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Delivered unto the
HEATHENS

How theology can survive the 21st century



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1 THE URGENCY OF A RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

Many children no longer know what Easter or Pentecost means, or who Judas or Peter was; they also have not the slightest notion about the psalms. That is not only a pity, because they can therefore not understand many elements of our culture, but it is mainly painful because religion can offer a promising and rich life perspective.

We live in a time in which religion has become incomprehensible and meaningless to many. Quite a few people view religion as suspect and dangerous. This means she might disappear from view as a possible choice.¹

I plead for maintaining religious orientation of life as an option for choice. It must remain possible to choose for religion. The urgency for this is inspired by the transience and perish-ability of everything.

I believe having a faith is better than not having a faith. To explain what I mean here, I shall introduce a specifically theological approach and procedure, in which I shall point out the task and responsibility of theologians in this day and age. However, not only theologians have responsibilities. Also believers, and even non-believers, must be addressed and asked how they relate to the cultural and religious inheritance, and which of its treasures they would like to pass onto the following generations. I invite them too, to participate in a discussion about what gives meaning to life and how they themselves experience this in their existence. During this discussion a perspective will open, in which old and new vistas melt into each other, and thus a new horizon of faith can find form.

¹ The loss of religion in our society is mirrored in the Dutch theological landscape. Independent theological faculties are being closed and incorporated, as a department, in the humanities, whereby elementary parts of the curriculum are stricken, as at the University of Utrecht where a Bachelor degree in Theology is no longer possible. Refer Denaux (2013).

In September of 2012 Marius van Leeuwen, former Professor at the Remonstrant Seminary that was seated in Leiden at that time², held his fare-well speech: *How necessary is it to believe?* It is not really necessary, he explains, there are good alternatives, but believing must remain possible. He sketches how in the past four centuries the taking for granted of religious concepts has been lost. For many unbelief has become a matter of fact – ‘No doubt about it, there is no God’. Based on the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, he demonstrates how all kinds of opposites, like time – eternity, earth – heaven, or immanent – transcendent, have become problematic. For most people their life here suffices, with its chances for development and happiness; they don’t care for that God, who is so hard to reconcile with reason and science. They do not want to stay stuck in childhood and have the courage to live without the illusion that there is support from above. In our world we can approach existence in all sorts of ways, in ways of believing and in ways of non-believing.

Van Leeuwen advocates keeping the possibility of believing open, and he does this in a typically liberal way: rooted firmly in the faith as your truth, but without an absolute claim to truth and with a fundamental openness towards people of a different faith, and so also towards non-believers. Believing is and remains a meaningful possibility, an option for the way one regards life. For some people in the West, and many in other regions of the world it is the border areas of existence in particular that still render religion attractive. (Van Leeuwen 2012).

The seventeenth-century theologian, Jacob Arminius (1560 – 1609), the founder of the Remonstrant Brotherhood, also pointed out the importance of faith as a possibility for choice. His point of view was that a person could say ‘yes’ to the offer of divine grace, but also ‘no’. The faith is offered to everyone, but the individual needs to accept it himself. Arminius came into conflict with his colleague Gomarus (1563 – 1641), who adhered to a much stricter perception of the predestination teachings. God has chosen part of humanity for paradise while another part is predestined for eternal death. According to Gomarus a human cannot influence God; choosing for or against grace makes no difference.

So, this is about free will. While Arminius still took a careful stance regarding free will, Episcopos, the first Professor of the Remonstrant Seminary, tightened up the remonstrant view still further. Human free will stays intact, even after the fall, he says. There is no such thing as an un-free will; the responsibility of man and God’s honor demand that within the

2 As from January 2013 the Remonstrant Seminary is located at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

space of God's omnipotence a certain freedom is afforded to mankind. Because God does not work in people 'as if they were blocks of wood (*sicut lignum*) (Hoenderdaal, 1980 p. 218).

Faith, as a matter of choice, as possibility of man's free will. With Arminius this choice seems to be more urgent than with Van Leeuwen. With Arminius it is about choosing eternal grace or eternal damnation, with Van Leeuwen however, it can no longer be about 'eternal'. After all, we are all bound to the temporariness of this world, and in that situation there are many options, and believing is one of them.

In the mean time this possibility is in danger of disappearing under a thick layer of dust. I want to show which precious treasure might be lost, and what we can do about this. Being delivered unto secular heathens is a meager perspective.

2 AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW OF RELIGION

In his study *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor writes that in our modernity religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective, remains a rich, independent source of motivation. Religion changes throughout history, but her great attraction remains.

According to Taylor the focus on experience and possibilities for choice stand out as characteristics of modern times. There are several kinds of deep experiences that can play a role in your existence: they give insight into what it's like to live as a believer or as a non-believer. These experiences make life fuller, richer and more worthwhile. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of something special, sometimes we are touched deeply by something. An experience like that can take place in different ways, but always lifts us beyond ourselves.

'There may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up, reinforcing each other, instead of producing psychic gridlock.' (p. 6)

These experiences help us to situate a 'place of fullness', for our moral or spiritual orientation. In current times several sources that give meaning to these experiences have become available to us besides religion. The experience of fullness can be explained in a humanistic or Buddhist fashion, from the perspective of the philosophy of nature and from many other points of view. This makes the interpretation of the experience truly ambivalent, because we realize that our view is but one in an array of possible points of view.

The individual searches and subjective experiences cause the fact that there is no longer a shared, believable point of view. Everyone looks for meaning within the boundaries of their own existence and the daily concerns. According to Taylor, he who looks for meaning in the work routines of every day will soon find himself in dire straits. On the one hand the routine business can easily conjure up the association with a prison, locking us in meaningless repetition. On the other hand it often happens that we are excluded from these daily routines – for

example by unemployment or illness. The routines themselves do not offer an overall framework that gives cohesion to our life, much less connect our lives with those of our ancestors and successors (Taylor, p. 718).

Happiness, fulfillment and joy are important for finding meaning. But “Alle Lust will Ewigkeit” is Nietzsche’s famous line. All pleasure wants forever, not because you would like to continue indefinitely, but because happiness loses a large part of its meaning if it is not sustainable. The big spoilsport here is death. The here and now – this moment – is not enough, because it is over before you realize. According to Taylor the longing for the eternal is not superficial and childish, but belongs to the human condition. In these times death is even more dreaded. This has everything to do with the role that love relationships play. Never before were they of such importance in our existence. We surround ourselves with loved ones who give our lives colour, scent, flavor and grip. Hell has disappeared, but has been replaced by the great pain of ‘la mort de toi’ (Taylor, p. 721). We search for meaning and according to Taylor, we are not nearly ready for disbelieving. The brokenness and fragility, but also the wonder of existence, makes us look for more.

‘All this is true, and yet the sense that there is something more presses in. Great numbers of people feel it: in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and loss; and quite wild and unpredictably. Our age is far from settling into a comfortable unbelief. Although many individuals do so, and more still seem to on the outside, the unrest continues to surface. Could it ever be otherwise?’ (p. 727)

INTERPRETATION OF BOUNDARY EXPERIENCES

In those moments when the self-evident is no longer self-evident in life, and one experiences the vulnerability of existence, we speak of boundary experiences. Because of such a boundary experience people start searching for what is beyond the boundaries. A part of humanity turns to religion. In my thesis *Thinking about death*, I have further elaborated on the view of religion as giving meaning to boundary experiences. In his book *Religions and the Truth* (1989) philosopher of religion Henk Vroom asks the question how religion and truth relate to each other. According to Vroom, THE truth, as a central, raised-above-all-doubt-truth does not exist. Religious traditions are not necessarily based on one central truth of faith, but they are made up of a configuration of truths, or basic insights. Basic insights are fundamental to a religious tradition and they hark back to human experiences. These experiences are not so

much 'religious experiences', but experiences that are connected to genuine characteristics of human existence, called by Vroom 'existentials'. It is about experiences of being finite, of responsibility and failure, of insight, goodness, evil and suffering. Religious experiences explain these human experiences from the perspective of the transcendent – that which transcends the experience itself and places it in a larger perspective.³ The teachings of a religious tradition (*dharma, veritates*) must be viewed as an interpretive, explanatory description of existence (p. 329-358).

Here, Vroom presents an anthropologically based view of religion, with the human perspective as a starting point. Also according to anthropologist Jan van Baal, at crucial moments religion points people the way in the world. It enables people to feel at home in this existence, with feelings of happiness, peace and warmth, but also with her insecurity, restlessness and disharmony (Van Baal 1981). Religion is a way to keep at bay the chaos which threatens to take over when someone can no longer understand the events he/she experience, can no longer endure them or can no longer morally give them meaning. Religion asks questions that surpass the daily routine, that are about the nature of things and the meaning of human existence, with all the inherent dark sides, and all values that are important in existence. As such it can be described as 'knowledge' about the 'why' of things (Tennekes 1990, p. 49).⁴

In a religious, as well as a secular interpretation of human existence 'power' plays a role. Power, in the sense of the ability to steer and control the behavior of others. The free and unbound 'play of purpose' that religious founders such as Jezus, Buddha and Mohammed played, is often a variation of – and an alternative for – ruling beliefs and practices. Such an alternative however, soon gets encapsulated in the opinions and beliefs of the rulers. Whether or not by appealing to the sacred, the divine or to reason, they define certain concepts and practices as orthodoxy and orthopraxis, and in that way restrict the free purpose play. (Ter Borg 2010, Drooger 2011, McGuire 2008). It is the religious leaders who determine who can and who can-

3 Usually the term transcendence is used to indicate a reality which is situated above the everyday reality, but this is not a must. Ter Borg (2010) and Kunneman (2005) also, speak about 'horizontal transcendence', which occurs when the boundaries of the here and now are crossed. As an example Ter Borg mentions making plans for the future or developing new ways of living together. Horizontal transcendence with Kunneman on the one hand indicates the relationships with other people and on the other hand the horizon of values that have a guiding role in life. This horizon of values cannot have an absolute base, but begets form from the dialogue with others (2005, 72).

4 See also Rita Gross: 'Simply put, all religions share, to an extent unique among human cultural creations, an attempt to provide meaning and orientation in a chaotic world, (Gross 1993, 316).

not be accepted as members of the congregation (no homosexuals and suicides), and whether or not it is befitting for girls to be educated. With the holy law-book *Manu* in hand, Hindu men can explain to their wives that it is their duty to serve them as gods. But also within a secular setting, there can be influencing and wielding of power.

In the first place the anthropologically based view above, says something about religions themselves: they offer a particular perspective for the boundary experiences of human existence. It is not just a cognitive, intellectual interpretation. The well-known Scottish scientist of religious sciences Roderick Ninian Smart describes seven dimensions of religion that denote well her total integration in human existence.⁵ He distinguishes a 'narrative or mythic dimension', in which the tales of the tradition are central, but also the stories of the believers themselves. Besides that there is also, according to him, a 'social or institutional dimension', a 'ritual dimension', a 'doctrinal or philosophical dimension' and also a 'material dimension'. This last one is about the architecture of temples and churches, but also the arts. In every religion certain experiences are important, like prayer and meditation, and experiences like fulfillment or, the opposite: guilt and lack. This is the experiential dimension. Furthermore every religion has its ethics. The seven dimensions of religion demonstrate that there is more involved here than an intellectual matter; it is about living religion, where head, heart and hands are involved. Thought is but a part, and feeling, hearing, smelling, seeing, tasting, breathing – the whole body participates. Religion and religious incorporation are about the whole of human existence. The seven dimensions also indicate that deriving meaning is a social matter, despite the individual tendencies in our times.

Furthermore the anthropologically based view of religion also says something about mankind: people feel the need to give meaning to (important) experiences in their life, to interpret them. Religious sociologist Meerten Ter Borg speaks of looking for a balance between 'ontological security' and 'ontological abandonment'. Ontological security represents reality as you see it, and which you absolutely take for granted. So it is about a situation of familiarity. Inevitably there will be presented an anomaly, an experience through which we discover that things are not as self-evident as we always thought. Then there is the threat of 'ontological abandonment', a situation in which the rules that you usually adhere to and the

5 Ninian Smart introduced his seven dimensions of religion to escape the problem of defining religion. Every definition of religion has restrictions and exclusions, but when life-views are described according to these seven dimensions there need be no restriction or exclusion. It may be clear that Smart also included secular ideologies; he considers Buddhism, humanism, Marxism and Maoism to also be worldviews. According to him it is artificial to make a sharp division between religious and secular beliefs and practices. In the seven dimensions the incorporation in existence always takes a central place (Smart 1989).

framework of interpretation with which you face reality, have lost their validity.

A sense of insecurity, emptiness and alienation assault you (Ter Borg 2010). In this situation it is of importance to find a new balance. Returning to a situation of ontological security seems impossible, because the self-evidence of things is lost forever. On the other hand a permanent situation of emptiness and alienation is also not an option.

Besides Ter Borg other researchers also point out the importance of a new equilibrium. According to the social scientist Baumeister the need for meaning and significance is an elementary need in life. Without meaning a person cannot be happy and successful and eventually life becomes threatening (Baumeister 1991). In these cases psychologists speak of an 'existential crisis'. They also indicate the terrifying and painful experience of existential despair and the need for restoration (Pargament 1997, Yang 2007, Leget 2010). Philosophically oriented aid providers stress how important it is, in spite of everything, to be able to keep saying 'yes' to life (Rütter 2006, Yalom 2005, Apostel 2000). All emphasize that the 'experience of meaning' (wonderment, contact, breath) and thereby the 'heartfelt confirmation' precedes the more rational exploration and interpretation of this experience.

Finally, the anthropologically based view of religion has proven that processes of interpretation surpass the individual. They offer a framework that is characterized by certain, broadly accepted, values like freedom, autonomy, neighbourly love, rationality, self development, selflessness, health or economic gain.

THREE MISSIONS

From the inextricable bond between religion and human experiences three missions ensue for theology.

She needs to translate religion to the human experiences that are behind it, so to speak. This may seem self-evident, but that is not so. It is difficult to find anything human behind many religious symbols and texts. Which human reality hides behind: 'The Word became flesh'. Or behind: 'Take and eat, this is my body that was broken for you'? In which way does Christ, who triumphed over the power of the devil and hell, still touch our existence, when we haven't believed in devil or hell for a long time?

Secondly theology needs to clarify what is going on in the field of religion and purpose/meaning in our times. Finally she needs to keep our eyes open for the connection between values and power. We live in a time where economic profit, health and success are seen as highest good for everyone. This however excludes many, who from their less accomplished lives may see totally different things as valuable, but who hardly get the chance to voice this.

3 FRAGMENTATION OF THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE AND NEW SOURCES OF MEANING

Sociologist of religion Staf Helleman demonstrates in his study *Das Zeitalter der Weltreligionen* (2010) how things have changed in the Netherlands over the past sixty years in the field of religious worldviews. He makes a distinction in macro-, meso-, and micro levels. He emphasizes that the changes are not only valid for religion but also for politics, science, education, the arts and the economy, to name a few areas.

From 1960 onwards, at the macro level the religious field becomes fragmented and obscure. Before 1960 the division is clear: there are Catholics versus Protestants, clericals and anti-clericals, churches versus sects. Religion still was the cement that joined the different parts together. In one and the same village, for example, reformed brothers formed the supervisory board of the psychiatric hospital, but also the board of the reformed elementary school and the reformed church council; the same reformed principles formed the starting point for policy and behavior.

From 1960 onwards, enormous growth and globalizing starts; hundreds of religions and religious movements somersault over each other. Connections between education, science, politics and other areas disappear more and more.

For the individual these developments bring more freedom, but also more complexity. Nowadays you can choose between Buddhism, Sufism, Islam, Hinduism, all kinds of yoga. Not believing is also an option, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, among others, emphasizes.

At the meso level the situation also changes. Where in the past you had only a few powerful churches, nowadays there are many religious streaming that compete more and more. This causes religions to become more flexible. The content of the belief system is interpreted anew time after time. In many protestant churches children are now welcome to participate in communion and women in office are no longer the exception. Interreligious marriages are winning ground and the catholic celebration of All Souls Day, when the deceased are remembered, is

also celebrated in many protestant churches, even in secular gatherings, with the aid of light rituals.⁶

At the micro- or individual level people feel religiously homeless, and they are searching. The individual and the subjective experience form the central focus. Everyone is obligated to tinker together a philosophy of life after their own liking and insight. People are driven by an unclear and unfulfilled longing: they roam hither and dither, from Santiago de Compostella to Rome, from the Buddhist meditation training via the yoga lessons to the wellness centre. Restlessness drives us forward. Hellemans speaks of ‘longing without belonging’ (Hellemans 2010).

According to sociologist of religion Joep de Hart the secularization is still going on (2011). In the past decennia God has really disappeared into the wings; even many rural churches are now empty. Outside of the church walls many people with religious feelings or a spiritual interest are on the move. But this alternative spirituality, according to De Hart doesn’t mean a reversal of the secularization process – in contrast to what others think. Many newly spiritual people are focused on this earthly reality and not on the transcendent. Also, the popularity of this new spirituality must not be overrated: clearly only minorities are involved, often ex-churchgoers. The numbers are absolutely too small to compensate the exodus from the churches; ultimately we can speak of the erosion of religion.⁷

The concepts and practices of the ‘new spiritual people’ are loosely compiled and formed, and are often translated psychologically. Spirituality has become ‘free floating’, she has no sharply defined social identity and social ethics are lacking. Finding one’s own personal mixture of beliefs, symbols and practices that are meaningful for this moment or this phase in life is central (De Hart 2011, p. 242).

It seems that the social debate about religion has been expelled to the margins or that it is ruled by suspicion and fear. Headscarves, minarets, ritual slaying, circumcision and homophobia incite the feelings in Europe, which until recently was seen as a calm zone of tolerance and brotherhood. Religion causes tensions and stress (Mikkers 2012, Nussbaum 2013).

6 Refer, for example to the project ‘Allerzielen Alom’ (All Souls Everywhere), which raises remembrance to a form of art, where cemeteries are the preferred locations.
www.allerzielenalom.nl.

7 Sociologists of religion have differing opinions about the number of people that consider themselves to be spiritual. Berghuijs’ research shows that 29% of the Dutch population is involved. Jespers, a scientist of religion from Radboud University Nijmegen has the tendency to estimate the number of real and truly practicing supporters to be 2 – 5 % (Jespers 2013, p. 242).

PURPOSE UNDER PRESSURE

Because of the fragmented religious landscape there is no longer available a clear, transcending framework for purpose/meaning that can help interpret important experiences. 'Freedom and happiness' is perhaps the greatest common denominator. This freedom may become a significant challenge when people come up against the boundaries of existence. When life is upside down, less self-evident than it seemed to be, and places us before moral dilemmas, exactly then the question of purpose and meaning arises. How do we find a place, a home, a refuge? How and where can divisiveness and fragmentation, doubt and insecurity ever come close to wonderment, wholeness and happiness again? How can we find direction and what is the right thing to do? Nowadays not the finding but the searching is the focus, and authenticity and subjectivity are important directives. It just depends on where you can find purpose/meaning.

That is not an easy task. Especially not when we realize that 'purpose or meaning' encompass several dimensions of existence. Because it is not just about a view of life, but also about a way of life, about ways of behaving, about community, an ethic on which you can base your choices and about rituals in order to restrict the chaos. Because of the secularization there are less traditional religious helpers nowadays. Moreover, because of their commitment to one particular religious belief, they often miss the connection with the majority of the population, who no longer expects to find answers in a traditional life-view. Even though regular aids in health care and in social services are open to their client's life questions, they lack the knowledge, methodology and time to adequately address problems of purpose/meaning. They also often don't know where to refer their clients (Hulshof 2012). Ever more often the religious and philosophic language is replaced by a medical or psychological discourse, which makes it hard for people to articulate what it is that makes them restless and insecure. Research within several care practices shows that clients as well as helpers have difficulty naming life questions (De la Hayze 2012, Anbeek, Schuurmans & Palmboom 2013).

The sociologist, Gabriël van den Brink, shows language problems with giving meaning. He researched idealism of people currently and concludes that they are still driven by ideals, but that there are some changes of focus to be observed. Where formerly God, fatherland and work were central, this has moved via our neighbour, society and mankind to love, the body and nature.

Van den Brink notes that present day activists often lack a language in which to express, communicate, judge and defend their actions. In his opinion a civic talk could be of help here. A public conversation that connects people's everyday experiences to societal views and political standpoints. In this public conversation citizens develop their opinions about the 'good life',

in which also one's own concepts about the Higher need to be addressed. Not everyone needs to have the same vision. According to Van den Brink one could form groups, or 'co-operatives' of people who take the same stance in life, where one co-operation is spiritually oriented, the second embraces social engagement and the third one engages in health or vitality issues (Van den Brink 2012, p. 103).

Not only at the micro-level do people look for inspiration in ideals and act accordingly, Van den Brink ascertains. At the meso-level this also sometimes happens, for example when people support their sports-club, or when they dedicate themselves to the work that they do. However, there is no language in to articulate these ideals, which means that the real communication about it is lacking, and so also the value-orientation at meso- and macro-levels.

NEW RESOURCES

The formation of co-operatives for which Van den Brink appeals, where people plan together what makes a good life for them is already taking place in Dutch society. For example, consider the NVVE⁸ or the citizens' initiative *Uit Vrije Wil (Out of Free Volition)*. With values like independence, autonomy, freedom of choice, not having to suffer inhumanly and dying with dignity in top, they invest in the possibility for a 'good' death, in which help from others is not excluded. Through the media they are able to reach a large audience and in this way they influence the view of many concerning suffering, dependency, old age, vulnerability, self-determination, solidarity and human dignity.

People also gather around other themes and values, and formally, but often also informally connect with each other (Van den Berg, Van Houwelingen, and De Hart 2011). When these groups participate in the societal debate they are a resource or source of inspiration, also for those who do not join their group directly.

THE ART OF LIFE

Another important resource in modern secularized countries in these days is the philosophy of the art of living. Existential philosophers like Heidegger and Nietzsche play a large role with this movement, but also philosophers of antiquity like Plato, Aristotle, Epicure and Seneca.

8 De Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vrijwillig Levenseinde. (The Dutch association for voluntary ending of life)

The philosophy of the art of living not only comprises thought, but also action. It is about turning your life into a work of art.

Within the Dutch language area the philosophers of the art of living Joep Dohmen and Wilhelm Schmid can frequently be heard. In their work they emphasize the tragedy of existence. Life is fundamentally insecure and fragile, many things can befall us – illness, death, psychological suffering, violence, betrayal – this calls forth fear. According to them the art of living is important because life is tragic and short. Especially in modern culture, where people are no longer embedded in religious communities, they feel the full meaning of death. One dies alone, and death is the ultimate boundary of life (Schmid 2001, p. 24).

The art of living cannot get rid of the vulnerability and the fear, but it does offer a way of handling it, by confronting it. The attitude in life that she advocates, is characterized by the values ‘self-care’, ‘moderation’, ‘autonomy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘authenticity’. Self-care entails investing time and attention in getting to know yourself well and face all feelings that accompany vulnerability. Moderation means to not allow yourself to be swept away by emotions, impulses and fears, but learning to handle the boundaries of reason, with fear, pain, poverty and death. We search for balance, from which point we can win back our autonomy. Autonomy does not mean our life is makeable, but rather that we ourselves determine how we react to what happens to us. This can be done by creating inner order and by keeping our peace of mind and vitality. We can hold onto our ideals and we have the freedom to choose our values and to live in accordance with them. Finally, authenticity stands for the right involvement, for an inner attitude, for a belief that you behave in a certain way because that is what you should do (Anbeek 2010, Schmid 2004, Dohmen 2007).

According to the Dutch philosopher Paul van Tongeren the philosophy of the art of living underestimates our powerlessness, our inability, our weakness and our vulnerability. With this failure to understand there is too little attention for the measure in which suffering is inevitable in human life. Wilhelm Schmid goes so far to say that even one’s suffering is one’s own choice. When we learn to moderate our longings, and learn to see the difference between possibility and reality, we will eventually learn to navigate between the two. According to Schmidt the individual himself must choose to which suffering he gives preference (quoted in Van Tongeren 2013, p.129).

Van Tongeren is surprised that the ethics of virtue no longer plays a role in the modern philosophy of the art of living. This ethic is also one of self-realization, but she does more justice to human vulnerability and powerlessness than the art of living. According to the virtue-ethics one has no say over happiness, happiness is fragile, just like good. Van Tongeren considers the art of living to be a remarkable mix of elements of classic morality (with

emphasis on training and self-perfecting, and with a blossoming and happy life as purpose), the Hellenistic fixation on one's own happiness (indifference towards that which is not in one's power) and a modern belief in autonomy and one's own capabilities. He advocates consulting Christian art of living more often, which takes the human shortcomings more into consideration.

HEATHEN USER MANUAL

A popular philosopher who does this entirely in his own way is Alain de Botton. In his heathen user manual *Religion for atheists* de Botton pleads to translate all sorts of religious ideas and uses to the secular world. You may very well shrug your shoulders about believing in God and even be a convinced atheist and yet be interested in the way religions stimulate moral awareness, encourage a sense of community, or use the arts and architecture. There are two important needs which we still do not know how to handle well in the secular society. In the first place the need to live harmoniously together in communities, despite our egoistical and violent tendencies. In the second place the need to be able to handle the large amount of suffering that befalls us, like disrupted relationships, death of our loved ones and our own decline and disappearance (De Botton 2011).

De Botton's book is a remarkable catalogue with which you can roam the museum of religions and en route take what is useful to you. So, according to him, in the room 'sense of community' it is a good idea to consider what religions have done in the past to promote the spirit of community. Who knows, we might learn something from this, now that the current sense of community has been so undermined by the pursuance of individual purposes. De Botton emphatically notes that we should especially look at the practical directions, without calling upon the theological top-structure that was once so closely connected to them.

In the room of education we can learn something from the way in which Christians handled their holy scriptures. They were seen as sources of wisdom and as a guide for living. According to De Botton we can put culture in the place of religion. Novels and historic writings offer life-lessons, we are just not used to seeing them as advice as to how to live our life. In his opinion we can learn this from religion. (p. 109).⁹

Religion accentuates that we are imperfect beings; we are not capable of lasting happiness

9 A wonderful example here is the book: *Erfenis Europa* (Inheritance Europe), by the remonstrant preacher Berkvens-Stevelinck (2012). She connects historic-cultural heritage from the arts, literature, music and film with nine current and personal values.

and are plagued by all kinds of desires and fears. Even if we don't believe in God, a ritual, like voicing your pain at the Wailing Wall can be of great importance. Although there is no God to hear us, we still here each other, the struck ones mourn together, grief doesn't only strike us. 'The wall is a place where it is revealed to us what the grief that we usually carry in silence really is: a drop of sadness in an ocean of suffering. It brings us to the comforting realization that disasters are omni-present and in one blow corrects the cheerful assumptions that our culture so unthinkingly takes as a premise. (p. 194).

The perspective of being human in the Jewish-Christian tradition is enviable. When God is dead, the chances are that people – to their own detriment – will place themselves at the centre. They imagine they are lord and master over their destiny, destroy nature, forget the rhythm of the earth, deny death, and fail to value everything that slips through their fingers until it is too late. Our secular world lacks rituals that keep us in our rightful place, and so the man becomes the measure of all things (p. 194).

Some critics ask in bewilderment whether De Botton takes the new structure that he wants to build from the leftovers of religion seriously. He builds a new religion of man and appoints himself as high-priest (Holtzappel 2013). For the time being I assume his plea is meant seriously and humbly.

In view of my argumentation De Botton's approach is interesting: religion holds much that is valuable, and we must not lose it. In many ways believing is richer than not-believing, and De Botton is a welcome guide to help show us the way. But I do question whether this philosopher of the public is not too much of a 'philosopher of convenience': why would he be afraid of the theological top-structure of religions? If religion is a work of man in the eyes of an atheist, then the theological top-structure is also. A lot of value can be found in the thought processes and underpinnings of religion. Certainly philosophers, who are educated and proficient in systematic thinking, should not shirk back from the top-structure of religion. For them there is the grand task of finding out which human treasures are to be dug out of the top-structure. And if they consider themselves to be incompetent they can always consult the theologians, who are more adept at decoding the theological content to the underlying human experiences. A nice presumption, but unfortunately reality shows a different picture.

ZOMBIE RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Dutch theologian Ruard Ganzevoort, in his essay *Spelen met heilig vuur (Playing with sacred fire)* (2013), diagnoses dismally. Current theology is disappearing more and more into the margin of society and is threatened with absolute irrelevance. Many classic theological ideas,

like 'guilt', 'sin', 'evil', 'sacrifice', 'forgiveness', 'belief' and 'truth' have become 'zombie-categories'. They no longer refer to a living reality and have all but forgotten to die. For the small circle of believers that is left they still function as code-words of a religious secret language, but for many in society this zombie religious language is irrelevant. Nevertheless – and theologians are the ones to know this – theological language refers to questions and experiences that are still actual and so it is still meaningful. Because, unlike a judge or a psychologist, the theologian looks for 'a higher or deeper dimension' in the questions and experiences of life, for something that transcends our existence, for ultimate answers (p.6).

Therefore we have a need of theologians who are able to do at least two things. They have learned to speak and understand the complex sacred language, and so act as a translator between people and between people and their traditions. Apart from that theologians must be able to recognize the fundamental life questions in modern culture, that also play a part in religion and to think these through. Religion is about handling ambivalent life. Sometimes she offers comfort, hope, perspective and something to hold on to. Sometimes she turns our calmly flowing little life upside down by advising us that there is more. 'All talk about above comes from below', is a well known saying of theologian Harry Kuitert, but we must become a bit more radical. All our talk about God says something about our existence here and now, as does our talk about heaven, the hereafter and creation. We must learn to make the transition to wisdom, and to steady ground beneath our feet. Religion also addresses 'truth', but this word has become so tainted that Ganzevoort suggests to not using it any longer. According to him it is really all about freedom, connectedness and responsibility, and how we can find our way there, inspired by each other and our sources. When reading Ganzevoort's essay you would think a remonstrant theologian was speaking here, but that is not the case. His words remind one of the remonstrant professor Cornelis Tiele, who in 1897 already writes that he wants to research religion as a purely human phenomenon (Tiele 1897, p.10).

Ganzevoort places remarks twice more on public theology. This theology is by definition fragmentary, according to him; there is no collective base upon which this theology can be built (p. 43). And furthermore this fragmentary theology does not lend itself easily for the systematic of a catechism or the order of a dogmatic manual (p. 45). In the rest of his argumentation Ganzevoort shows by way of film and popular culture what such a fragmentary public theology could entail. As a framework he chooses the virtues 'belief', 'hope' and 'love', with which he comes close to the earlier mentioned philosopher Van Tongeren.

4 AN EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGY OF VULNERABLE LIFE

The discussion about a public theology is of great value. Hopefully Ganzevoort will be right, and we will be in time to prevent that theology goes down due to her own irrelevance. However, I want to strongly contradict Ganzevoort on three points.

In the first place public theology can be more than fragmented, and there certainly is a collective base for this theology. Alain de Botton, but also Ganzevoort himself, and many others provide these: the vulnerability and fragility of human existence.

Secondly I am convinced that especially the systematic theology is extremely suitable to demonstrate the relevance of a public theology. If theologians have the courage to radically translate that which traditionally is seen as the heart of theology to the underlying human experiences and the searching life questions, then that can offer theology a wonderful prism to look at human existence in all its colours and facets. Numerous perspectives become perceivable that can lift man, also current man, above himself and his personal grief.

Thirdly we must not cross out the question of truth. The demand for truth is connected to the search for the real, the good and the beautiful, which we must not quit. This question does need to be connected with the questions of purpose: from where do I come? What is my business here? Where do I / we go as people? (Denaux 2013). In this manner truth is always 'lived truth', experiencing or doing what is right, being in wonder of what is beautiful. This truth is not always and ever the same, but something that is our business in this life itself. There need not be just one lived truth, it is exactly her many forms that make her grand and impressive (Anbeek 2009).

Theology should be built upon these three pillars: vulnerability, systematic theology and lived truth.

VULNERABLE LIFE

The shared foundation of this theology is not a sacred source or a theological document, and also not a divine revelation. It is moulded from the vulnerability of life. They can be called boundary experiences, basic experiences, existential experiences, experiences in which the security of existence which was taken for granted falls away.... This is about personal experiences that turn your existence upside down. Life as it had been up until then ceases to exist. A new, unknown reality announces itself. Different experiences can be involved, but in most cases there will be a loss: loss of health, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, a view of the loss of your own existence.

In theology of vulnerable life we will first zoom in on the concrete experience of loss, the breach and the abyss or the empty country that then becomes visible. In *De berg van de ziel (The mount of the soul)* which I wrote together with Ada de Jong, Ada's story is pivotal. In the summer of 2008 Ada lost her husband and three children in an accident in the Italian Alps. In my book *Overlevingskunst (The art of survival)* my own experiences are the starting point. Zooming in on loss means being willing to face the feelings that accompany loss: sorrow, despair, sharp physical pain, tiredness, exhaustion, resignation, resistance, sometimes relief, and guilt.

Facing this and feeling the vulnerability is hard and not at all pleasant, but it is a step that cannot be left out. It shows and makes tangible that we are far more deeply and fundamentally connected with each other than we normally think we are.

According to philosopher Judith Butler one can question the much loved story of our autonomy based especially on experiences of grieving and violence. According to her these experience break down the illusion that we master ourselves. We become who we are through relationships, but we do not belong to ourselves, we are also 'disowned' by others (Butler 2004, p. 24).

Characteristic for this theology of vulnerable life is that she takes concrete experiences as a starting point, not general treatises of abstractions about vulnerability. The Italian philosopher Elena Pulcini, who also takes vulnerability as a starting point for her care ethics, says that imagined vulnerability can also trigger a turnaround. We can imagine that many events that are mutually connected take place and threaten all of humanity with extinction. This awareness of global vulnerability, in which ones own vulnerability and that of others merge, can form the base for a new exploration of our responsibilities (Pulcini 2013, from p. 184 onward). Although Pulcini touches on an important point with her global vulnerability, I do not agree with her resorting to a mind-experiment. The concrete reality of our own physical, vulnerable life and that of others around us, offers enough for us to have firmly in our minds what fragile life entails in depth.

My choice to go for the micro-level of the experience is a choice for the practical, lived through, experience and the wisdom that can become visible here. But also at the meso- and macro-levels it is important to think through the implications of concrete experiences of vulnerability.

At the middle-level I plead for a 'discourse about vulnerable life'. My aim is for small or large groups to share the personal experiences of fragile life. Discussing together what went wrong, broke away, wasn't possible, didn't succeed, hurt, wounded us, belittled us, where freedom was lost, how we lost ourselves, is not a popular activity. We'd rather keep silent. That, however, is a choice with political consequences.¹⁰ Keeping quiet about dependency and vulnerability, a 'discourse of silence', causes these personal experiences to fall out of the picture, have no name, to not exist. That means we are delivered unto a one-sided story about success, self-development, freedom, health, independence and self-determination. But when we speak of that which hurt us and was broken, we also speak of what gave us strength, what was helpful, how we bounced back, where new possibilities arose, where we discovered something that we had not seen before. It makes visible a shared human condition and invites us to take responsibility for each others' physical, practical life. It opens the eyes to underlying questions that surpass the individual domain. How do we as a society handle vulnerability and dependency? Why are we so quick to think they mar the human dignity? What exactly is human dignity? An ethical appeal can be heard in these questions.

Pulcini, who earlier said that human imagination is large enough to envision our vulnerability, sees a risk in stressing the personal events. We can indeed get stuck in the trauma and the isolated episode, and not see vulnerability as something shared that is fundamental to the human condition. Exactly envisioning global vulnerability makes us consider our responsibilities (Pulcini 2013, p. 185). With that, Pulcini underlines why it is important to tell each other our stories and listen to each other. In this way a discourse of vulnerable life can commence at the macro-level, in which we articulate and so make visible the shared human condition of vulnerable life and the accompanying individual and common responsibilities. Human life is valuable, vulnerable, dependent, and thoroughly relational. Based on shared insights new value-orientations can arise, so that we also see mutual openness, responsibility and solidarity, as necessary to protect life, allow it to blossom and bring it to a good close.

10 Opening ourselves to feelings, especially those that happen in the context of relationships that we cherish, means we are capable of enduring dependency and fragility, and that is difficult because we live in a world in which dependency is seen as inferior. Feelings are personal, but not private, you can communicate them with others. The British psychologist Stephen Frosh writes that the ability to feel other's feelings, or at least understand them, could be the pivotal point of our humanity (Frosh 2011).

According to philosopher Margaret Urban Walker there is no philosophical and moral reflection apart from one's own experience. The best way of unearthing the wisdom hidden in our experiences is to open ourselves to our own experiences and those of many others. Mutually accounting for what we have been through, what that experience has done to us, who were important to us, which choices we made, which values we cherish – it all helps to start articulating our responsibilities (Walker 2007, p. 67). This allows a mutual moral understanding to develop that presumes a common life and tries to continue this. Walker writes about three 'narratives', three kinds of conversations. The first conversation is about who are important to us, which expectations we have, which needs, how we want to invest in relationships. The second conversation involves our moral identity; it is about to whom we want to connect and for whom we want to care. The third is a conversation about values: all things, relationships that we value and responsibilities and what's of importance to them? (Walker 2007, p. 117 and further).

We can apply some of Walker's notions to our research into a new theology of vulnerable life. The most important one is: 'no theological reflection exists apart from one's own experience'. In the land of theologians we are not used to allowing our own experience to openly and insightfully be heard, let alone to give her a place in our theological reflections.

Broadening our own experiences with those of others is a second crucial necessity, in which not the care and responsibility for the other, but the self experienced vulnerability is the starting point. What puzzles you and where lies the greatest pain and despair? Which experiences and actions allow the connectedness to grow and what actually prohibits this? From this conversation the common thinking about values surfaces by itself; this is Walker's third notion that is important to us.

In aiming for a theology of vulnerable life I add a fourth narrative, namely the dialogue with the philosophical and religious traditions. So doing we broaden our knowledge and connect to people throughout times and cultures. We join with the value-orientations of those that lived earlier and who were confronted with comparable and other vulnerabilities as we ourselves are. The tracks they have made on their way to a worthy life can be of significance to us and lift us beyond ourselves.

CHRISTIAN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

For the dialogue with the traditions I'll take the Christian systematic theology as a place of departure, the second pillar under the theology I suggested. I have good reason for this, namely the fine systematic order that shows us numerous aspects of human life. Systematic theology

offers brilliant starting points for our research on the question how we can find direction in life when we ourselves no longer know which way to turn. It also offers a nice systematic of search-questions, with attached many perspectives and insights. In the choice for the Christian systematic theology I am not only inspired by the systematic framework of the Christian faith, but also by the content of the Christian faith. This faith once developed from a search, in the middle of vulnerability and suffering, to come to a life of fullness, in which individuality, connectedness and solidarity have a central place. In the gospels this turns into a failed leadership, dreams that are smothered, violence, death and grieving and the ensuing confusion and disorientation. But exactly at those kinds of crucial moments the stories bring important values into view, values that people have formulated throughout the years, that they have lived by, and which they eventually may have formulated anew.

The declaration of faith also, in which the core of the Christian faith is expressed in a much shorter form, would be a good substantial starting-point. In this sense, my project is not new, but the outcome of a start that was made in 2006 with the new Remonstrant declaration (Goud and others 2004).

The traditional *Apostolic declaration of faith*, the right date of which is not certain, but which probably stems from the first of second century after Christ, starts with the declaration of belief in God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. To continue to speak of Jesus, the Son who suffered for us and after that of the Holy Ghost, and only then of us: first us as a community, and then of forgiveness and the resurrection from death and of an eternal life.

The Remonstrant declaration of faith of 2006 turns the classical declaration upside down and puts the human experiential reality first.

‘We know that our spirit does not find its rest in the security of what it knows or declares, but in the amazed awareness of what is allotted and given to it, that our will does not find its destination in doubt or indifference, but in wakefulness, trust and connectedness with all living beings, that our feelings are not the prisoner of greed and thirst for power, but can develop in a longing for that which is different and pristine, that our existence is not completed by who we are and what we have, but by that which is endlessly larger than we can comprehend.’ Experiences of wonder, trust and connectedness and a wakeful alertness concerning our possibilities for development take first place. Only thereafter can one speak of faith in the Holy Spirit, who focuses the soul on the sacred, just, and good, of Jesus Christ, the true human, and of faith in the Eternal One, who is unfathomed love. Then we turn back to our weakness and vulnerability and see a possible future in connectedness.

Noticeable about the anthropological angle on this declaration is her ‘apophatic’ approach of the human quest. We cannot say exactly where we are travelling, but we can clearly voice what it is not: not the security of knowing or expressing faith, not the indifference, not the greed and thirst for power, not that which we already are now or what we have. Instead we distinguish and accept the wonder of what has been gifted to us, but also wakefulness, trust, connectedness to everything alive, and yearning for what is different, endlessly grander than we can comprehend. We start with ourselves, on the way to ‘beyond ourselves’.

The Christian systematic theology is not my only source for the discourse with the traditions. Theology is at its most colourful when she looks for resonance in what is going on in culture, literature, actuality, and the sources of other religious traditions. Theology only becomes really talked about if she can articulate experiences of preciousness, threat and vulnerability, and can start a discussion thereof.

With Ganzevoort one could say that the dialogue with wisdom-traditions is somewhat fragmentary, but I myself would rather speak of: is somewhat ‘eclectic’. This eclecticism is truly an advantage. The wholeness and freeing of the individual and community does not need to be found in a perfect theological system, moreover, that is exactly the danger that is always lurking around the corner. Theology should be of service, as Maarten Luther (1483-1546) once emphasized, and not a purpose in itself.

PALETTE OF SEARCH-QUESTIONS AND THE PLACE WHERE INSIGHTS CAN BE FOUND

Theological insights should be translated back to the underlying human experiences – they exist of search-questions, but also of wise insights – in order to couple one’s own contemporary experiences to tradition. Based on the eight *loci*, the different chapters or parts¹¹ of the Christian systematic theology, I make a first effort in *De berg van de ziel (The mount of the soul)*. First, I try to discover one or more questions behind a certain chapter. Then I figure out how this question is formulated in other life-philosophies. In *De berg van de ziel (The mount of the soul)* they are Buddhism and humanism. The choice for these two traditions is not a matter of principal, but has to do with my own knowledge and experiences. Other traditions also, like

11 The different parts of the systematic theology do not always fall together with the number of chapters that comprise a systematic theology, the sequence can also vary. For example, see Van den Brink and Van der Kooij (2012), who dedicate three chapters of their Christian dogma to the subject ‘God’.

Islam and Judaism, need to be incorporated in translating back of religious insights to the underlying human questions and quests for understanding.

PROLEGOMENA

The first chapter of systematic theology is called the *prolegomena*, which means foreword. It is about the question: how can we know? Or: how can we understand something in the special field of faith? The answer points to revelation, the Holy Scriptures and tradition. Buddhism also poses the question of how we can gather information about, and gain insight into, that which is of genuine importance: enlightenment or liberation. According to Buddhists reason is of importance here, but meditation also is a way of knowledge. In humanism scientific research is important, but also other human ways of knowledge, like imagination, are deemed valuable.

Looking at vulnerable life, we can adapt the question that is central in the prolegomena to: where have we arrived and how can we orientate ourselves in this unknown territory? Everything, the way it was seems to have disappeared and a new world presents itself. How can we find a way in it? What aid do we have? Language: telling each other where we are, stuttering, crying maybe? What do your senses tell us – what do we taste, hear, smell, see and feel? The answers of the different religions serve as signposts and help us on our way. Telling stories is important, but also that which we cannot say gives insight, feeds our intuition. We couple the signpost to our own experiences of how we have found a first indication earlier.

In the film *Als de Spiegel breekt (When the mirror breaks)* three patients tell how they responded when they heard they had cancer. Total panic and crying, fear, not knowing what to do. They had to tell the children, yet did not want to alarm them. Silence, left to your own resources and the feeling you have to do this by yourself, in spite of having a close network of friends. The experiences differ, but common to all is the wonder and the lack of knowledge of the new territory.¹²

12 *Als de Spiegel breekt (When the mirror breaks). Losing purpose and finding new purpose in a life with cancer. Publisher: Taborhuis and KWF cancer control, 2006.*

GOD: OF ULTIMATE IMPORTANCE

The second topic of systematic theology is about God. Traditionally this question is divided into three: what can we say *about* God? How can we speak *to* God? And how does God speak *to us*? Especially in a time that for many people God has disappeared, the interpretation of this topic is important. What disappears together with God? Buddhism and humanism are not theistic views, and still they pronounce things ultimate and ‘not to be given up’. For humanists, for example, this is the uniqueness of each human being. Asking about God can possibly be interpreted as: what is of ultimate importance? What is sacred? What is not to be given up, especially when we are confronted with vulnerable life? If it is no longer God, is it us for each other then? How can we speak about this, and can we also speak to this not-to-be-given-up-ness? What is the yearning that hides behind our talking to God. In all religions there are forms of prayer in which people can lay down their hopes and yearnings, their sorrow and lack, their despair and happiness before God, the gods, the Buddha, Mary or some other saint. An important motive for our speaking to God seems to be that we want to be seen in what befalls us. But we also want to be touched ourselves, and be addressed ourselves. We want something inexpressible to deeply touch us. Impressions we will remember as long as we live.

The disappearance of God is exactly the reason that the question of what is of ultimate importance seems to be more urgent than ever. A sense of lack and emptiness has emerged, that cannot easily be filled. This past spring I held a series of lectures for master students in the humanistic philosophy about the loci of theology and the human questions that lie behind these. Within that framework they were required to write a personal essay on their own philosophical interpretation of two of the fundamentally human questions which underlie the chapters. During one of my lectures there were protestors when I translated ‘God’ as ‘what is of ultimate importance?’ Because how can one know what is of ultimate importance? How do you determine that one is more important than the other? When can you say that something is not-to-be-given-up? All the more surprised I was that out of 51 students, 21 had chosen to write an essay about the question of God. Obviously the subject touches us deeply.

In 2006, on the occasion of her sixtieth anniversary the IKON (Dutch religious television) conducted a survey amongst preachers about their belief in God. The Remonstrants stood out, 42% of their pastors did not know whether there is a God or a higher power, or denied the existence of God or a higher power. Since 2006 a good number of pastors have followed suit. Even Princess Beatrix and other members of the royal family follow Carel ter Linden, a preacher who does not believe in a personal God and neither in a heaven or an afterlife. ‘God who

watches over you can exist only in the form of people who think they need to do that for you', he says in an interview with Kefah Allush of the Evangelical Broadcaster. He also speaks about the death of his wife. Together with his three children he succeeded in assisting her until the last moment. But she in turn also watched over them, and carefully she chose the moment for the definite good-bye. The interview illustrates movingly how, from a personal experience, one can look for a new significance for the old signpost 'God' in the Christian faith.¹³

CREATION: NATURE IS WHAT WE ARE

A third subject of the Christian systematic theology is creation. Judaism, Christianity and the Muslim religion see God as creator of heaven and earth and everything in between. The doctrine of creation is about God and the world belonging together. All finite things – so, the world – springs from the source of life – or God. In the course of time Christian theologians emphasize that creation is not just about the beginning, but also about destination. God as creator cannot be seen separate from God as redeemer and finisher. This is a religious age-old motive: man wants to be able to bring back his life and world to a creating principle outside of himself. This outward focus of man has to do with his inability to come to terms with finality. We are looking for a way (back) to eternity.

In Buddhism and humanism there is no god who created the world, and yet there is a purpose, even if it does not touch eternity. Buddhists strive to become free of suffering. In humanism self-development of the individual and the development of a humane society are pivotal. Life is comparable to a journey, where the future is brighter than the start. But what is much goes wrong on the way? What is creation and nature show their harshest face, and a tsunami washes away everything? An accident happens in the mountains? You contract a horrible disease? What is the meaning of all that is and what is man's place in all of this? What is our destination? How are we truly meant to be? How can we ever feel secure again, especially after being broken? Where is our home?

MAN: VALUE AND MISERY

The fourth subject of the systematic theology is about man. Noticeable for the human condition is its tragedy. The longing and striving for wellness and happiness are inextricably con-

13 De Kist, November 23, 2012, Evangelische Omroep. (Name of the tv- program and broadcasting company.)

nected to boundaries, with impossibilities and frustrations. Man is made in the image of God, but the image has not wholly succeeded. She is the most beautiful of all creatures, but she drags everything and everyone down in her fall.

Many philosophers also inform us about this double identity. Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger described human existence as free and yet bound, determined – by this and that – yet responsible.

Hannah Arendt writes about ‘nativity’ as the most characterizing aspect of human existence. With this she means the uniqueness of every human birth, but also another ‘miracle of life’. Characteristic of existence is starting over again and again, in words and deeds. This active life is like a second birth, with which we confirm the naked fact of our original birth. To label speaking and acting as characteristics of human existence, calls forth questions like: when did we start anew? With which words and which deeds?

Pastor Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557-1644), leader at the time of handing in the remonstrant declaration in 1610, but at the age of 20 still a student, looked after the wife and children of his host Van Buyren, who was in Mechelen on a business trip. This is at the time of the plague, and both children fall ill. Uytenbogaert locks himself in the contaminated house. The children die; he helps put them in their coffins. He comforts the deeply sorrowful mother, who recovers slowly. Years later in a sermon he writes:

‘Shall spouses, parents and children, blood relatives and friends abandon each other under such sad circumstances? Shall one send away ones servants, because otherwise they might infect wife and children? This would be inhuman. If there are no opportunities in the house to care for them properly, then one must see to it that they do not lack aid elsewhere. In this way is fulfilled the commandment to love.’ (Rogge 1874, p. 14).

CHRISTOLOGY, RECONCILIATION: IT IS AS IT IS

The fifth subject of systematic theology is about Christology. Here, the person and the work of Jesus Christ are central. What identity does he have, is he God or man? Traditionally Christians consider Christ’s suffering and death as being the sacrifice that reconciles God with sinful man. Christ voluntarily sacrifices himself on the cross. Many contemporary believers are uncomfortable about this reconciliation. A loving God could have done this in a wholly different way. For reconciliation bloodshed, tears, suffering, abandonment and death are not necessary. More importantly, Christ is an image of God, he showed how God meant man to

be – in his life, but also in his suffering and dying he is an example of wisdom and courage. Urgent questions are called forth by this life, this suffering, and this dying. How can it be that Christ, the ideal man, is not elevated above the vulnerable life? What do his struggle, his fear and his sense of abandonment mean? It seems here, to be about God who reconciles with human imperfection, but the question of how he could be reconciled, as a man, with suffering and death.

And we, how can we live with the things that go wrong, with breaking-up or with loss? With dreams that do not come to pass? Which keys are handed to us? Which examples impress us? How can we learn to accept that things are as they are, or rather, isn't that the road we need to travel?

PNEUMATOLOGY – THE HOLY SPIRIT LIGHTHEARTEDNESS

The sixth subject of systematic theology is about the Holy Ghost (Spirit). The Hebrew word *ruach* is traditionally translated as spirit, but it has more meanings. It is wind, breath, storm, breeze, life, life-force, movement, and dynamic. God's strength is like a cool breeze or a burning sand-storm. As from creation God breathed into man. It is the spirit of God that gives life, to the individual but also to the community.

The spirit works in a connecting and moulding way, so that we become ever more how we are meant to be. The spirit is the work of God in the here and now, present and yet elusive. She blows wherever she chooses. She cleans that which is dirty, sprinkles water on that which is dry, softens that which has become hardened, warms that which is cold. She is the comforter, fills up the dark heart with light.

Buddhism also has comforters and innovators, bodhisattvas, heavenly beings who aid people and uplift them. Humanists seem to be dependent on each other, but perhaps it just looks that way. The spirit, the light-heartedness of existence, has an unexpected side. The question is: where do we find her? What does she do to us? How did she breathe new life into us? And what was made possible because of that? How did she make us laugh at ourselves and our fate and how did she then lift us above ourselves? How did she make us whole?

ECCLESIOLOGY: BROKEN COMMUNITY

The seventh chapter of the Christian religion is about ecclesiology. This is the part of theology in which one gives thought to the institute of the Church. Throughout the ages the church has grown and changed, against an ever-changing social and political backdrop. Many breaches happened, the religious communities became fragmented, and to this day that process still continues.

John Calvin (1509 – 1564) perceives two major characteristics of the true Church. The word of God is preached and the sacraments are bestowed in a proper manner. The church is of life-importance for the individual. Calvin compares her to a mother who looks after her children. If she does not ‘receive us in her womb, birth us, feeds us at her breast and takes us under her wing, then there is no possibility for an eternal life.’¹⁴

From a human perspective we can translate this subject to the question: how can we organize our communities in such a way that vulnerable life is protected and can fully blossom? Which responsibilities do we have to prosper all living beings, and how can we make this happen?

The question of how we as a society can foster, protect and allow to flourish vulnerable life is not at all simple, more so because we are so focussed on the opposite with our emphasis on autonomy and self-determination. In the book: *Hij had beter dood kunnen zijn (He would have been better off dead)* journalist Gerbert van Loenen writes about his friend who contracted brain damage after surgery to remove a brain-tumour. Their life changed radically. Work is no longer possible, going out independently: not possible, help is needed with everything. One day a woman friend comes for dinner.

‘Still flustered because of her busy job she said to Nick: ‘You choose to continue living, so stop complaining.’ Apart from the fact that Nick hardly ever complained, this remark touched me. As if what she said to Nick was actually: I’ll understand if you want to end your life. If that is not what you want to do, then you must also not talk about your handicaps. And then I also don’t have to feel solidarity for you’ (Van Loenen 2009, p. 14).

14 Calvin. Institution IV, 4.

ESCHATOLOGY: FUTURE

The last chapter of systematic theology is called eschatology and is about the last things, the end of the individual life and the end of history. It is about the judgement and the end of suffering, about a new heaven and a new earth. Translated to the human situation it is about our future, individually and communally. What do we dream about, when we realize how vulnerable and finite our life is? How do we judge ourselves and the life we lived? What leaves to be hoped for? How do we want to travel the road towards the end?

Now especially, when for many the belief in a hereafter has vanished, these questions can be seen in a different light. What is the purpose of our finite existence? Why add days, if everything that needed to be done has already been done? What if you are finished with life? How much longer must you, or do you want to, remain in the waiting room of death? And how? What will remain of us, and how do we want to be remembered?

LIVED TRUTH

So, I have mentioned three pillars upon which theology should be built: vulnerability, systematic theology and lived truth. As I indicated, this is a first, temporary, not at all comprehensive, initial approach, an attempt which I probably make myself ridiculous with the systematic theologians. Yet, I believe I might conclude that the coupling between contemporary stories about vulnerable life offers a special perspective for the broad spectrum of insights of systematic theology. From the lived life arises a colourfulness and diversity that is not directly perceivable of its own accord. The religious prism breaks the light and dark of existence in a wondrous way. By connecting our own experiences with tradition, numerous colours and shimmers become visible. We have much more to tell each other than we think we have. We ourselves are living the systematic theology.

My attempt at a renewed theology needs to be continued. I see here various challenges and responsibilities.

In the first place theologians are needed who, together with philosophers and interested lay-people, will further translate the upper structure of systematic theology carefully to the underlying reality of the human experiences. They need to possess courage and wisdom to distinguish firewood from building wood. Firewood also can be of use, but it needs to be cut down before it can give space, warmth and light and so can help throw a light on what it is really about. This group of translators needs to be divers, because there is a need for knowledge

and experience of and with different religious and cultural sources and languages. Tolerance and respect are important requirements in order to understand each other. The first step is an adventure in itself – it is nearly a dream – a discourse between scholars and believers of Jewish, Hindu, Islamic, Christian, humanistic, agnostic and Buddhist decent who explain to each other which experiences hide behind their different views and dogma's.

A second challenge is that believers and non-believers enter into a conversation together about vulnerable life. It is important that concrete experiences are spoken about here. When were you confronted with the vulnerability of life? How did you feel physically and emotionally? What was of ultimate importance and proved to be not-up-give-able? Which people around you caused you not to give up? What professional people en organisations pointed you in the right direction, or what were you exactly up against? Which opinions and societal discussions were helpful or on the other hand a hindrance for finding a way out? What should we ourselves start in the societal debate?

A last challenge is looking for connections between our own lived lives on the one hand and the insights and stories from the traditions on the other hand. What do they offer? What light do they throw on the urgent questions of our existence? How can we feel connected to vulnerable people in different times and cultures? What light do our experiences throw on tradition? Where do we have our own, new journey to go?

In this way we will beget a theology that exists of reflection on fundamental life-questions. That is in dialogue with the people that matter, and that can make connection to those who went before and those that will follow us.

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