
Hermeneutical Theology

Everything has its time. Hermeneutical theology had its time—in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. That is a significant duration. In contrast to some other theological movements, it did not simply remain an announcement and an agenda; it actually has a history that is worth remembering. But does it have a present that is worth mentioning? Or any future at all? Are there reasons to continue that which students of Rudolf Bultmann such as Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, and Eberhard Jüngel—and their own students—began two or three generations ago? And what would there be to continue, if one wanted to?

I am not suggesting that there is only one answer.¹ But to be able to answer at all, one must first take a look backward, for orientation, before looking ahead. What goes by the name of “hermeneutical

1. See U. H. J. Körtner, “Zur Einführung: Glauben und Verstehen. Perspektiven Hermeneutischer Theologie im Anschluß an Rudolf Bultmann,” in *Glauben und Verstehen. Perspektiven hermeneutischer Theologie*, ed. U. H. J. Körtner (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 1–18; H. Vetter, “Hermeneutische Phänomenologie und Dialektische Theologie. Heidegger und Bultmann,” in Körtner, *Glauben und Verstehen*, 19–38; O. Bayer, “Hermeneutische Theologie,” in Körtner, *Glauben und Verstehen*, 39–55; Körtner, *Theologie des Wortes Gottes. Positionen—Probleme—Perspektiven* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001); and Körtner, *Hermeneutische Theologie. Zugänge zur Interpretation des christlichen Glaubens und seiner Lebenspraxis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008).

theology” within Protestant theology cannot easily be reduced to a single type or common denominator. Of course, there are similarities, but there are also significant differences.

In contrast to theological hermeneutics, which exists in many versions both inside and outside of Christianity,² hermeneutical theology is a movement within Protestant theology in the second half of the twentieth century that is tightly linked, theologically, with the development and deepening of Bultmann’s theology along the lines of Reformation theology and, philosophically, with the history of philosophical hermeneutics in the twentieth century after Martin Heidegger.³

1. A Philosophical Perspective

These developments can be described under different aspects and from different standpoints; the same is true of that which was, is, or can be understood as hermeneutical theology. In his commendable book, Otto Pöggeler presents a philosophical narrative, rich in material and detail about the various threads of discussion, concerning what he, following Heidegger and Bultmann, calls “hermeneutical theology.”⁴ However, exactly what is to be understood by that term remains obscure, lost among the complexities of the extensive reminiscences from the history of theology and philosophy that Pöggeler shares. All the way through to the final chapter it remains unclear just what he understands “hermeneutical theology” to mean or how he wants it to be understood. True, he connects it to a number of theological and philosophical debates of the twentieth century and includes in his narrative not only different strands of twentieth-century Protestant theology but also recent publications of Pope Benedict XVI. However, within these complex discussions, “hermeneutical theology” is spoken

2. See, for example, J. Lauster, *Religion als Lebensdeutung. Theologische Hermeneutik heute* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005); and U. H. J. Körtner, *Einführung in die theologische Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

3. In this book, “theology” is always understood as Christian theology. More specific definitions will be given as needed.

4. O. Pöggeler, *Philosophie und Hermeneutische Theologie. Heidegger, Bultmann und die Folgen* (Munich: W. Fink, 2009).

of in very different, sometimes contradictory, and often pejorative ways. Pöggeler fails to provide the clarity needed to guide us through this ambiguity.

Even his final chapter, presented as the systematic culmination of the work, remains vague on this point. To be sure, the publisher announces that at “the end of book stands the attempt to systematically define on the basis of philosophy what hermeneutical theology can be.”⁵ And Pöggeler himself announces that “it will be asked in systematic fashion how philosophy helps to bring a theology into play that claims for itself the adjective ‘hermeneutical.’”⁶ But this promise is never fulfilled. Pöggeler begins with Ebeling, who is said to have used “hermeneutical theology” to mean the fundamental theological “question about the ground of the necessity of theology at all.”⁷ Pöggeler criticizes Ebeling for answering that question in a way that was not only so Christian, but so narrowly Protestant, that it was not even able to value “the artworks of Christendom” or “Gregorian chant.” Much less was it able—as had been the case since Heidegger—to value “the experience of nature and art,” “Greek tragedy,” “Zen Buddhism,” or “Taoism.”⁸ And Pöggeler asks whether “today, when the continents have become closer, any talk of a ‘hemeneutical’ theology must not be developed from this world-wide conversation,” and whether “what we call ‘hermeneutical theology’” ought not be practiced “as a global hermeneutics” of a variety of religious and cultural traditions.⁹ Hermeneutical theology, to put it succinctly, ought to be understood and practiced as the cultural hermeneutics of religions.¹⁰

However, Pöggeler correctly sees that the “focus upon ‘theology’” can be “a problem.”¹¹ “In a hermeneutical theology the very heart of the question must be whether the step to theology must be, or may

5. *Ibid.*, back cover.

6. *Ibid.*, 283.

7. *Ibid.*, 295; See G. Ebeling, “Hermeneutische Theologie?,” in *Wort und Glaube II* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 99–120.

8. *Ibid.*, 296.

9. *Ibid.*, 296–97.

10. Cf. I. U. Dalferth and Ph. Stoellger, eds., *Hermeneutik der Religion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

11. Pöggeler, *Philosophie*, 297.

be, taken at all.”¹² Would it not be better to restrict oneself to the hermeneutical and forgo the theological? Should one not concentrate on the understanding of religious, cultural, and anthropological phenomena and, as “a philosopher like Franz von Baader in opposition to Hegel and Schelling” rightly stressed, want “to see the effects of the religions not determined by metaphysical principles”?¹³ Indeed, if theology is understood to be a metaphysical science of the principles of religion, one can only agree. But one can only understand theology in that way if one has not understood what hermeneutical theology of the Protestant sort is all about. Pöggeler’s extensive survey actually misses the very point of the movement that he discusses in such detail. He fails to grasp it because he gets lost in the diversity of the historical material and in the vagueness of his view of hermeneutics, while simultaneously holding firmly to an understanding of theology that is not that of hermeneutical theology. In the end, therefore, for him there can only be an “interplay between philosophy and a hermeneutical theology” that remains “to be carried out again and again.”¹⁴

The problem of this position lies neither in Pöggeler’s understanding of philosophy nor in his completely legitimate request that the variety and diversity of cultures and religions be taken into account hermeneutically. Instead, the problem lies in his lack of a clear understanding of theology. Thus, he writes:

Any effort may be counted as philosophy that takes up the questions humans ask while dismissing none of those questions. Such a philosophy always exists within a socio-historical context. It must offer instruction in the beliefs and practices which determine how people define themselves. This instruction can critically take into account the lived experience of people. If one is to speak of a hermeneutical theology, then it must be conceded that the theological approach itself is problematic. While individuals may distinguish themselves from one another by their religious decisions, they remain embedded in the comprehensive assumptions of their larger cultures. . . . As a result, philosophy has the obligation to engage with every fundamental approach in the dialogue and conflict of cultures, while allowing this dialogue and conflict to

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 26.

14. Ibid.

remain open, an openness that must be achieved again and again and often cannot be achieved without pain.¹⁵

As a specification of the task of a hermeneutically oriented philosophy, this statement is worthy of support, especially since not just the interpretative, but also the critical task of philosophy is emphasized. But while philosophy is concentrated on a problem-oriented instruction regarding the “beliefs and practices which determine how people define themselves,” the task of hermeneutical theology is intended to be that it “critically take[s] into account” what is, in fact, experienced within the variety of cultures and religions. However, this critical account must by no means take on the problematic form of a theology that seeks to make normative statements and privileges one faith persuasion over another. Accordingly, hermeneutical theology is limited to remembering “that the theological approach itself is problematic.” This self-critical function of seeing itself as a problem is all Pöggeler can get out of hermeneutical theology.

But that is too little. Hermeneutical theology is not simply that which should distinguish every critical theology. It does not exhaust itself in seeing itself as a problem. It has a positive task. But at this point, Pöggeler’s account remains opaque.

2. Theological Perspectives

Pöggeler’s book fails to address the challenges of clarifying how hermeneutical theology understands theology and of giving a theological account of hermeneutical theology. That challenge will be taken up in this study in light of German-speaking Protestant theology of the last century. Here, too, the task will not only be reconstruction but also criticism. But beyond this, I shall attempt to critically adopt the core insights of hermeneutical theology and to develop them in a constructive fashion. My aim is not only to report on the history of philosophy and theology in the twentieth century, but to make a theological contribution to the debate in the twenty-first century.

15. *Ibid.*, 27.

A critical look to the past is a prerequisite for moving forward in a productive way. This look backward would, however, prove to be blind in crucial respects if it did not see that two clearly different tendencies can be distinguished within the theological tradition we are considering. They have two important features in common. Both follow the Reformation tradition of being oriented on the incarnate *verbum dei*,¹⁶ because that is the only place at which (and from which) one not only can but *must* speak of God, if one wants to say anything at all.¹⁷ And both place the basic relationship between *cognitio dei* and *cognitio hominis* at the center, although with characteristically different emphases. One of these tendencies is represented by Gerhard Ebeling, the other by Ernst Fuchs and Eberhard Jüngel.

The theological point of Ebeling's approach was to develop, with constant recourse to Martin Luther, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, those features in Bultmann's theology that are consistent with Reformation theology, and to integrate them into a Lutheran hermeneutics of the word of God based on the distinction between law and gospel. This was carried out within the framework of a *hermeneutics of reality* centered on the key concept

16. See Ebeling, "Hermeneutische Theologie?"; E. Fuchs, "Das Wort Gottes," in *Zum hermeneutischen Problem in der Theologie. Die existentielle Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959), 323–33; Fuchs, "Das Sprachereignis in der Verkündigung Jesu, in der Theologie des Paulus und im Ostergeschehen," in *Zum hermeneutischen Problem*, 281–305; Fuchs, "Das Neue Testament und das hermeneutische Problem," in *Glaube und Erfahrung: Zum christologischen Problem im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1965), 136–73, esp. 150–57; and Fuchs, "Neues Testament und Wort Gottes," *ThLZ* 97 (1972): 1–16. Fuchs's texts are scarcely accessible unless one reads the Swabian dialect. "One has the feeling that Fuchs would be saying something marvelously important if he were saying anything at all," as R. W. Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For: The Sense of Theological Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 196, aptly noted. Those who have difficulty with the reading of Fuchs's texts, and understand no Swabian, can rely on the works of E. Jüngel. There one can find, presented in accurate hermeneutical punctiliousness, all of the sentences between Fuchs's thoughts and insights that Fuchs himself left unwritten.

17. In the world of human experience, there is not a single point where you would have to speak of God or where there would not still be much important to say if one renounced speaking of God. But one cannot speak about the Word of God, or about God's self-revelation, without speaking of God. Whoever cannot or will not do so may without self-contraction completely renounce the use of the term "God," because everything that can be said with it can also be said without it. Conversely, Christian theology, which has to speak about the Word of God and about divine self-revelation if it is to have anything to say at all, cannot *not* speak of God, but at the same time must here speak of God in a very particular way if it is really to speak of God. That is why, starting from here, theology has good reason to make God a topic of discussion throughout, even where there is no necessity to do so. In this formal sense, Christian theology is a theology of revelation, or it is superfluous, because its talk of God could be replaced by other interpretations of reality as it is experienced or might be experienced.

of the *word-event*, in which the *cognitio dei* is developed from the *cognitio hominis* as shaped by the dialectic of sin and faith.

The theological point of the approaches of Fuchs and especially Jüngel, however, was to develop, by means of a thorough exegesis of New Testament texts within the horizon of the reflections on language of the later Heidegger and the Trinitarian Word of God hermeneutic of Karl Barth, a revelation-oriented theological hermeneutics of the freely occurring and self-disclosing presence of God. Its central term was the *speech-event*, and it was elaborated as a *hermeneutics of possibility* in which everything, even the *cognitio hominis*, was developed from the *cognitio dei* disclosing itself as such.

These two currents of hermeneutical theology also differ in their philosophical emphasis. While Ebeling proposed a *relational ontology of reality*, developed in the footsteps of the subject-hermeneutics of modernity, Jüngel outlined a *dynamic ontology of possibility*, which opened the way to a postmodern hermeneutics of the event.

To explain what this means, let me briefly review in the next chapter some central lines of development within twentieth-century hermeneutics.