

Preface

*And this is the name by which he will be called:
The Lord is our righteousness.*

The contributions published here came into being during the last ten years, being presented as lectures at meetings of the Gesellschaft für Evangelische Theologie or as essays in the journal *Evangelische Theologie*. They are intended to contribute not only to the specific Christian perception of God, but also to joy in the God of Jesus Christ. The One who lets the sun rise on the evil and the good is himself ‘the sun of righteousness’—and this is the title I have given to one of the chapters in the present book.

The order of the contributions in the present book follows three fundamental Christian insights:

God is the God of Christ’s resurrection.

God is the righteousness which creates justice and puts things to rights.

The traces and signs of God give the world meaning.

These insights lead us into the wide living spaces of the triune God.

I began to study theology sixty years ago. Theology was for me then, and is still, a fascinating, disturbing and wonderful discipline, an adventure of ideas, a progression into new spheres, and a beginning without end. This book is intended to bring out my experience that it is a profound joy to think about life and death, the future and the earth before God, and what that means theologically. But at the beginning and at the end is always God himself. God is our joy, God is our torment, God is our longing. It is God who draws us and sustains us. We are theologians for God's sake. Theology is a function of God's before it becomes a function of the church.

When I think back, I discover with some surprise that I have always understood Christian theology as a unity, irrespective of the persons who have thought it and maintained it. From Orthodoxy to the Pentecostal movement in Europe, Asia, Africa and America, all theologians belong to the whole of Christendom on earth and to the thousand-year-old *communio theologorum*. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Greek nor barbarian, neither master nor servant, and neither man nor woman. All become one because the frontiers that divide them have been broken down. And the same is true in Christian theology. Everyone who has contributed something to the knowledge of God must be listened to and taken seriously. Christian theology reaches out beyond denominational frontiers and cultural barriers. Its discussions do not run parallel to confessional boundaries. I myself have never felt the need to defend my own confession towards anyone else, but have taken account of the other traditions with curiosity, and with admiration too, as being complementary to my own. I was ordained in the Reformed tradition and have served as pastor in its congregations, but this tradition is my starting point, not my boundary. To be evangelical in the true sense means thinking ecumenically, for the gospel of Christ—the 'evangel'—is ecumenical. To be Reformed means thinking in life's reforming processes, so as to conform to the gospel: *theologia semper reformanda*, not *semper*

idem: theology must always be reformed, not always be the same. Perhaps I am also simply a relic left over from the ecumenical era, which is now supposed to give way to an era of confessional profiles. If that is the case, it is a good thing, for I believe that the only future for a divided Christendom before God, and hence on earth too, is a common future.

At a time when different religious communities are living together in a world threatened by violence, interfaith dialogue is necessary. But this dialogue cannot be carried on just 'for the sake of peace', although this is what is demanded by people for whom religion is a matter of indifference and who therefore maintain that 'one religion is as good as another' or that 'all religions are somehow or other related to God'. The dialogue must be pursued honestly, because of what it is about. But it can only be carried on honestly if it is a dialogue about the truth. Without truth there is no peace in which we can live. And part of honest dialogue is also confrontation, and the 'yes' and 'no.' For me, it is impossible to be tolerant towards satanism, the belief in the devil in the world religions, the religion of death, and the religion of nihilistic destructions. I have no desire for dialogue with religious anti-Semitism. So my concern in this book is to bring out what is *specific, strange and special about the Christian faith*. This by no means leads to a depreciation of other religions, but all the others have a right to discover what Christians believe and what they don't believe. The same is of course true for the others too. For me, what is distinctively Christian is the confession of Christ and belief in the resurrection. I don't know whether all religious people believe in the same God, but I am certain that the same God believes in all human beings, whether they are religious or not, because they are the beings he has created on his beloved earth.

So my concern in this book is also the *consistent Christianization* of the religious and philosophical traditions in Christianity and in theology. I am putting forward here an outline for an idea about the *last judgment* which has Christ at its centre and no longer takes

its bearings from the Egyptian judgment of the dead. This is not a matter of speculations about a far-off future. It has to do with overcoming the deadly friend-enemy thinking of the Armageddon warriors and the Islamic terrorists here and now. The last judgment is the world's salvation, not its annihilation, just as Gretchen, we are told in Goethe's *Faust*, is *gerichtet*—*gerettet*: judged—saved. I am fully aware that here I am challenging, and putting up for discussion, ancient traditions in historic Christianity. In doing so I am developing further the victim-orientated doctrine of justification which I published earlier.¹

In the last part of this book, the section on God in nature, I am trying to continue the conversation which I began in 2002 in the book *Science and Wisdom* (ET 2003)—the conversation between the sciences and theology. In the section on resurrection in nature, I have thought about the natural world in the perspective of Christ's resurrection, and the cosmic Christology which follows from that; while the chapter within this section, entitled 'The Resurrection of Nature: The New Creation of All Things', has to do with the signs and lights through which the natural world points to the indwelling presence of God's Spirit. This transcendent divine immanence is part of a *natural theology* which sees itself as a response and resonance to a *theology of nature*. Nature in the perspective of Christ's resurrection points to God in its language of natural signs. We come a step closer to the community of the sciences and cultural studies if we ask about the meaning of what we can scientifically know. Do we understand what we know? The *hermeneutics of nature* I am putting forward here could be a bridge between the sciences and theology, a bridge that can be crossed in both directions.

I am still continually surprised at the great number of dissertations which have been written in different countries, seminaries or faculties about my theology and its problems, for my real intention was only to gain clarity about my own problems. But it is what is concrete that is apparently the relevant thing, and experience-based

theology appears to be universal theology. The response to my theological attempts of course gives me pleasure, the more so since I hope that through their study of my own reflections the authors have arrived at their own theological ways forward.