

# Theology and Cultural Contexts

There is more in my life than what I can realize.

There is more in the story of humankind than what we can achieve—or destroy.

IF THERE IS ANYTHING SPECIAL about my theological and academic pilgrimage, it is the simple fact that I have taught theology both in Eastern and Western Europe: for eighteen years at the Comenius Faculty in Prague and for twenty-three years at the University of Basel (not forgetting the frequent guest-lectureships on all the continents, particularly in North America and East Asia). Different places confronted me with different challenges. I have often asked myself (and been asked by others) what such a variety of altering social and cultural contexts meant for my theological identity.

I remember that the first dissertation about my theological way, written by an English scholar, tried to emphasize the impact of diverging cultural situations on my thinking—to such a degree that he questioned the identity of my way. I understood his attempt. However, in my own (certainly subjective) interpretation, I saw it differently. In my understanding, theological identity is a dialectical identity, not a rigid, monolithic one; it is an identity in dialogue with diverging situations, responding to different challenges, setting different priorities. You cannot dogmatically repeat in postmodern Basel what you learned in Communist Prague. Anyone who makes a theological pilgrimage should pay attention to the changing climate and the altered landscape.

There is, however, another side to the question. Ultimately, the pilgrimage remains the same. For in addition to altering contexts, there is the common text. There are essential themes of theology which

prove their validity, in different lights and with different emphases, in altering social and cultural contexts. You need not forget in Basel what you learned in Prague. On the contrary, the lessons you had to learn there can sharpen your eyes for the temptations and promises of the new situation, helping you not to become uncritically captive to the new society and culture. The memory of yesterday can strengthen our critical awareness today as well as our hope.

In the personal account that follows of the theological motives that proved essential on my ecumenical way, I will deal with five major themes and concerns.

## In the Beginning—God

At the very beginning of my theological pilgrimage I learned that the first task of a theologian is a concentrated effort toward knowing and confessing the reality of God. The term theology itself leads in this direction. The cultural climate of the Masaryk-tradition of pre-war Czechoslovakia had already provided me strong support for this conviction during my years in secondary school. Then, during the early

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books by Jan Lochman that have been translated into English are: *Christ and Prometheus? A Quest for Theological Identity* (1988); *Encountering Marx: Bonds and Barriers between Christians and Marxists* (1977); *The Faith We Confess: An Ecumenical Dogmatics* (1984); *Living Roots of the Reformation* (1979); *The Lord's Prayer* (1990); and *Zeal for Truth and Tolerance: The Ecumenical Challenge of the Czech Reformation* (1996).

years of my university studies, the emphatic theocentrism of Josef L. Hromadka introduced into our ecclesiastical atmosphere the persuasion that biblical piety and theology can successfully flourish only in the presence of respect for the majestic will of God, which transcends every religious ideal. “God is”: this was an unquestionable axiom for me and the majority of my colleagues.

After the war, this commonplace theocentrism suffered a disturbing but ultimately liberating jolt. The far-reaching secularization of European society rightly demanded our attention. In the Czech context, the favorable, or at least indifferent, cultural atmosphere was radically transformed by the violent communist overthrow in 1948, resulting in the public dominance of a militant atheism. This situation necessarily affected us from the beginning of our work at the Comenius Faculty. Yet, even more important were the voices from within the contemporary theological scene. How dramatic was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s influence upon us, with his conviction that “humanity has learned to wrestle with all the important questions of life without the ‘God-hypothesis’ . . . God is constantly being ousted from the world, he has lost his ground.”<sup>1</sup> Theology had to confront this situation.

Such rousing voices prompted us to confront the changed atmosphere in our own concrete circumstances. To the credit of Czech theology, numerous lay persons oriented us in a direction similar to the one suggested by Bonhoeffer. We cooperated with them in working toward a theology of humanity’s “coming of age” developed around a non-religious, civilian interpretation of the Gospel.

This attempt at a “civilian theology” had definite implications for our understanding of the central theme of God. The theistic understanding of God as a principle, which was doubtlessly part of the prevailing world-view, the virtually “obligatory idea of God”, lost its culturally supported matter-of-factness. The decisive question was: Did the biblical theme of God thereby lose its theological and human validity? We in the church and on the theological faculty were not

tempted by such a conclusion. Later we did encounter in our ecumenical contacts the short-lived fashion of doing “theology without God” or “as atheists”. But, frankly, we were already immunized against the temptation to ride this wave by the less-than-enticing form of atheism in our homeland. It was precisely such atheism with its accompanying vulgar social strategies that had lost credibility, and not only with us. Was it not rather the case that the loss of the commonplace idea of God, formerly secured through prevailing cultural opinion but now “culturally homeless”, could open up a path toward a more appropriate, clearly differentiated understanding of the One to whom the biblical name of God applies? This question (and its implied affirmative reply) had already engaged me in Prague, and it became one of the major concerns of my work at Basel and in the ecumenical movement.

In my second speech as rector of the University of Basel, I used an expression of Eberhard Jüngel: “God is not necessary, God is more than necessary.”<sup>2</sup> I wanted to indicate that the name of God is not built into a closed ontological system, with God necessarily posited as the beginning, crown, and goal of all cosmic movement. The biblical God, the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not at all to be taken for granted as a necessary part of such a system. He is more than necessary: An atmosphere of surprise, of dread—but above all else of joy and grace—surrounds the self-disclosure of this God. *Freedom* is fundamental to God. The name of God in the scriptures is anchored in the revelation to Israel of the “I am who I am” in the context of Exodus—the deliverance from slavery and the liberation of the people of God. And one of the most significant “definitions” of God may be found in Romans 4:25, as the one “who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead”. As Hellmut Gollwitzer phrased it, “God is centrally identical with the promise of life and with the invasion of life into the world of death.”<sup>3</sup>

How could theologians ever abandon this majestic theme? How could they be ashamed of it in the academy (or in daily life)? Reflection on my own experience, especially under the conditions of

a totalitarian society, led me in another direction. I came to realize that wherever and whenever fundamental questions about the human condition are raised, the biblical perspective with its central theme of God can demonstrate its encouraging, liberating potential. It may speak to individuals searching for a foundation for personal identity in life and in the face of death, and also to societies as a means of relativizing every official claim made by rulers and political institutions. I will never forget how the officially banished and forbidden theme of God provided a new horizon of freedom for many thinking and socially engaged people, precisely in collision with the rigid boundaries of totalitarian systems.

Against such a background I was able to affirm without hesitation the principle articulated in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. In volume 2, part 1, Barth made the following remark, almost in passing: "Dogmatics in each and all of its divisions and subdivisions, with every one of its questions and answers . . . can first and last, as a whole and in part, say nothing else but that God is."<sup>4</sup> To make clear that he was not simply dealing with areas of academic teaching, Barth further wrote: We may and should live "in great things and small . . . , in the totality of our existence . . . with the fact that not only sheds new light on, but materially changes, all things and everything in all things—the fact that God is"<sup>5</sup>. I found a similar categorical emphasis in the writings of my Basel philosophy professor, Karl Jaspers: "The transcendence is alone the real being. That God is, is sufficient. To be convinced of this is all that matters."<sup>6</sup>

### Christological Concentration and Trinitarian Theology

The fundamental thesis "God is" was a presupposition and the basis but not the end of my theological way. The path led further through many twists and turns. Its direction may be described by the dictum "through a *Christological concentration to trinitarian theology*". The term "Christological concentration" was coined by Karl Barth, and I adopted it for much of my theological journey. Though it sounds like

an academic *terminus technicus*, the term contains a dynamic vitality, even political ferment. It echoes the historically important and still influential First Barmen Thesis (1934): *Jesus Christ is the one Word of God*". In the face of all temptations, especially totalitarian ones, this statement calls Christianity to a firm foundation and a clear standard of faith and confession. The church cannot drag its feet on both sides of the fence. There is no other idea that can be wedded to the Gospel, whether pious or unpious, tradition or myth. This was assumed in the Barmen Confession of the German Confessional Church. We found the assumption helpful when faced with the claims of totalitarian authorities of both kinds: Nazism and communism.

The program of Christological concentration should be applied to all areas of theology. This is not to say that we should confuse it with a "Christomonism", as if the entirety of theology could be summarized in just one of its areas. Yet Christology is the heart of Christian theolog, and its themes must be developed in light of the Christ event: his incarnation, teaching, cross, and resurrection. The term is thus a methodologically central postulate.

We did not have to wait for Barth for the program of Christological concentration. Our teacher J. L. Hromadka moved in a similar, and always more definite, direction, and there were other teachers, and, later, colleagues on the faculty who shared this emphasis as well. Most of all, I recall sessions spent with Professor J. B. Souček. Here was a teacher who critically discerned a whole spectrum of problems with traditional interpretations of the New Testament, their inner tensions and conflicts, and he never tried to hide these from us. But, at the same time, he was one who heard most clearly the *cantus firmus* in the sometimes disquieting variety of voices found in the New Testament: namely, the concentration on Christ.

"*There is salvation in none other*" (Acts 4:12). Is this simply an exclusivistic, sectarian statement? I took from Souček the enduring certainty that such was not the case. Yes, the New Testament confessions of Christ are exclusive, but we are concerned here with the

exclusivity of *Christ*, and not with the self-serving principle of sectarianism. We are challenged to follow *him* whose humanity is uniquely inclusive, namely, in unconditional solidarity with others beyond all human gulfs and borders. I thought of Souček's helpful insight as I stated the theme of my first speech as rector of the University of Basel, "Zeal for Truth and Tolerance". These two motifs are not contradictory; there is a tension, but a tension within an inclusive love in the spirit of Jesus.

I developed the program of a christologically concentrated dogmatic (and ethical) work relating to a broad spectrum of further themes, especially in the three volume *Dogmatik im Dialog* about which I will say more later.<sup>7</sup> Presently, I would like to raise the question: What consequences does this concentration have for theology as the doctrine of God? I would put it simply: If one wishes to know who God is, one should look toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Christian God is not an abstract principle, but the Word that has become flesh—the Jewish flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. The apostolic church added another dimension to this concrete insight: "No one can confess 'Jesus is Lord' except through the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3b). From here, the fundamental statement, "God is", finds its unique, unmistakable fulfillment. God is *in Christ and in the Holy Spirit*.

The *trinitarian* dogma cannot be easily accessed, "digested", or arbitrarily promulgated. As the ancient church well knew, this doctrine requires discipline (*disciplina arcani*) and careful interpretation. My own path toward understanding its most fruitful possibilities was not easy. Significantly, the breakthrough to a deeper appreciation of the trinitarian motif came from a rather unexpected direction. In the early seventies, I was invited by the Society of British Theology to give a lecture on the social implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. This kind of reflection was later developed in theological discussions such as Leonardo Boff's liberation theology.<sup>8</sup> Earlier, however, the trinitarian theme appeared as the dogma related exclusively to the transcendent mystery of God. Was this to have social/ethical conse-

quences? I hold that such consequences *are* implied in this doctrine from its very origins. The trinitarian dogma proved to be a potential and actual form of resistance to the temptation at the beginning of the Constantinian era to turn the Christian Gospel into an official imperial ideology. A "pure" and undifferentiated monotheism seemed to lead logically to such an ideology: one God, one ruler, one empire. And, understandably, there were theologians who took such a route. But the trinitarian doctrine was never so easily misused.

The model of relationships portrayed by the trinitarian dogma is neither hierarchical nor authoritarian. The relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not subordinationist, but—to use the technical term—*perichoretic*: God is essentially a dynamic communion of equally and mutually shared love. And this fact implies social impetus. Being made in the image of God calls for ethical and social consequences, it nurtures the spirit of solidarity. Of course, these consequences cannot be simply, mechanically transferred to the areas of human relationships. But they lead, or should lead, the confessor's heart in an unambiguous direction—toward guarding the faith in the communion of creative love.

I discovered one of the pearls of truly rich trinitarian reflection in Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670). Comenius was a passionate defender of trinitarian thinking. This led him occasionally to some outlandish speculations. But he understood deeply the intention of the dogma: *Deus non est solitarius* (God is not lonely), and, further: God is *summe communicativus* (supremely communicative). His trinitarian thinking reflects the essential message of both the Old and the New Testaments concerning God: God is the Spirit committed to its creation, the God of covenant, and ultimately the God incarnate, Immanuel, God with us—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the challenge confronting the people of faith, a challenge not only anchored in occasional biblical texts but in the very essence of God, is to seek communion in a world of broken or distorted communication.

While reflecting on the implications of the trinitarian truth in the

later period of my pilgrimage, the relevance of the biblical motif of the *Holy Spirit* emerged with fresh actuality. Here the altering cultural context played a definite role. The postmodern cultural scene in my Basel years was characterized by the personal quest toward a self-realization of individual human potential. The biblical message of the Holy Spirit responds to this existential yearning. *Testimonium Spiritus sancti* underlies the importance of our spiritual life. Some of my charismatically oriented doctoral students made me more attentive to this.

At the same time, the biblical identification of the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ should remind us that our aspirations for self-realization cannot succeed if we set ourselves in the center. The drive of the Spirit transcends the horizon of our personal lives. “For we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, Slaves or free, and we are all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13). No doubt, the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills, but the Spirit evidently will blow in the direction of overcoming the barriers among human persons, groups, races, cultures—and even between humankind and our sister-creatures within the one creation (Romans 8). Such pneumatological reflection confirms the social/ethical impact of trinitarian thought.

### Dialogue and Doxology

Reflection on the trinitarian essence of God also affected my thinking about appropriate theological method. I must admit that I was never extraordinarily concerned with methodological questions. I found myself at a distance from those theologians whose primary attention was so directed to methodological concerns that they had difficulty pressing on to the content of theology. It was clear to me, however, that theology is not, nor can it be, an arbitrary or careless process, but that it is a “way”, therefore, a method, possessing order and character. If I were to approach the matter of method with two concepts, I would appeal to dialogue and doxology.

For me the concept of *dialogue* is set in a definite historical context.

I refer to the atmosphere in the 1960s within Czechoslovak Marxist society. Theology was confined by official ideology to a social and cultural ghetto. We were restricted to a confined academic province where we were tolerated, to a degree. Attempts to scale the fence of this enclosed place to make contacts with other movements and representatives of other faculties were received with hostility and sanctions. True theology done in integrity with its subject matter would not reconcile itself to such confinement. We ended up finding contacts among the younger generation of dialogically minded Marxists. A Christian-Marxist dialogue developed with the initiative of J. Hromadka on the Christian side and M. Machovec and V. Gardavsky on the Marxist side. The emerging ecumenical discussion in the aftermath of Vatican II provided critical undergirdings.

The Christian-Marxist dialogue contributed to a social process of fermentation culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968. From this event, and beyond it, the dialogue received its truly ecumenical resonance. I realize that many, from a distance, view with skepticism these early attempts at dialogue, as well as the entire movement for the democratization of communist society in 1968. For us, the dialogue of that time was and remained an event that shaped us. As citizens, we felt that we were becoming not just objects but subjects of political events. As theologians, we found confirmation of our conviction that theology and its themes have their public value and relevance even in a hostile secular context.

*Dialogue* is not only an instrument in theological communication with the outside, but also in theology’s internal orientation. First, dialogue is typical of the biblical witness. God’s revelation is neither a mechanical occurrence nor a meteor that falls from the sky, but a personal address, the word that “dwelt among us” (John 1:14). It corresponds to the character of the One who is *summe communicativus* (supremely communicative). This applies secondarily to our own dogmatic work, whether examining the classical dogmas of the early church or (at a few levels down) exploring contemporary ecumenical

attempts at expressing the apostolic faith. The response of faith always involves a dialogic, communicative process, colored and weighed down by the all-too-human nature of the participants, but undertaken in the hope expressed in the first apostolic proceedings, that such was pleasing “to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). It seems to me that the Holy Spirit does not enjoy monologue.

All of the above provides the background for my giving much energy, after my arrival in Basel, to the aforementioned *Dogmatik im Dialog* (3 volumes, 1973-1976).<sup>9</sup> The three dialogue partners in the work (Heinrich Ott, Fritz Buri, and myself) were for a short time professors of dogmatics on the same faculty. Ott came from the Bultmann school (at a certain distance from his teacher Karl Barth) with a growing interest in other religions; Buri represented a radically liberal, critical theology. We sought a dialogue that was systematic, not haphazard, one that involved interactive discussions of the traditional *loci* of dogmatics. Soon after embarking on the project we learned that such an undertaking revealed sharp differences of perspective that often led to unsatisfactory results. The three sizable volumes bear witness to the difficulties. We seldom arrived at consensus, and the contributions to each topic provoked stormy, passionate discussion among us and our students. Of course, the end result was not without meaning, not only as an experiment for those studying theology, but also an illustration of the ongoing, unfinished nature of theology, suggesting that we must always struggle to listen to the voice of the other, even if occasionally with grinding teeth. We were personally very gratified that the passion of the arguments did not lead to alienation among us.

The ultimately ambivalent experience of the *Dogmatik im Dialog* confirmed my understanding that dialogue cannot be the only element of theological work. *Doxology* is another integral, essentially constitutive, element. *Pectus facit theologum*—the heart creates the theologian. I do not support this statement if it is used uncritically to suggest that piety itself creates theology. Theology is the *thinking* of faith, thinking that is just as demanding as the work of other acad-

emic disciplines. But what is this thinking of theology about? What is its subject matter? If the subject matter of theology is God in his Word, then the thinking of the theologian cannot be abstract or neutral. Theology has its doxological, “adoring” dimension. Prayer belongs to that which precedes and accompanies the task of a theologian. God’s drawing near to humanity provokes humanity’s drawing near to God: the praise of God in the highs and lows of our lives.

In my “little theological trilogy”—my explanation of the three foundational “catechetical” texts—I followed the exposition of the Ten Commandments and the Apostles Creed with a concluding volume on the Lord’s Prayer. In this appreciative evaluation of prayer, I was concerned not only with the challenge of a *praxis pietatis*, even though such is truly fitting for a theologian. I was also concerned with the clarification of what had always been essential to theology as a specific science. Recall in this regard the often quoted statement from the time of the church fathers: *lex orandi—lex credendi*, the rule of prayer is the rule of faith. To expand on this, we could add: *lex docendi*, indeed *lex vivendi*, the rule of prayer is the rule of doctrine but also of life itself.

I therefore maintain that theology must always be doxological at heart. We fail to understand such classical theological texts as the trinitarian or christological dogmas if we conceive of them as static descriptions. Doctrinal formulations open up to us only when we understand them as texts whose essential purpose is to point beyond themselves toward thanks-giving faith. One needs only to read Augustine or Anselm (not to mention the Reformers). These are demanding texts that represent disciplined ways of thinking, but at the same time they reveal an enduring element of wonder and praise concerning God’s grace and truth. It is justifiable in current ecumenical theology to speak of and to respect the doxological structure of dogma.<sup>10</sup>

What applies to thinking also applies to life. I often recall words I heard Karl Barth speak when I was his student: “Hands folded in prayer are the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” This sentence deserves careful attention to both its parts, but

especially to their interconnection. It is good and necessary to fold the hands in prayer. This initial and constant companion to the thinking of faith has indispensable value. But note that this is not prayer as self-service or as an evasive maneuver. From this beginning, we should move forward in dialogue and common work with people both near and far for the betterment of human affairs. The doxological movement of theology has its dialogical, ecclesiastical and public dimensions.

### Church and University

I arrive now at a seemingly secondary or rather practical question, but one which for me, because of biographical circumstances, became fundamental. Where does theology find its social basis, its “home”, in the context of human relationships? To which community are we primarily obligated in our work? I can answer this question without wavering: The place where theology proves itself is the church. The church is the primary but not exclusive context for meaningful theological endeavor. Although theology also has a universal dimension, its home is the church. This conviction carried me from the beginning to the end of my theological journey. My fundamental theological but also elementary human loyalty belonged to our congregations, especially during the times when they were threatened by totalitarian pressures—and this was indeed the case during my student years and subsequent work in Prague. This elementary solidarity with the church and its congregations was shared with practically all my Czech theological teachers and colleagues.

Only in foreign countries did I encounter theologians who did not care much for the local churches—and I was astounded by them. To be sure, a purely academic career as a theologian is obviously possible, but such academic theology is impoverished, not only sociologically, but essentially. As one definition has it (though not my favorite): “Theology is a function of the church.” And what a wealth of experience I was able to take to Switzerland and to the ecu-

menical movement from congregations right in the midst of difficult times—from a discriminated-against, oppressed, but, in spite of all its difficulties, *living* church! So there is for me no doubt that the church is the home of theology.

And the *university*? It became for me a second home. During my years in Prague, the totalitarian political structure placed the university outside our reach. We did not regret that we were eliminated from the university institutionally, for in this way we were not so directly exposed to its ideological pressures. But we did miss the broader possibilities of exchange and communication with professors and students of other faculties, and we worked hard person-to-person to break through the wall erected around us. We knew that the concept of *universitas literarum* is precious to theologians, and not only for historical reasons. When I was called to the University of Basel, I accepted the post as a new, but classical, theological challenge. The chance of dialogue with representatives of other disciplines was fascinating, and I sought to take advantage of it whenever possible, not only during my years as rector, but certainly most intensively during that period.

The symbolism in the rector’s seal deeply moved me. It features a hand reaching down from above with an open book, the Bible, inscribed with four key words: *pie - iuste - sobrie - sapienter*. These four words are variations on the four classical virtues connected with the four major faculties of medieval universities but valid for all of them because of their origin in the one truth. This truth is not created by us; rather, we are all drawn to it by our common search, each in his or her own academic discipline. The central elements of my Czech heritage moved me in the same direction. The Hussite motif of the Bohemian Reformation was truth, which grants sciences and scientists their ultimate consecration; truth with its call to communication among sciences was the legacy of Comenius; and finally, the common emphasis of my philosophical masters T. G. Masaryk and E. Radl was on the sovereignty of truth. These ideas were both a chal-

lenge and a help, offering unprecedented possibilities in the unexpected context of a significant academic office.

The new responsibilities I accepted at the university of Basel did not weaken my theological work. Quite the contrary. Looking back at my tenure as rector, I have the vivid impression that I never worked so intensively as a pastor with a “congregation” as I did during this time with the “congregation” of my university. In this way the university became my second home.

I mention this experience to evaluate the importance of both church *and* university. The relationship between these two should not be one of false alternatives—the church *or* the university. Both are legitimate contexts for theological work. But it is important to respect priorities. These need not be the same for everyone. My own priority is suggested by referring to the church as my first and the university as my second home.

Allow me to express my viewpoint with an illustration. My older son studied archeology and is an expert in ancient sculpture. In this field one distinguishes between a leg used for standing (*Standbein*) and one used for playing (*Spielbein*). Forgive me the somewhat clumsy parallel: It seems to me that the leg upon which a theologian stands is the church, while the leg with which one plays is the academic community. Both legs are needed for a theological pilgrimage. I do not mean playing in the sense of sport. Those who know me know how much joy I experience from sports of all kinds. But I am not thinking now of games in this sense. I refer to the game of knowledge or the search for wisdom, the *agón* of those who strive for knowledge from different perspectives. This contest also belongs to theology. For this reason, theology’s second home, the academic community, is indeed a welcome and valuable opportunity, if it can be employed within the freedom of the children of God. But the game of knowledge will only serve the soundness of theology if theologians have a firm leg to stand on, and if they do not weaken the foundation on which they stand or fall, the church, the *communio sanctorum*.

## Status Mundi Renovabitur

The only way I can conclude this personal account of my theological journey is on an eschatological note of hope. One of my favorite quotations is the dictum of Jan Želivský, a revolutionary Hussite in Prague in 1419: *Status mundi renovabitur* (the conditions of the world will be renewed). How often I have quoted these words in my theological work! It seems to me to summarize an essential part of the Czech Reformation’s legacy to us. The thinkers and witnesses of this reform movement tried to live by the eschatological vision of “a new heaven and a new earth”, of the coming city of God, the “New Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:1f). And they were able to apply this hope not only to their personal destiny but also to their church and society. Initiatives of hope were characteristic already of Jan Milič, the “Father of the Bohemian Reformation” from the 14th century, but also of Jan Hus and later of the Czech Brethren. They culminated in the grandiose program for the universal renewal of human affairs proposed by Jan Amos Comenius in the turbulent 17th century.

In my ecumenical experience, I gratefully recognized the validity of this vision. One of my assignments in the seventies was to supervise and summarize the “Ecumenical Account of Hope” for the meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order held in Bangalore, India. In preparation for that assignment, I had the privilege to study various “Documents of Hope” written in different ecumenical contexts. Of particular importance to me were those created in situations of struggle and oppression. They testified that Christian hope is not a product of favorable circumstances; it is not produced by optimistic moods. It is anchored much deeper. It is hope “set on the living God” (1 Timothy 4:10). Both the memory of the Czech Reformation and the fresh ecumenical experience confirmed it. Since our hope is grounded in God’s promise in Christ, it is valid and encouraging, even in discouraging moments of personal and social destiny.

In this sense, the old dictum *status mundi renovabitur* should be remembered as both promise and obligation. With its emphasis on the

*status mundi*, these words challenge our theology to relate to the concrete and altering conditions of our time, including the social and political ones. At the same time, with its *renovabitur* it opens us to the eschatological *plus ultra* of biblical hope.

This hope was the gift of freedom granted to my Czech and ecumenical fathers and brothers, mothers and sisters, in seemingly hopeless circumstances under totalitarian domination. But that very hope proved to be the source of encouragement in the uneasy post-modern climate in the European West with its diffuse doubts about the ongoing mission of the church. In altering cultural and spiritual contexts, biblical hope in the living God remained the *cantus firmus* of my theological pilgrimage.

There is more in my life than what I can realize. There is more in the story of humankind than what we can achieve—or destroy.

## Notes for Theology and Cultural Contexts

1. Letter to Eberhard Bethge, 8 June 1944. *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 8 (Gütersloh, 1998), 476-77.
2. Eberhard Yünger, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen, 1997).
3. Hellmut Gollwitzer, *Krummes Holz-aufrechter Gang* (Munich 1970), 284.
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., First Half-Volume, 258.
5. Ibid.
6. Karl Jaspers, *Über meine Philosophie* (1941), in *Rechenschaft und Ausblick* (Munich, 1951), 345.
7. Fritz Buri, Jan Lochman and Heinrich Ott, *Dogmatik im Dialog* (Gütersloh, 1973-76). See p. [58] below.
8. See Thomas R. Thompson, *Imitatio Trinitatis: The Trinity as Social*

*Model in the Theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff*, doctoral dissertation Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996. UMI reprint (Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International, 1996).

9. See note 7 above.
10. See, for example, Edmund Schlink, *Ökumenische Dogmatik* (Göttingen, 1983), ch. 25, “Der Lobpreis Gottes.”

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