

# Introduction

This book is a contribution to hermeneutical theology in the twenty-first century. It offers a critical analysis of this important movement within twentieth-century Protestant theology. The purpose of the analysis is not to assign this movement a place within the history of theology, thus consigning it to the past as theology moves on to face changing issues and new challenges. Rather, it is to make its concerns understandable and to point out their validity for the present. Hermeneutical theology in all of its versions has never attempted to adapt to the trends and fashionable topics of the time, but has rather taken up the task and assignment of Protestant theology with radical seriousness in the context of our present secular age. It is not directed toward the wishful thinking of more or less well-meaning contemporaries, whether those nostalgic for a bygone religious age or those critical of all religion. It seeks rather to develop itself from the roots of Christian theology in Christian faith. Its concerns were and are those of a radical theology. That is what this book is about.

Theology is intellectual work that involves hard thinking. However, one's thinking is not rendered radical simply by writing "RADICAL" in capital letters while leaving "thinking" in small letters. Nor do theologians become radical theologians by focusing all their energies on maximizing the *Logos* aspect of "theology" while minimizing the *Theos* aspect.<sup>1</sup> Such a strategy holds just as much promise as sawing off

1. The shift from the study of God (theology) to the study of religion (science of religion or religious studies) since the late eighteenth century has often been (mis)understood to mean that theology

the branch on which one sits. Nor are those theologians particularly radical who put all their efforts into demonstrating that it is not necessary, possible, useful, or appropriate to speak of God, but instead insist that human experiences, needs, problems, religious orientations, antireligious prejudices, or nonreligious ways of life must be placed at the center of theological thinking and church practice.<sup>2</sup> This alternative is a caricature. The two emphases are not mutually exclusive; instead, they require each other theologically.

The Reformation insight into the elementary and comprehensive correlation between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of human beings (*cognitio dei* and *cognitio hominis*) is not realized, however, simply by adorning our everyday experience and its scientific explanation with a cream topping of religion or some reference to transcendence. For Christian theology, the fact that religion and religions exist is not the greatest stroke of good fortune; this fact can serve to divert theology from its rightful task. So long as one understands “religion” as a special field of empirical research or as one segment of human life that is the subject matter of theology, one makes

has to be construed as anthropology (Feuerbach), as a systematic account of the history of religions (Troeltsch), as a version of the psychology of religiosity or religious emotions (Freud, Jung, William James, Otto, Erikson, Jaynes), as part of an evolutionary psychology of religion and religious convictions (Pascal Boyer, Barbara King), as a spiritual neuroscience (Persinger, Newberg, Geschwind), as a radical account of the decline, disappearance, or death of God in secular culture (Althizer, Hamilton), as a comparative account of what people believe in different cultures and traditions (theology of religions or comparative theology), and so on. Approaches of that kind, for all their differences, all agree that we cannot say anything meaningful about God but only about human belief in divinities, gods, or God or, more generally, about the empirical, experiential, and historical phenomena of religion, religions, and religiosity in human life and society. For methodological reasons, they hold, we can only study human activities but not divine activity. It is the accepted methodological axiom of the modern and postmodern mind alike that everything that can be studied, even God and trust in God, has to be studied *etsi deus non daretur* (as if there were no God). But this is self-defeating, as many have pointed out, and it misses the very point of religious convictions. Cf. Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987); and McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2005).

2. English grammar creates well-known problems about the appropriate third-person reflexive pronoun for God. As the American poet Christian Wiman asks in *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013), 2, what language is “accurate or helpful when thinking about how God manifests himself—or herself, or Godself, or whatever pronoun you want to use—in reality or in individual lives”? There is no general answer to this, and to use “Godself” just becomes too awkward in many contexts. Since Christians speak of God as Jesus did, and Jesus addressed God as father and not as mother, I shall use “he” and “himself” in this book wherever “God” or “Godself” sounds too clumsy. The reader ought not to conclude from this that I assume that God is male or that this gendered language is being used descriptively when applied to God.

the very possibility of theology dependent upon a debated reality, a reality that appears from a secular point of view to be shrinking and from a postsecular point of view to be gaining ground. Moreover, the field of religious studies has long established itself as the specialist for studying this empirical and historical realm of cultural phenomena, thus leaving theology, so understood, in an unfortunate battle for turf.

All this is unnecessary. Theology has no need to fight with religious studies about which can better, or more appropriately, or more rightfully deal with the religious phenomena of human life. Theology also gains no advantage by approaching the topic of religion with a sociological or anthropological fundamentalism that sees all people through the lens of religiosity (so that they are not really without religion, even though empirically they practice no religion) or that understands society to be fundamentally shaped by the function of religion (so that there can be areligious people, but no religion-free society). Theology has to do primarily with God, not with religion, with the one who alone rightfully deserves to be worshipped (a normative question), not with the empirical practices of worship and the gods people actually worship (factual questions). Theology's interest in religion(s) and religious practices is a mode of its interest in God, not an independent interest in its own right. It studies religion(s) because it seeks to learn something about God and, as theology, it does so for no other reason.

This is true of everything it studies, and it could study anything in this way. Without God, there would be nothing to study and nobody to study it. God is the one without whom nothing possible would be possible, and nothing actual would be actual. To be true to this is a formal requirement of any viable idea of God. To think God, therefore, is to think that without which one could not think—whether with respect to what one thinks (content) or how one thinks it (form) or how one thinks what one thinks (mode) or that one thinks (fact). To focus on God (or the question of God) is to focus on that without which one could not focus on God (or the question of God) or on anything else. This has to be taken in its most radical sense. There is nothing

special about God, but everything is unique. “God makes no difference to anything,” as Herbert McCabe held, “not because God is impotent, but because God is the reason why there is anything at all.”<sup>3</sup> This is why theology does not assume any specialist knowledge about God from sources inaccessible to anyone else. What it thinks and says is public; it can be understood by anyone who cares, whether one agrees with it, dismisses it, or rejects it. But it does not think something that one could meaningfully affirm, ignore, or deny without affecting one’s view about everything, including oneself. For theology, even to deny God presupposes the prior actuality of that which one denies. Therefore, theology cannot focus on God without understanding itself and everything else as being impossible without God. This is a unique claim made only about God, the prior actuality of everything possible and actual; or, rather, it is a claim made about the idea of God—that is to say, that which we think when we think God as the one without whom nothing possible would be possible, and nothing actual would be actual. But it does not assume God to be a self-evident reality that nobody could meaningfully deny. On the contrary, God is neither given in experience (God is not one god among others) nor accessible in thought (God is beyond everything that can be thought). God is not a token (this god) of a type (god), nor a particular (a Christian or a Jewish or a Muslim God) of something general (divinity), nor merely singular (one) but unique (the only one). This does not make God ineffable but rather inconceivable as God without God’s self-disclosure. And it does not make theology impossible but allows it to see God present and at work everywhere, albeit in different ways. Just as the sciences explain everything *etsi deus non daretur* (as if there were no God), so theology discerns everything *etsi deus daretur* (as if there were God). On the one hand, therefore, theology has nothing more to do with religion, religions, or a particular religion than it has to do with other areas and aspects of human life that are explored in the humanities (culture) or the natural and social sciences (nature and society). On the other hand, the only way God can become its theme is because of God’s self-

3. Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum 2005), xiii.

disclosing relationship to human life and human life's relationship to God. God is not an entity among others in the world but that without which there would be no life and no world, and thus no way of dealing with God or religion or anything else.

It follows that theology, since it is directed toward God, must take *everything* into account, not just the limited field of religious phenomena within human life. In principle, then, the subject area for theological thinking extends far beyond religion and religions. The social sciences are no closer to the center of its concerns than the natural sciences or the life sciences. Theology focuses on God, not by making God a special topic among others but by perceiving everything, seeking to understand everything, exploring everything, and reasoning about everything in the light of God's effective presence. It is *theology* insofar as it concerns itself with bringing the *logos* of the phenomena of this world to expression as it is manifested or hidden in the light of God's presence.

Doing this makes theology *theology*. *How* it does this marks it as *radical* theology. Radical theology not only addresses everything in the light of the presence of God, but it does so within a certain horizon and from a very specific point of view, that of the radical reorientation from nonfaith or unfaith (unbelief) to faith (belief).<sup>4</sup> This transformation is not something that one can bring about on one's own; instead, it is a totally contingent experience that those affected, with good reason, do not attribute to themselves or to others, but to God alone. This by no means explains this contingency or theologically defuses it. In fact, it is just the opposite: through reference to God its inexplicable contingency is not only retained, but increased and deepened. Theology becomes radical by consistently and uncompromisingly reasoning on the basis of this event, whose contingency is not explained away but radically enhanced through reference to God. It explores an event horizon that through its very

4. I shall use the terms *non-faith*, *lack of faith*, and *unfaith* interchangeably as the opposite or negative complement of *faith*.

recourse to God makes room for absolute novelty and thus offers a new perspective on everything.

Radical theology aims neither to induce such a change of orientation from unbelief (lack of faith or nonfaith) to belief (faith) nor to deduce its possibility from given experiences or principles of reason. Both would be foolish expressions of a thorough confusion about what is and is not possible and useful for theological thinking. Rather, it sets out from this change of orientation and seeks from within it to shed light on the conditions of its possibility and to clarify the prerequisites and consequences of its reality. Without this change, there could be no radical theology. The given for radical theology, however, is not the mere empirical presence of certain life phenomena (conversion experiences), but rather the radical transformation of the framework of orientation through which all life phenomena are experienced and understood. This transformation is not confined to certain phenomena, but can appear anywhere and at any time, if it happens at all. Biographically, this change may occur as a sudden event or as an imperceptibly recurring process that others can hardly notice and that the persons themselves may recognize only in retrospect. It thus corresponds to the Christian paradigm for this change, the confession of faith in Jesus Christ, expressed in terms of the end of the old life and the beginning of a new life: the world came to an end and a new world began and hardly anyone noticed. If not for the church, no one would even remember. But the fact that the church exists is no merit of the church, and that it still exists after two thousand years is also nothing for the church to brag about.

This change is radical both in the biographical sense and the historical sense because it is a new beginning of life, not simply a change of life, a becoming new (an eschatological event), not simply a becoming different (a historical event). Of course, this transformation of orientation, in either life history or world history, can be described as an alteration or becoming different in such a way as to underscore the continuity of the life and of the history. Nonetheless, the essence of the experience is that the continuing sequence of “the old” is not

extended, but a sequence that is entirely new begins. This is not merely a new series of the old things: both in life and in history, something radically new has come into being, not just another case of the old. Thus, neither life nor history can be described any longer as a simple unity; they must now be eschatologically differentiated (old and new). This does not mean, however, that the old is simply what came before while the new is what comes after. Instead, the distinction between the old and the new applies both to the life and history that came before and to the life and history that comes after: *everything* is seen in a new way in light of the eschatologically decisive point of view of the old and the new. This is what makes it a *radical* transformation of orientation.

This radical transformation of orientation, from nonfaith to faith, does not lead to a new life in a different world, but to a new worldview and view of life in which everything is seen anew, including the biographical or historical event that led to this new view. This change can be investigated by all the scholarly and scientific methods we normally use in studying the phenomena of human life, history, and culture. Nonetheless, if one does not recognize that this *becoming different* in faith is understood and lived out as a *becoming new* by those who define their new identity and life as believers by reference to it, then the crucial point will be missed entirely. One does not do it justice when this terminology is understood only as a hyperbolic way of expressing what “actually” is, in a scientifically strict sense, only a *becoming different*. After all, in life and in history there is no becoming new, only an ongoing becoming different. Once a life has begun, it can no longer become new; it can only become different so long as it exists and has not reached its end. If it is new, then it was previously not yet there (substantial becoming); if it was already there, then it can only become different, but not new anymore (accidental becoming). A life is new only at the beginning, and that lies always behind us. But each beginning is also a becoming different, if not for the new life itself, then for the context in which it appears. Thus, there are always two things one can say about the beginning of a new life: It is new because it now is, whereas before it was not; and it is a change in the world

that now is different from what it was before. When new life makes its entrance, it enters into the context of a particular history. What is a becoming new for it is a becoming different for the context: it is not the new life that is changed, but the history that is changed. Every becoming new is thus a becoming different, but not every becoming different is also a becoming new. Nothing that is can become new, so wherever something new comes into being, the context in which it happens also becomes different. It is not the becoming new, but the becoming different, that is the dominant category. And since every change is an event that changes the state of the world, every becoming new from the perspective of a new life is a becoming different from the perspective of the world. The world permanently changes, but it only becomes different and never new.

Looking at the transformation from nonfaith to faith solely in terms of a life becoming different sets up the ordinary point of view as the measure of the theological point of view, and thus misses its point. Theology does not understand all becoming new, including the coming to faith, as “in the end” simply becoming different. It understands *this* becoming different as a *becoming new of this life*. This is true only because and insofar as the change from nonfaith to faith possesses a surplus in comparison with all other phenomena of life in the process of becoming different. Faith cannot be reduced to a set of empirically describable phenomena that initially are not there in someone’s life and then are there (even though it certainly does not occur without such phenomena). Faith is not itself a phenomenon in life, an acceptance of what one has previously not thought true or what one has experienced as real (a cognitive and emotional becoming different that affects a person’s will and attitudes), but a fundamentally new horizon within which all the phenomena of life are understood in a new way (a radical becoming new, and thus not to be traced back merely to a becoming different). Only within this horizon can one speak at all of a change from nonfaith to faith: neither faith nor lack of faith appears as an inventory of particular phenomena that can be specified by distinguishing them from other phenomena in life. Faith



is much more a way of living and perceiving human life as a whole, a way that lives, understands and judges life in all of its dimensions and with all of its phenomena in relationship to God. Thus, in principle, faith brings more into view than human life within its own horizon can see and say about itself. Within the horizon of the phenomena of life, nonfaith or lack of faith does not become a topic of concern; it becomes so only in relation to faith. The phenomena of life neither define what faith is nor what nonfaith is; faith arises only in relationship to God, and so does nonfaith. Without recourse to God, then, there is no way of clarifying what is meant here by becoming new. If such recourse is denied, then the *becoming new* appears only as a *becoming different* and the theological point is lost.

Of course, this all depends upon what one means here by “God.” Little would be gained if this God were only a theological construct and Christian interpretant—that is, an arbitrary point of view or way of thinking that could be dispensed with without losing anything essential with respect to the phenomena under consideration. To understand everything *coram deo* (before God) does not mean that one can do just as well without this *coram deo* reference, because everything can also be understood *coram mundo* (before the world) or *coram seipso* (before oneself): we still have the phenomena, but we do not determine their meaning by reference to God. Theologically, this is a fatal mistake—a mistake made by all those who think that believers and unbelievers share the same phenomena of life but differ only on their meaning. The difference is much more radical. Without such reference to God, one is not simply thinking differently about life and the world. Rather, one does not think theologically in the proper sense of the word at all because, strictly speaking, there is nothing to think about anymore nor anyone to think. Without reference to God, one does not simply lose a certain way of looking at things; the phenomena themselves disappear, and so does the subject to whom they appear. Believers and unbelievers do not share the same world of phenomena and differ only about the phenomena’s relation to God. Rather, their difference goes all the way down to everything actual and possible.

They live in different worlds inasmuch as that believers hold that everything owes its existence to God whereas unbelievers ignore or deny this. For unbelievers there is a world but—perhaps, probably, very probably, or certainly—no God. For believers, there is no world without God and nobody to affirm or deny it. However, this cannot be read off or inferred from the phenomena but becomes clear only when one comes to see oneself and everything else as creation. Those who do, live in a creation that is distinct from but dependent on its Creator. Those who do not, live in a world whose fundamental character they miss, whether they speak of God or not. That they miss it neither is self-evident nor can be shown from the phenomena of life. It requires a total change of perspective on everything, including one's own point of view, to see the world and oneself as God's creation. Since nobody begins her life as a believer and nobody can achieve this change of perspective by herself, it is precisely the change from nonfaith to faith that discloses the character of the world as creation, and the character of God not only as Creator but also as revealer of Godself as Creator and the world as creation. Without the change from nonfaith to faith, nobody can see the world as creation, and this change cannot be brought about by anyone in the world, but is rightly attributed by believers only to the effective presence of Godself.

Radical theology thus understands reference to God neither as an arbitrary nor as a necessary horizon of interpreting the phenomena of life that it epistemologically and hermeneutically unfolds. Instead, it explores the reference to God as the horizon of the event of the transformation from non-faith to faith through God's effective presence. It is the horizon of an entirely contingent event that is not a creation of theology, but through which theology first becomes possible at all. To live and think *coram deo* (before God) does not mean to understand life in reference to God and to understand God within the horizon of life, but rather to understand God in reference to life and life within the horizon of the event in which God so manifests the divine presence in human life that it does not remain what it was but

becomes what it is: the place within creation where the presence of the Creator is experienced by the creature.

The program of radical theology is to explore the meaning of the event in which human life becomes the place where God manifests divine presence. It does so not by grounding its thinking on anything it thinks, but by measuring its thinking by the event on which it is grounded. This makes its thinking radically experimental, at any time open to revision, should this be called for by the event that makes it think what it thinks. All theology can think only what is not self-contradictory but possible, and theology can think that only because its thinking is itself possible and not impossible. Radical theology is radical precisely by building on nothing but the actuality of this possibility. Without the silent power of the possible that it explores, radical theology would not exist. This power of the possible is given to it in the event that it contemplates and that makes its contemplation possible. Radical theology cannot contemplate this event without contemplating a prior actuality that precedes it and provokes it. And it cannot understand this event without understanding it in the way in which the event itself discloses its meaning (as a becoming new) against the misunderstandings (as a mere becoming different) by which it is covered up but in, with, and under which it is hidden and communicated. In order to discern and bring out the meaning of the event from among the manifold misunderstandings and failures to understand, radical theology must proceed with a critical hermeneutics that identifies misunderstandings as misunderstandings and understandings as understandings. That was the task that the hermeneutical theology of the twentieth century set for itself. I begin, therefore, with an analysis of twentieth-century hermeneutical theology.