# 11

# Trinity, History – and Discernment?[1]

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## 1. Recognizing the finger of God in history?

In March 1979 a conference at UNISA focused on 'The Meaning of History'.[2] Although these were not as such times of transition, they were deeply troubled times of struggle and conflict. The interpretation of history was also a site of struggle – and believers and theologians were all part of these very real struggles. A group of right-wing activists from the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging led by Eugene Terreblanche entered the Senate Hall in full battle dress, and attacked, tarred and feathered the respected historian F.A. van Jaarsveld on stage, in front of the shocked scholarly audience, before his lecture on diverse interpretations of the event at Blood River in 1838. This became the earliest incident for which an amnesty application before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was

1 This paper was read during a consultation on the theme 'Theology in times of transition. Creating a Continuous Inclusive Conversation, A Celebration of the work of Coenie Burger,' at the Hofmeyr Centre, Church Street, Stellenbosch, 23–25 January 2012. Most of the contributions and discussions during the consultation dealt with the theme of 'discernment' and the invitation was that this plenary paper should consider possible implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for practical forms of discernment and for so-called missional ecclesiology today. The form of the oral presentation was left unchanged, and only the references were added for purposes of publication. The personal style and content, honouring Coenie Burger, has therefore also been retained.

2 For the collection of papers delivered during the Conference, but without any account on the eventful day, see A. König & H. Keane (eds.), *The Meaning of History* (1980). The literature dedicated to this theme is of course limitless, both in scholarly, literary and popular discourses. Therefore only two studies are mentioned, both because they call attention to the complexity of these questions, in the same way that the present essay attempts to do. The first is the very old but influential and still informative collection of classic perspectives on the theme, edited by the well-known Karl Löwith, *Meaning in history* (1970), with essays working backwards from Burckhardt and Marx to Augustine, Orosius and the Biblical view of history. The second is the late work by the eminent ethicist, mainly from Chicago, James Gustafson, *An examined faith. The grace of self-doubt* (2004).

received. On 10 May 1999 Eugene Terreblanche defended their conduct by arguing that it was motivated by their religious convictions, their interpretation of the acts in history of 'our God, the Holy Trinity, and the God of Blood River, who brought, who gave us the victory at Blood River'. In detail, he described the events at Blood River, interpreting all these details in the light of the conviction that 'it was God, it was not a myth'. Asking for amnesty, he refused any apology:

> *I cannot for the sake of this court and simply lip service, say I am sorry because my Master, Jesus from Nazareth, and the Trinity of God was defended by me, because my nation was defended by me.*3

In a significant keynote address during the same meeting, the systematic theologian J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand reflected on 'God in History – an Unresolved Problem', later published also in Afrikaans, as 'Die Vinger van God in die Geskiedenis – 'n Onopgeloste Probleem', to which (then Bishop) Desmond Tutu responded, with approval and enthusiasm.[4] Jaap Durand has been the one theologian in South Africa – as I have argued elsewhere[5] – who took the problem of history more seriously than most, in many ways and in several studies, including his ground-breaking doctoral work on Aquinas in *Heilsgeskiedenis en die dialektiek van syn en denke* (1973).[6]

Durand explained that theological thought since the 20th century can be characterised by the rediscovery of the concept of history in God's revelatory acts. Theologians from different traditions again understood that the God of Israel was in the truest sense the God of history. This includes an awareness that history is open towards the future, and that being part of this history means expecting the unexpected and risking the new. In biblical language, this openness to the future is emphasised by the conviction that God as the Lord of history is a living God who acts freely and who, although God, remains true to Godself and to God's promises, and never becomes slave to a kind of blueprint of history. On the contrary, God's actions are free, new, creative and unexpected. God's actions in history are contingent in that they resist formalization and programming.

These convictions, he continued, are not limited to any so-called salvation-history, separate from the everyday experience of so-called

3 For the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the amnesty application, see the *Report*, Volume 6, Section 3, Chapter 6, 461–563.
4 Durand 1980:171–178, with the response of D. Tutu on 178–181. Also Durand 1986:91–99.
5 Smit 2009.
6 Durand 1973.

universal history, but belong integrally to the biblical view of history. The conviction that history, some way or other through, in partnership with or even in spite of human beings, is written by the finger of God is a premise of faith that follows inevitably for those who accept God's revelation as recorded in the Bible, he argued. However, as he pointed out,

> *this premise creates more problems than it solves with regard to the interpretation of history. Indeed, history is a story written by the finger of God, but do we have the text? Things are ambiguous or inscrutable. Do we have any assurance that the things we consider to be momentous coincide with those which would be found momentous if God showed us the whole text and commented on it? (Durand 1980:73)*

Already in the Bible itself, this is also the case, he argued. Ambiguity and inscrutability are of course true also of God's history as told in the Bible. So-called bare facts do not have any revelatory character, not even in the Bible. They always have to be interpreted. Although it is God's history, it is at the same time also human history – and one of rebellion and failures.

All such interpretations are, however, also ambiguous, and therefore controversial. Even in cases where God's rule in itself was not questioned, the interpretation of God's presence – already in the Bible itself – was indeed questioned, 'the *interpretation* of these events, the presumptuous conclusion that in these events the will of God and God's intention could be *discerned*' (his italics).

> *To confess that history is a story written by the finger of God is one thing; to identify, interpret and attach a specific divine meaning to specific parts of that story is quite another matter (1980:174).*

The thrust of Durand's argument then becomes a warning against the widespread and influential tendency in the history of the church to develop some kind of fixed pattern in terms of which faith and theology think that it does indeed become possible to interpret history as God's story and to attach divine meaning to specific parts of that story. This temptation, according to him, is prevalent in many different ways and forms in history and today – in theological movements, figures, systems. However, our trust in our own patterns contradicts our own confession of the living God, acting freely in history.

> *If we believe in the presence of the living God in history, a God who acts freely and creatively, history can never be a closed circle with a fixed pattern. What we do as a result is to create our own pattern, perhaps not*

> *always a total pattern, but at least a pattern comprehensive enough to accommodate the fragments that need interpretation (1980:174).*

The eternal *ordo ad Deum* (of Aquinas) appears on the level of the temporal – and we can recognise and name this divine presence, we can interpret and discern the divine meaning of history, behind the flux and changes, the transformations and transitions of everything contingent and surprising.

Indeed, in recent years, he concluded, a new approach to the problem of God in history seemed to appear in theology. In this new approach, the ideas of contingency and an open future do not seem to be in conflict with God's presence in history. The problem is resolved by no longer speaking about God as One who rules the world in transcendent majesty according to a fixed and preconceived plan. God is now rather seen as One who, with human beings as partners, makes history and in a certain sense is part of this historical process. This is an ambiguous development, according to Durand. On the one hand, it reflects something of the biblical message of a living God. On the other hand, there is the acute danger that God could be dissolved in an historical process.

What is certain, for him, is that such a new (and more biblical) approach makes the task of discernment of God's finger in history even more difficult.

> *This makes the interpretation of historical events from a theological point of view very difficult. Of course there is a pattern and plan, but not in the sense of a blueprint that we can somehow discover, because God is God's own plan. This fact makes the interpretation of history a hazardous undertaking because we mortal people lack the necessary data. It can also be a dangerous undertaking (1980:177).*[7]

## 2. Discerning?

One of the theologians who struggled like few others with this difficult and dangerous challenge to discern the presence of God in history was the North American Richard Niebuhr.[8] For him, theology precedes ethics. Before asking what we must do, we should ask what is happening, what

7 All the references from Durand 1980.

8 For Richard Niebuhr and for the following brief discussion, see more Smit: 'Theology and the transformation of culture – Niebuhr revisited (2007). In addition to his major books mentioned there, for eighteen unpublished essays by Niebuhr that were published posthumously, see the collection edited by W.S. Johnson, *H. Richard Niebuhr. Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (1996).

God is doing. Only then, understanding what is going on and what God is doing, can we ask how we should respond.

But how can we know what God is doing? He answered this question in his classic *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), a radical attempt to keep Barth and Troeltsch together in a way that would have a lasting impact on different theological streams, including narrative theology, faith formation studies and responsibility ethics.[9]

In a chapter on 'The point of view' he emphasised both our historical relativism (we are conditioned by our socio-historical situation) and our religious relativism (we can speak and think about God only from the point of view of faith in God). Christian theology has no other option but to be 'confessional', that is, to start 'by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view', or also in his own words 'by recalling the story of Christian life and by analyzing what Christians see from their limited point of view in history and in faith' (Niebuhr 1941:5–31).

This led to his well-known discussion of 'The story of our life' (1941:32–66), in which he made the important distinction between 'history as seen' and 'history as lived' (or 'external' and 'internal' history). The church has no other way of stating its faith than by telling its own story. He argued that 'the great source of evil in life is the absolutizing of the relative.' Christianity faces the continuous temptation of *idolatry*, of 'taking something relative for the living God'. Normally, this means that Christian faith and the church are seen as instrumental, as necessary for serving other purposes, whether religious, cultural, ethical or political. In his famous study on *Christ and culture* he would later discuss this tendency under the rubric of the 'Christ and culture'-position.[10] For the Christian community, argued Niebuhr, the challenge is to find the unity of their life-story in the revelation of the personal, living, one God in the Christ-event. They should be willing

> *to regard all events … as workings of the God who reveals himself and so to trace with piety and disinterestedness, so far as its own fate is concerned, the ways of God in the lives of men. It is necessary for the Christian community, living in faith, to look upon all the events of time and to try to find in them the workings of one mind and will (1941:63).*

9 For the following argument and most of the references, see Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941).

10 Niebuhr 1951.

These thoughts were powerfully expressed in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, where he contrasted henotheism and polytheism with radical monotheism.[11] It is from these sinful, divisive, and destructive interpretations of society and culture that the revelation of the One God can liberate us.

The crucial question, therefore, becomes how to use this view of revelation in interpreting history, concrete, present-day events, theologically? He explained this by using Pascal's well-known dictum, when he discussed 'reasons of the heart' and emphasised the role of imagination (1941:67–100). Understanding by means of revelation is in opposition to 'the evil imaginations of the heart', to our idolatrous interpretations, and not in opposition to reason as such (1941:79–80). We must use our imagination, seeking patterns for interpretation, and then make reasonable, rational observations and conclusions.

Apart from revelation, he argued, we have other patterns which we employ in understanding our joys and sorrows, but for the most part they are not only inadequate, leaving us ignorant, but evil, tending to lead to destruction. There is, however, 'an image neither evil nor inadequate which enables the heart to understand and the event through which that image is given them Christians call their revelation' (1941:80).

What is this image of revelation, making discernment possible? Interestingly, suffering played a major role in his own answer. In our interpretation of history, our understanding-through-revelation of what is happening, suffering plays the key role in our interpretation of the past, the present and the future. Without going into any detail here, his conviction was that such discernment will lead to conversion – conversion of our memories, conversions of our actions in the present (since we do not understand what we are doing to others), and conversion of our fears and dreams.

By now, it should also be clear why 'responsibility' became the term that he preferred to describe the proper moral conduct of Christians.[12] They must respond to the living God, revealing Godself in history according to the pattern of Jesus Christ, or according to his famous motto, 'God is acting in all actions upon you, so respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action' (1963:126). Especially in later years, he often used the distinction between human beings as answerers, makers and citizens. He wanted to contribute a theory of moral responsibility, using the root metaphor of 'human-beings-as-answerers'. For him, moral action was

11 Ibid. 1960.
12 Ibid. 1963.

more a situational response to challenges than pursuing ideals or adhering to laws (1963).

Therefore, for him, Christianity was 'permanent revolution' or *metanoia.* Through the years he used many synonymous expressions: change of mind, repentance, conversion, redemption, republication, reinterpretation, revolution, reconstruction, restoration, reorganization, metamorphosis, transformation, transvaluation, transfiguration. This was also the conviction behind the well-known fifth type in *Christ and culture* as well as the reason why he consistently called this position 'conversionism'.

'Transformation' does not refer in the first place to something active on the part of Christians, but instead to a response on their side, a response of radical, revolutionary conversion, a response to what the living God is doing. That is why it is called 'concrete *conversion*'. At the same time, it is important that this 'revolutionary faith' or 'conversion' means responding to what God is doing in particular situations, in very concrete, and ever-changing, socio-historical situations. That is why it is called '*concrete* (or contextual) conversion'.

This conversion, the proper transformation of self, church and society, does not take place in terms of timeless, abstract and never-changing principles, ideas or slogans, but in terms of the concrete and very particular historical contexts and what the sovereign God, known in Jesus Christ, is doing there and then. This makes a theological analysis of the situation a prerequisite for moral response. For all these reasons, he was very much aware of the context, both of time and place, in which he practised theology. His first book was the epoch-making *The social sources of denominationalism* (1929), a sociological analysis of American churches.[13] With that approach, he introduced a new approach to situational theology, with the help of social analysis, which was to have major effect in American theology in the 20th century.

Not satisfied with a sociological interpretation, however, *The kingdom of God in America* (1937) followed as sequel, to complement the sociological interpretation with a theological one,[14] but his appreciation of social analysis and historical awareness characterised all his work afterwards. Even when using his method of 'typologies,' constructing timeless 'ideal-types' in order to classify and understand dominant trends, he showed extraordinary sensitivity for the sociohistorical contexts of the theologians and movements he discussed.

13 Ibid. 1929.
14 Ibid. 1937.

In his famous *Christ and Culture*, all this was still very obvious. He never simply looked at ideas, principles or motifs, but also discussed theologians as concrete, living people, within particular historical contexts and movements. This also explains why the proper response expected of the church differed so continuously through his publications. Responsibility, he said, is exercised in society and in time and history, responding to the living God, by telling the full story, interpreting history and discerning God's intentions and actions.[15]

For him, in our interpretation of what is going on in society and culture, in our reading of revelation in history, in our interpretation of God's actions in events and movements, in our decisions as to what is responsible praxis within our situation, we must remember and acknowledge our relativity and limitations, but that should not make us afraid of confessing and acting; instead, it should encourage us to listen to others, especially to those 'on the underside of history', those suffering under a cross, and we should be willing to be converted, fundamentally. What then, finally, *is* the proper image, the pattern, provided by the revelation in Christ? In a way, the cross of Jesus became for him the basic paradigm with which to interpret and respond to suffering.

## 3. In history?

Even the cross, however, can be used in different ways to tell our story and to discern God's presence in history – as another more recent but again very influential example from a different context may illustrate. One theologian during the 20th century who struggled, like a few others, to discern the presence of God in history in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ is the Dutch *dogmatikus* Bram van de Beek.[16]

His struggle with this question – discerning God's presence – is evident from his earliest work and over decades. In particular, however, he responds to this question in his major Christological works. In increasingly radical fashion, he would focus on the cross of Jesus as the true work and

15 Ibid. 1963.

16 The literature is extensive. From Van de Beek himself, on these kind of themes, see for example Waarom? Over Lijden, Schuld en God (1984), Nogmaals, Waarom? (1986), Tussen Traditie en Vervreemding; Over Kerk en Christenzijn in een Veranderende, Cultuur (1985), Waar is God in deze Tijd (1994), Psalmen in de nacht (1994), Rechtvaardiger dan God: gedachten bij het boek Job (1992), Ontmaskering. Christelijk Geloof en Cultuur (2001), Hier benede is het niet (2005), Is God terug? (2010). For the following argument and the references, see for example only the overview in Smit (2012)

only presence of God. Even the resurrection, crucially important as it is, should be seen in light of the cross only.

His third Christological study, on God who exercises justice – *God doet recht* – is extremely instructive.[17] 'What is God doing?' is the question with which he opens an overview of contemporary theology. His answer, often moving, is that God seems not to be doing anything.

> *De dingen gaan zoals ze gaan en zoals ze altijd gegaan zijn … Zo ver je kunt terugkijken in die geschiedenis, zien we alleen de gewone gang van het wereldgebeuren (Van de Beek 2008:13).*

This is not the experience of a lack of faith, he says, but of faith itself. Contemporary theology, he argues, finds several ways of dealing with this deep spiritual crisis. In diverse ways, theology appeals to the *eschatos* (and resurrection) to provide promises which make more positive interpretations of history and of our experiences possible. We discern signs of the kingdom. We find ways to talk about progress, whether in history and society or in our personal lives. On the whole, contemporary theology is, according to him, an attempt (in diverse ways) at meaning-making, *zinduiding*, discerning some presence of God when in fact God is absent, doing nothing. He finds such attempts in the many contemporary church and theological tendencies from which he regularly distances himself – particularly also in his own teachers, including Berkhof, Van Ruler and the later Barth, in Protestant theology and church life in the Netherlands, in the ecumenical movement and its involvement in so-called life and work activities, but also in the circles of pietism and evangelicalism, with their stress on personal growth and fulfilment of the self. Words that he recognises almost as slogans of these meaning-making attempts to discern and describe a presence and activity of God are, for example, success, growth, progress, and morality.

However, he points out that the need to do theology in this way already goes back to the early church. He describes how, under the conditions of the Constantinian revolution, the incarnation became central (rather than the cross), with similar kinds of spiritual implications. The focus now became the presence of holiness (somehow) in the world – in many ways and forms, but together this led to a loss of eschatology, which radically affected Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, sacramentology, and views on Christian life, all changes that Van de Beek discerns and radically opposes in his work.

17 Van de Beek 2008.

Over and above this, he opts for Alexandrian theology, following in the footsteps of Athanasius:

> *The Alexandrian theology becomes a theology for people who have nothing to lose. It is a theology for people whose entire life is one long Good Friday. It is the theology of people who have lost every illusion that tomorrow will be a better day.*[18]
>
> *Ik richt me daarbij allereerst op mensen die geen enkele hoop meer hebben dat het morgen beter wordt in de wereld. Onder hen reken ik mij zelf. Het gaat om de God die ons gebroken bestaan wil delen tot het einde.*[19]

It is therefore also not enough to speak of Jesus as crucified. The deeper point is that he is crucified as a victim. Jesus suffers as a victim of human power, human violence, human injustice. The cross is not a religious and spiritual symbol, but a harsh and cruel reality. Jesus is slain and slaughtered. Even more, the victim on the tree is innocent, he hangs there because he is cursed, unjustly judged, rejected – and this also by God.

For Van de Beek, this is crucial. God is here at work, God is here judging Jesus, judging the world – in the Crucified. This judgment includes victims and perpetrators alike, moral and immoral, believers and unbelievers. These distinctions – so important for our moral, religious and spiritual sensibilities – all disappear in light of the cross; in fact, they become dangerous and misleading. Here, no-one is moral, no-one is just.

One should therefore say even more. In *The Crucified*, God is judging Godself. The Crucified is the Judge himself. It is the King of Israel hanging on the tree. It is the Lord hanging on the cross, the Lord of glory. It is Godself carrying the judgment there. Van de Beek does not hesitate to use the strongest of expressions to make this point. For him, this *is* the point. It is Godself hanging on the cross. This is for him the comfort of the gospel. God provides justice. God *does* deliver justice – in spite of all doubts, questions and fears to the contrary. The cries of the victims are not in vain. Their prayers have been answered. That is why the curse-psalms are alien not to the message of the gospel, but to its climax. Whoever does not understand this, does not understand the gospel.

In the cross, the kingdom of God becomes visible in history, and *only* in the cross – not in the resurrection and most certainly not in our erecting any so-called signs of the kingdom. He does not tire in underlining that the

18 Ibid. 1998:33.
19 Ibid. 1999:22.

cross is the visible mode of God's reign. This is his central argument in *God doet recht*, in response to the questions of doubt and fear – not primarily from the sceptics, but more seriously in the heart of believers – whether God does anything at all.

> *God participeert in deze wereld . . . God is de God die slachtoffer is van de wereldgeschiedenis, in de schaar van kinderen, met een moeder die een zwaard door haar ziel heeft gekregen. Dat is het oordeel over onze wereld. Dat is onze diepste realiteit … Dit is de realiteit van de wereld … De geschiedenis van Christus legt het wezen van de wereld bloot. Het is een veroordeelde wereld. Het is de wereld waarin God participeert. Hj is gekomen tot het zijne. Aan het kruis is haar God (Van de Beek 2008:283-284).*

If there are signs of the kingdom, they are to be found in suffering and disasters, all caused by God. The many disasters in history become further promises, assurances, that God does indeed act and do justice – since these disasters are all God's works. They are the only positive signs of the coming of the kingdom. 'The hunger in Africa, the epidemic of AIDS, the tsunami in Asia … This is what God has done' (2008:303, translated). This is how God is coming in the world. He now realises that pneumatology *is* eschatology. The outpouring of the Spirit *is* eschatological, except that this should not be understood as future, nor the relationship between Christ and Spirit in historical terms, in linear succession, in terms of outworking, development or progress. In the history of the church this has been the common understanding; also in his own earlier pneumatology, but that is based on misunderstanding – namely understanding the Spirit anthropologically, optimistically, without crisis, and the cross only as intermezzo.

No, the cross is *the* eschatological event, the incursion into God's final judgement. The result is a pneumatology of judgement. To a *christologia crucis* belongs a pneumatology of judgement, just as a pneumatology of progress belongs to an incarnation Christology (whether understood in a personal or an historical way, as progress in one's own spiritual life or progress towards a better future for the world).

There is only one coming (and presence) of Christ, namely the all-too-human history of Jesus on the cross, which then finds some 'extension in time' in that we see this one coming in different moments, different *kairoi*. After the cross, nothing further happens – but the one cross becomes visible in different moments. Over against almost all of 19th and 20th century theology – from Weiss to Wright, from liberal theology to Cullmann and Pannenberg, from Bultmann to Barth – this means for

him that nothing new can happen in history. He qualifies this 'extension in time' again and again, in order to prevent possible misunderstandings. For example, it does not allow a church-historical (often positive and optimistic) interpretation of the (coming of the) kingdom.

Living in the world means forsaking the world. That is why the images of resident aliens and strangers are better suited to describe the Christian life than the image of pilgrims, because the word 'pilgrim' falsely still suggests the idea of some purpose or goal, which believers do *not* have. Sadly, this is denied in many ways – also by ecumenical Protestantism. He is deeply sceptical about all attempts to describe the Christian life in terms of *vivificatio*; about any interest in exercising power; about the pervasive passion in church and theology for morality, social structures and history; about the so-called prophetic role of the church; about any so-called involvement of the church in politics; about the so-called erection of signs of the kingdom; or about any so-called trajectory in history that points towards the *eschatos*. All *these* forms of interest in the world have to do with progress and improvement (whether personal or historical), with exercising power and making sense, with change, transformation and meaningful renewal – and all these he rejects.

Living in this world, believers await the final judgment, which he describes as the day of God's wrath, in direct contrast to all contemporary humanist attempts to see the day within the perspective of God's – free and all-inclusive – love. The proper biblical paradigm for the doctrine of God, he argues, is not love, security and comfort, but justice, particularly justice for the oppressed. Both victims and perpetrators stand under this judgment.

Apart from the cross, there is *no* glory and *no* sense in morality (whether personal or public), in social or political structures (whether in liberal attempts to build up or liberationist attempts to overthrow) or in history (whether individual or communal).

The only possible response is conversion. Conversion means that they recognise God's action in the Crucified and in the circle of all those who also carry their crosses, and that they join this circle, by willingly leaving the social, economic and political structures that determine the face of this world, even giving up their claims to morality – in short, that they leave everything and follow Christ. Ultimately, believers respond by celebrating the eschatological meal.

> *Dan kan men zelfs zeggen dat de viering van de eucharistie de realiteit van zijn komen is … Er is geen reden om angstig 'Nog niet' te roepen*

> *als we het messiaanse maal mogen vieren … Het avondmaal zelf is de viering van de komst van het koninkrijk (2008:330–331).*[20]

It is not without reason that he talks so often about a sense of spiritual crisis. It is the crisis of the possibility of talking about God at all – without anything that happens, without anything visible, without any presence. He sometimes speaks movingly about the 'slijtage van de tijd' – which one should not underestimate. He has always been fascinated by the question as to whether and how we can talk about God, '(w)ant wij moeten ons niet verbeelden God met onze theologie te kunnen uitbeelden'.[21]

## 4. The Living God?

Hopefully, Van de Beek's radical *theologia crucis* serves as demonstration that the difficult task remains, even when people agree that the cross of Jesus provides the proper image for us to discern the meaning of revelation, the presence of God in (our) history and world. The cross can be understood in different ways to help us to interpret reality and respond to whatever we experience as claims on us.

It becomes even more complex when our Christology is not only or primarily focused on the cross, but when – say – the incarnation, the life and ministry, the words and works, the resurrection, the ascension and intercession or a future return of Jesus also inform our imaginations more decisively – as David Bosch argued so movingly during SACLA 1 (the South African Christian Leaders Assembly).[22]

It becomes still further complex when not only (or not primarily) Christological convictions and images, but also other concerns and notions building on the second and third articles of the creed influence our imaginations and our reasoning and interpreting hearts. This is of course the case in many circles worldwide in recent theology after the so-called Trinitarian Renaissance.[23]

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20 All references to *God doet recht*, also in Smit 2012.

21 Van de Beek 1994:25–26.

22 Bosch gave his lecture called 'For such a time as this' on Sunday 8 July 1979, in other words only months after the eventful day at his home University and Faculty. The gist of the lecture later became part of his influential monograph, *Transforming mission. Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (1991).

23 The literature is overwhelming, but see for example the special edition of the *Journal of Reformed Theology* called *The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Faith and Global Theology,* 3(1), 2009, with an introductory essay by Gijsbert van den Brink with the same title (and extensive references).

One contemporary thinker deeply concerned with discerning the Trinitarian presence and work of the Living God in reality and history is the German systematic theologian Michael Welker.[24] Describing his own theology as biblical-realistic, standing in the Reformed tradition (of Calvin, Barth and Moltmann) and deeply engaged with inter-disciplinary scholarship from a wide variety of fields and traditions (including Whitehead, Luhmann and Polkinghorne), Welker is consciously reflecting on the Trinitarian tradition and from a Trinitarian perspective.

The essay by Welker dedicated to Moltmann on his 80th birthday could serve as representative illustration, also because it is – according to its own subtitle – an attempt to develop a doctrine of the Trinity with biblical orientation. It is called 'Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre' and it is a contribution in the volume called *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität.*[25]

Welker takes his point of departure in contemporary experiences of disaster, suffering and evil, and asks how it is possible to speak of God and life in the face of these realities? In his own words, only a complex Trinitarian response based on the dynamic biblical account could show the way.

Therefore, he first discusses God as Creator by showing the ambivalence and ultimate lack of comfort of any 'natural' creation theology (appealing mainly to Calvin). Not only do believers need to face 'das ungeheure Maß der Zerstörung and das Ausmaß des Leidens', but they also have to stop ignoring and denying 'die unvermeidbare Zerstörungskraft allen physischen Lebens'. since all life exists at the cost of other life. Creation is beautiful and wonderful, yes, but there is also another side to creation and to life. Discerning the presence and work of the Creator may not silently attempt to deny this reality:

> *Ich werde im Folgenden zunächst auf die tiefe Ambivalenz und letzte Trostlosigkeit einer Wahrnehmung von Schöpfer und Schöpfung aufmerksam machen, die sich nur auf die Hervorbringung, Erhaltung und Bewahrung der natürlichen Welt konzentriert (2006:36).*

24 Again, the relevant literature both by and about Welker is overwhelming. For his Trinitarian thought and responses to that, see only the German *Festschrift* dedicated to him on his 60th birthday, *Gegenwart des lebendigen Christus,* G. Thomas & A. Schüle (Hrsg.) (2007), as well as his own two important doctrinal works, *Gottes Geist* (1992), and *Gottes Offenbarung: Christologie* (2012).

25 Welker 2006.

Calvin had already been very clear and honest about the fact that on the basis of these observations alone it is impossible to discern between our own misleading impressions and constructions and true knowledge, since every claim will remain vague and confusing.

> *Calvin weist schonungslos darauf hin: Auf dieser Basis können die Menschen niemals zwischen ihren Phantasien und Einbildungen und der wahren Erfahrung Gottes unterscheiden … Mit vernichtender Nüchternheit stellt Calvin solche frommen Illusionen bloß … Das Empfinden der Gottheit durch natürliches Ahnvermögen, dem menschlichen Geist eigen, bleibt vage oder – wie Calvin sagt – ein 'eitles und flüchtiges' Wissen (2006:40).*

He then deals with the self-revelation of the saving God in the crucified and resurrected Christ (in critical dialogue with Moltmann himself):

> *Zweitens wird zu bedenken sein, was es heißt, dass Gott sich erhaltend und rettend, schöpferisch und neuschöpferisch der Welt im gekreuzigten, auferstandenen und erhöhten Christus und durch ihn zu erkennen gibt (2006:36).*

Although the claim that God revealed Godself in Jesus Christ is the central confession of the Christian faith, Welker says – appealing to Luther and to Barmen 1 – that it is not so easy to integrate this claim into our theological knowledge. Does this claim not raise almost unanswerable questions? he asks. How can this claim be related to the claims of the first article of the Trinitarian faith? Is the claim that we can face Godself in the flesh, in suffering, on the cross and in death not completely incomprehensible in comparison to the (already difficult, but in many ways more reasonable) questions of creation?

> *Doch wie kommen wir von den schöpfungstheologischen Űberlegungen von den Beobachtungen zu den dunklen Seiten der Schöpfung, zu den Grenzen des abstrakten Omnipotenzdenkens und zu den Ambivalenzen der natürlichen Religiösität, wie kommen wir von dort aus zu einem trinitätstheologischen Erkenntniszugang zu Gott? Betreten wir mit der Konzentration auf den Menschen Jesus Christus und auf der Gekreuzigten nicht einfach eine andere Welt, völlig andere Erfahrungsbereiche? Ist die Forderung, im Menschen Jesus und in Kreuz und Leiden Gott zu erkennen, nicht eine unerträgliche Zumutung? Warum wird Gott in der Inkarnation und in Kreuz und Leiden nicht gerade völlig unkenntlich? (2006:42)*

In response to these questions, Welker develops his own Christological views, in this essay in dialogue with impulses from Moltmann.

Finally, he introduces the care for and salvation of creation in the power of the Holy Spirit (engaging with natural scientists, like John Polkinghorne) as a third way of responding to the challenges in the Christian faith and tradition. After all, it may be that Christological answers alone are inadequate to deal with the issues.

> *Ist das Leben und Wirken Jesu Christi nicht zu klein, um überzeugend das schöpferische und neuschöpferische Wirken Gottes prägend zum Ausdruck zu bringen? Erst auf diesem Niveau des Fragens erreichen wir die Ebene der zu entfaltenden Trinitätstheologie,' (2006:47) and therefore, he argues, following the Christian creed, '(M)üssen wir (drittens) versuchen, die Kraft des Heiligen Geistes in der Schöpfung und die die Schöpfung erhebende Teilgabe am göttlichen Leben zu erfassen' (2006:36).*

His intention and hope is indeed that such a theological thought process – and *only* such a thought process ('nur die Konzentration auf das Wirken des dreieinigen Gottes') – may help us to see and interpret the Living God and the divine work in the world in a Trinitarian way.

> *Mit diesem theologischen Erkundungs- und Gedankengang werden wir an eine Wahrnehmung des lebendigen Gottes und des göttlichen Wirkens in der Schöpfung heranführen, die trinitätstheologisch verstanden und entfaltet werden kann (2006:36).*

However, such a Trinitarian approach will not function as easy explanation or magic formula. It could rather help to sustain the patience of faith and its ability to endure in the midst of destructive meaninglessness and senseless lack of purpose (that Kant observed in history and the world).

> *Nicht das Interesse an einem theologischen Glasperlenspiel ist dabei leitend. Die Trinitätslehre soll vielmehr helfen, den langen Atem des Glaubens zu verstehen und zu bewahren inmitten der Erfahrungen zerstörerischer Sinnlosigkeit und 'Zweckwidrigkeit' in dieser Welt (2006:36).*[26]

26 All these foregoing quotations are from Welker, 'Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre', in *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität*.(2006).

These last sentences are important, since they claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is needed, not only because it provides a more comprehensive theological response, but because in this way it fulfils an important practical, pastoral role, precisely when believers do *not* understand.

Again, it is impossible to enter here into any of the questions raised by this approach. The crucial claim is that only in this complex Trinitarian way can faith hopefully speak more responsibly about such experiences of disaster, since any partial answer would remain inadequate and misleading. A partial answer would not be sufficient. In this way, Welker demonstrates the importance for the tradition of a Trinitarian spread in speaking the language of faith – also in any attempt to discern the presence of the Living God in history and reality.

## 5. On the kingdom, the power, and the glory?

However, even the use of Trinitarian language and the willingness to search for a Trinitarian spread in our interpretation of what is happening does not guarantee simple spiritual processes and agreement on what to say and do, on the contrary. The doctrine of the Trinity is no fixed pattern or easy solution either to the difficult questions of discernment. It obviously offers no final protection against confusion and the evil imaginations of our heart. Perhaps a brief consideration of the work of an influential contemporary philosopher may serve as helpful reminder that the doctrine of the Trinity may in fact make matters far more complex.

Giorgio Agamben is an Italian philosopher. In the tradition of Foucault, he is engaged in writing a history – or better, a genealogy, and better still an archaeology – of modern politics in the West. In a recent study translated as *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) he argues that present-day notions of politics in the West can only be understood against the background of Christian theology – although most political philosophers do not realise this at all.[27]

His argument is therefore one continuous engagement with Carl Schmitt, the famous 20th century German legal scholar, who also argued, in his controversial *Political Theology*, that politics can eventually be based only on theology (and therefore also a continuous engagement with Erik Peterson, the opponent of Schmitt and the discussion partner of Karl Barth).[28]

27 Agamben (2011). The present work is part of a much larger project, called *Homo Sacer*, on the genealogy (or nature) of power in the West. This work is therefore *Homo Sacer II,*2 in the series, not yet completed.

28 See the influential study Schmitt (2005), as well as the essays published as *Political Theology II: The myth of the closure of any political theology,* M.

Over and above Schmitt, who defended absolute sovereignty (of the political leader, in his case Hitler) over politics and law, who declared that the sovereign possesses absolute power (exemplified in the right to declare a state of emergency, suspending both all political discussion and the rule of law) and who based that on an understanding of the divine sovereignty, Agamben argues that economy (understood to include both what is today called the economy, but also what is called the practical administration of government) is where power really functions.

According to Agamben, Schmitt (like Foucault, albeit in a different way) was therefore correct in his opinion that the paradigm of politics today is to be found in the history of Christian theology, but he was mistaken in his opinion where real power is exercised. It does not belong to the (political) sovereign, but it is distributed all over the economy which includes the government and its administration – and yes, its original paradigm is indeed to be found in the history of Christian theology, namely in the doctrine of the Trinity. The subtitle of his work is therefore 'For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government.'

This is not the place to enter in detail into his argument on politics and the economy and not even the place to follow his creative and often fascinating reconstruction of the archaeology of the doctrine of the Trinity. We only follow very broad strokes of his argument in an attempt to sense some of the relevance for our theme of discernment of the divine presence and actions.[29]

The key to understanding his discussions of 'kingdom', 'power' and 'glory' lies in the widespread use of the notion of 'economy' already in Paul and then in the early church, and in the distinction which then developed between '*theologia*' in the strict sense of the word (also called the immanent Trinity) and '*oikonomia*' as description of God's actions in history, in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, through both the One eternally begotten and the One proceeding from the Father, in short, through what is today often called the *missio Dei.*[30]

Put simply, the church became increasingly interested in the economy, in what God was (supposedly) doing. What Paul still described as 'the economy of the mystery' (meaning: what we see in Christ is the

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Hoelzl & G. Ward (eds.) (2008). For a recent detailed and authoritative interpretation of Schmitt's contribution and remarkable influence, see Mehring (2009). For the relationship between Erik Peterson and Barth, see for example Nichtweiss (2005) (with literature).

29 All the following references are therefore to Agamben (2011). For a very helpful discussion, see also Brouwer (2020).

30 For a very insightful discussion of the history and use of the term *missio Dei,* see Flett (2010).

revelation of God's mystery) became 'the mystery of the economy' – a fascination with the questions relating to what precisely was happening and how precisely God was actively involved.

By way of the notion of 'God's will' (which Agamben describes as a kind of invention by the church to overcome the gap, the aporia between theology and economy, between immanent and historical, the fracture between being and action), by way of a very complex doctrine of (different) providence(s), by way of a detailed angelology – and all these he documents in minute philological detail from the history of Christian theology – the church gradually built complex bridges to relate (the inactive immanent Godself) with the actual realities of history and the world.

The kingdom (*theologia*, the immanent Trinity) was seen as inactive, while the real effective power was given to and administered by a diversity of administrators (powers, structures, laws, angels, will, providence, general and special, among others). The power(s) represented the king(dom), even in its own absence and inactivity, increasingly to such an extent that the glory owed to the kingdom, and needed to legitimate the power(s), became more and more real, and was no longer only symbol and ritual.

Again, Agamben provides intriguing examples of glory that was given to material objects and military or cultic events justifying the power(s) in their historical functions of representing the (inactive, absent, immanent) kingdom. The most glorious is perhaps the empty throne, surrounded and adorned with all kinds of regalia – that had to be worshiped as if the power representing the kingdom were in fact present. On his cover is a beautiful picture of such an empty throne, from the Papal Basilica of St. Paul outside the Walls in Rome, but this is just one example of many.

For Agamben, this archaeology is important to show (over against Schmitt) that the sovereign is not that powerful, but is in fact inactive (like the Fisher King of the Grail Legend, or contemporary monarchs in Western democracies, *le roi règne*, *mais il ne gouverne pas*), and that real power in contemporary societies is exercised by those who administer government and economy, while the public opinion and public media provide the necessary glory, keeping up the glorious appearances of the powers, so that we all believe there is somewhere a king on a throne behind the glories of the spectacles offered to us.

For many other reasons the study is also fascinating for theological readers, including radical implications for issues of providence and notions of secularism. For the purpose of discernment, however, major implications and questions should already become clear.

To put them in Agamben's terms, is it really possible for us to discern the presence and the actions of Godself in our world and in history with the help of the doctrine of the Trinity, if the doctrine of the Trinity was indeed developed to protect the fracture between immanent and economic? Is it really possible for us to reckon with God as living and free, and the future therefore as contingent and open (Durand)? Are we perhaps rather trying to discern the divine economy and mission, the providence of God, the divine will, natural laws and processes, perhaps the role of angels and spiritual powers? In that case, however, is our view on the divine providence or will or natural laws not once again be a kind of pattern, a blueprint, a fixed scheme? Remembering, for example, John Calvin's 159 sermons on the Book of Job, struggling 'to trust in the often incomprehensible providence of God' amidst experiences of darkness, hiddenness, and unknowability – what can we finally know about the *arcana operatio*, the 'secret operation of God'?[31] Could we ever succeed in not being misled by the glory, justifying the powers governing our world, our histories and our lives? Are we in any way able to escape the relativity of our points of view, our stories and our idolatrous imaginations (Niebuhr)? Even when we employ the images of our Christological faith and our Trinitarian creeds, or our discourses of God's providence and will, do our interpretations not remain partial, contested, conflicting, witnesses to our lack of spiritual knowledge (Van de Beek, Welker)? In short, in our attempts at spiritual discernment, what are we truly discerning – and what could be the proper, modest enough language to describe what we are actually doing? Our discourses of discernment are after all also rhetorical languages, and therefore languages of power?

## 6. Concluding comments celebrating CW Burger

I consciously tried to pay tribute to Coenie Burger also by way of my formal treatment of this topic. As so often in our wonderful friendship over so many years, I did not choose the topic, but it was given to me, and in fact if I did not explicitly ask for the topic, I would probably only have seen it today, on the programme. Like so often before, he seems to think that serious systematic theologians should have something to say on any possible theme – without any reflection and preparation (somewhat like Luther on pastors, who should always be immediately ready to pray, preach and die).

31 See, for example, Smit 'On illness and providence? Questions from the Reformed tradition' (2009) (with extensive literature); but in much more detail the work of Susan Schreiner, for example her *Where shall wisdom be found?* (1994); her *The theater of his glory* (2001); and again her very helpful essay 'Calvin as an interpreter of Job' (2006).

I deliberately tried not to be practical, because he is the practical theologian, often asking me systematic theological questions, because he is keenly interested in systematic theology and convinced of the importance of systematic theological reflection. I know by now that he will draw practical conclusions for himself, on plans and priorities and processes.

I also tried not to give any coherent answer at all, but only to raise a diversity of issues, somehow related to one another. Most of the time, Coenie does not want answers and he will in any case not follow the answers one gives; he is more interested in gathering information, if possible from as many people and many sources as possible, and then he will make up his own mind. He has always been more interested in the conversation itself than in any advice and opinions, more interested in friends and friendship and fellowship than in being told what to do.

I consciously tried to respond to the theme by raising questions, since this is what he often wants to hear. He would often ask one's opinion about possible difficulties and concerns, about potential risks and dangers, about problems that should be taken into account – something that I always appreciated, since I like the question marks more than the answers myself.

I further tried to provide the information and to raise the concerns in the form of references.