation. Freedom is significantly understood as 'communicative freedom',⁴ which indicates the demand of an ongoing exchange without necessarily aiming at articulated common judgements.

This position relies primarily on the presupposition that there is no given reality which could be the context of reference, within which or related to which ethical reflection could find its ways of judgement. The only reality is considered the mental disposition of morally or ethically reflecting people, their convictions and ways of communication.⁵ This mental reality is also called 'Geist',⁶ 'spirit', which has (or may have) its own rationality, and which is in a way thought to be transparent for God's Spirit. The Reformation heritage has to be presented in its reasonableness for everybody.⁷ It is valuable in its rational substance and because of its rational substance.⁸ The rational substance can be identified also in supposedly common public thoughts. There is also the attempt to reclaim 'the' public *ratio* and language as a translation of Christian doctrine, for example 'human dignity' or the 'equality of all human beings' as the translation of 'justification by God'. There are new attempts to conceive a 'public theology', that is, a theology for the public, whose theological understanding of the public is still an open question.

This task of translation is not seen to be critical for all elements of the Christian doctrine, but primarily for those which expose our human nature ('human condition' in a specific meaning) as we have to preserve it as a common nature, especially in its moral appearance. From here follows the question about human life and life forms and their future for a publicly articulated and accepted common sense as it is needed not least in many legislative issues. 'The future of human nature',⁹ the preservation of human nature, is within this perspective a genuine theme on the public agenda, because here what human beings must keep in common as the indispensable natural basis for any political coexistence is at stake. Here the question for the future gets a specific meaning and urgency, and ethics finds its public agenda, in distinction to the theological anthropology which is

2 For the German context see Ulrich H. J. Körtner, *Evangelische Sozialethik. Grundlagen und Themenfelder* (2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

3 For a different description see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 25.

4 Wolfgang Huber, *Folgen christlicher Freiheit. Ethik und Theorie der Kirche im Horizont der Barmer theologischen Erklärung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983).

5 See the discussion in Johannes Fischer, Stefan Grotefeld and Peter Schaber, *Moralischer Realismus. Theologische Beiträge zu einer philosophischen Debatte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004).

6 Johannes Fischer, *Leben aus dem Geist. Zur Grundlegung christlicher Ethik* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1994). The EKD-Statement 'Im Geist der Liebe mit dem Leben umgehen' (Hannover: Kirchenamt der EKD, 2002) can be seen as a significant example of that 'Protestant' ethics.

7 A significant example is Wilfried Härle, *Ethik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

8 Johannes Fischer, *Sittlichkeit und Rationalität. Zur Kritik der desengagierten Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010).

9 Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

significant for the Reformation heritage—the anthropology of human, creaturely life as it is hidden in God’s work and activity.¹⁰

Protestant ethics connects with its particular public ‘ethical theology’ the perspective of a Christian culture. Christian culture implies—according to the Protestant model—a particular meaning of secularity, that is, the Christian concept of a genuine religiously constituted pluralistic, rationally conceivable world of living, in distinction to the context of explicit Christian practices and its corresponding worldliness. This Christian culture and the concept of secularity overwrite the promising view of the political coexistence of Christians with non-Christians and lack a theological concept of the specific political coexistence of Christians and non-Christians as we find it in the Lutheran reflection on God’s twofold regiment.

The Protestant paradigm (in distinction to the Lutheran logic) presupposes that there are no theological discernments which may remain in contradiction to characteristics of a culture which by definition transforms and homogenises contradictions into pluralism on the one hand and common rationality (or reasonableness) on the other. Talking about the future of ethics therefore would mean reflecting on the development of social-cultural conditions for this Protestant paradigm and its semantics, and, vice versa, on the impact of this Protestant mind to those conditions. One essential condition is the notion of pluralism as enrichment of our human existence.

Lutheran Ethics in its Relation to God’s Future

We now could be inclined to describe also other types of Christian ethics related to the same programmatically submitted conceptual aspects as it was recently again undertaken for Lutheran ethics.¹¹ Lutheran ethics, however, if we take its very own logic, cannot be described in an equivalent way.¹² Lutheran ethics refers genuinely to particular practices of a Christian life—practices of prayer, reading and interpreting the word of God, and fulfilling good works. Lutheran ethics refers to this lively reality given in God’s work and communicated by God’s word, focused on the life-form of the *Christenmensch* who coexists and cooperates with God. In this sense the context of Lutheran ethics is a church which consists of these practices. Lutheran ethics has to be described as a tradition in a theologically determined meaning of tradition.¹³ Its grammar doesn’t follow a *ratio* (logos) according to an abstract relation between God and man, but it reflects a particular dramatic coexistence and cooperation of God and human beings as it appears in those practices.

10 Gerhard Sauter, *Das verborgene Leben. Eine theologische Anthropologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011).

11 Svend Andersen, *Macht aus Liebe. Zur Rekonstruktion einer lutherischen politischen Ethik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010); Eilert Herms, *Gesellschaft gestalten. Beiträge zur Sozialethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

12 See instead Bayer, *Freedom in Response*; Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (eds.), *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998); Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Bernd Wannenwetsch, ‘Luther’s Moral Theology’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 120–35.

13 See e.g. the description by Oswald Bayer, ‘The Ethics of Gift’, *Lutheran Quarterly* 24 (2010), pp. 447–68.

Ethics therefore is essentially about the future of this coexistence, i.e. future of God's faithfulness in His ongoing work and regiment, according to His promising word and its fulfilment by our living in Christ.¹⁴ Christian practices respond to God's word and gift.¹⁵ The future of Lutheran ethics, then, consists of the continuity of this responsive worship. To practise this worship in the world is the mission of Christians. 'Worldliness' means to be present as missionaries in the world, which has to be proven by this witness itself to be God's very own world.

Here we are—from the Lutheran perspective—in the midst of the Reformation heritage, insofar as it is essential that, for it, ethics is about a Christian life-form (ethos) and its witness to the world. This life-form and its (visible, institutional) contours and practices are grounded in and determined by God's work and promise (*vita passiva*).

Different Notions of Freedom

The Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) published in 2010 a programmatic statement within the perspective of the coming Reformation jubilee 2017.¹⁶ The title, 'Church of Freedom', suggests that freedom is the central indicator for the Protestant church. But the concept of freedom appears here in a quite different logic. Freedom, according to the Lutheran grammar, is given only within the ongoing drama of God's releasing salvation, within a metamorphosis, the transformation of one's life-form (repentance, justification and sanctification).¹⁷ It is the freedom from the law, i.e. the law of any human justification, also of any moral or rational justification. God's work is communicated by His liberating word, in His commandments and communicated fulfilment in Jesus Christ. This word has to be heard, understood and received continually. In this sense the ethics within the Reformation heritage is an ethics of God's commandment, as it is unfolded in Karl Barth's ethics. The core of this ethics is the new life, the *nova creatura*, as it becomes visible in those practices of a *Christenmensch*, not least in its genuine presence for the neighbour. Freedom is bound to the awareness of the needs of the other.¹⁸ This includes not only personal involvement but also institutions (mandates) constituted by God's promise of

14 Luther, *On The Freedom of a Christian* (1520). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/luther-freedomchristian.asp>.

15 Bayer writes: 'God's categorical giving does not exclude the counter-gift of the creature, but rather empowers the creature to this counter-gift as its response.' *The Ethics of Gift*, p. 458. This signifies obviously a certain grammar of Lutheran ethics which is distinct from other 'Lutheran' ethical concepts, and it integrates at the same time the Protestant logic of 'empowerment'. See also Bo Kristian Holm (ed.), *Word—Gift—Being. Justification—Economy—Ontology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

16 For a broader analysis see Hans G. Ulrich, *Kirche der Freiheit, Kirche im Aufbruch—Reform als Klärungsprozess* (Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte, 23; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), vol. 2, pp. 482–519.

17 See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer's description of 'transformation'.

18 Luther, *On The Freedom of a Christian*. The key question is about the need and the sources of 'solidarity' on the basis of granted rights and social security. The answer from the Reformation tradition is the reference to the praxis of solidarity and corresponding institutions. This praxis of solidarity is the way Christ remains present within the world (Barmen I).

His coexistence and cooperation.¹⁹ *Christenmenschen* are not simply moral or ethical subjects but citizens, continuously shaped by a worship which is genuinely political.²⁰ Luther's social ethics is about that citizenship. One basic element is Luther's notion of the praxis of social justice within everyone's daily life, according to God's vocation.²¹ We find this elaborated in Bonhoeffer's ethics and connected to his particular understanding of responsibility. This is not the responsibility of a somehow-empowered subject, but the subjection to the needs of the neighbour. An essential element connected with the praxis of solidary neighbour-love is its relation to institutional forms of solidarity. Ethics is about good works;²² it is about practices—like the practice of the *iustitia civilis*. Therefore ethics is genuinely about political practices according to that grammar. Those political practices are also realized by professional politicians and they should find institutional contours.

This ethos has its institutional background within a worshipping community, the church. The difference to the Protestant model of Christian ethics has to be seen fundamentally because of this rootedness in a worshipping community. The Christian is sent to the world, the Christian is called to the world. The world is in its worldliness the forum of the Christian witness, addressed by God's reconciliation to Christians,²³ but it does not provide a source for one's living within God's work.

One may ask why this grammar of Lutheran ethics seems not to be present as a living, articulated tradition, but is often replaced by a model of Lutheran ethics which is quite different from this grammar. You may find this model in various forms as an ethics which is based on a certain disposition of a (general) ethical subject, a worldly subject—not a Christian citizen who is called and created by God.²⁴ If we want to see Lutheran ethics from outside in terms of its impact on people under given conditions of our society (e.g. liberal societies),²⁵ we have to look for the Lutheran grammar as it really guides Christian people. The future of ethics becomes present as the future of a grammar proving itself and becoming apparent in any daily work where Christians are called to do their worldly worship in coexistence and cooperation with God.

The Explorative Praxis of Christian Ethics

The future of ethics is the future of an ethics of vocation and the future of corresponding institutions, political, economic, and ecclesial. This is essentially different to the future of a mental reality and the empowerment of 'the' Christian subject in a kind of universal responsibility. Vocation, practices, good works, and institutions as they are rooted in God's

19 For this coherent theological context see Hans G. Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben. Konturen evangelischer Ethik* (Münster: LIT, 2nd edn, 2007).

20 Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship*.

21 See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 254–62.

22 Stefan Heuser, *Gute Werke und Sozialstaat* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, forthcoming 2012).

23 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*.

24 Consequences of this kind of Protestant ethics may be found in the context of the debate about 'bioethics'. See e.g. the analysis of Friedemann Voigt (ed.), *Religion in bioethischen Diskursen. Interdisziplinäre, internationale und interreligiöse Perspektiven* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

25 For the Protestant side see Stefan Grotefeld, *Religiöse Überzeugungen im liberalen Staat. Protestantische Ethik und die Anforderungen öffentlicher Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

work constitute the reality endowed with God's promise. This is the reality Christian ethics has to explore and articulate. This reality, then, provides the critical path of Christian ethics, its ways of discernment²⁶ and judgement. This, then, is its contribution to public discourses. There are significant elaborated and practised examples in various fields, especially in business ethics or medical ethics.²⁷

So we have to be aware of different ways of theological ethics, a way of a universal responsibility and its rationality on the one hand, and the ethics of a *nova creatura* with its very own grammar, on the other hand. The future of Christian ethics is according to the Lutheran tradition bound to the promise of God's ongoing creational work where human beings find themselves renewed and transformed within their practices and works (their life-form), according to St Paul's summary of Christian ethics in Rom. 12.2.

26 See especially Martin Honecker, *Evangelische Ethik als Ethik der Unterscheidung* (Münster: Lit, 2010).

27 For examples in business ethics see Hans G. Ulrich, 'On the Grammar of Lutheran Ethics', in Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Studies, 2005), pp. 27-48.