

Excursus: Dogma as a dangerous memory¹

Christian faith can be understood as an attitude according to which man remembers promises that have been made and hopes that are experienced as a result of those promises and commits himself to those memories. Neither the intellectual model of consent to certain articles of faith nor the existential model of a decision made in man's existence is in the foreground of this interpretation of faith. What is important here is the figure of eschatological memory.²

What is meant here is a phenomenon that has been mentioned before in this book: not the memory that sees the past in a transfiguring light, nor the memory that sets a seal on the past by being reconciled with all that is dangerous and challenging in that past. It is also not the memory in which past happiness and salvation are applied merely individually.³ What is meant in this context is that dangerous memory that threatens the present and calls it into question because it remembers a future that is still outstanding.

This memory breaks through the grip of the prevailing consciousness. It claims unresolved conflicts that have been thrust into the background and unfulfilled hopes. It maintains earlier experiences in contrast to the prevailing insights and in this way makes the present unsafe.

As *memoria*, faith is able to provide an answer to the question that is so frequently discussed by theologians—that of a mediation between the already and the not yet of the eschatological salvation made possible in Jesus Christ. The common theological discussion of the tension between the already and the not yet is ultimately meaningless. If our understanding of salvation is not to be stripped of its historical content and reduced to the level of a mere idea, it is obviously essential for the 'already' to be accepted and understood in the 'not yet', that is, for the datum of salvation to be accepted in the hope. The already is, after all, a determining modality

of the not yet, in so far as the 'not yet' claims to be more than and different from a 'not' or a 'nothing'.

Various attempts have been made in contemporary theology to define Christian faith in its relevance to the world and history. These attempted definitions all have one thing more or less in common with each other—they all interpret faith above all as an act of faith, as *fides qua creditur*, as far as possible without any content, as a figure of man's free non-objective decision. Interpreted in this way, faith can certainly be contemporary. At the same time, however, an interpretation of this kind is always in danger of obscuring the power of Christian faith, which is derived from its content and conviction, to criticise society and devalue it to the level of a symbolic paraphrase of modern consciousness, without in fact contributing in any way towards changing that consciousness.⁴

On the other hand, as *memoria*, faith makes it clear that Christian faith is a dogmatic faith which is tied to a certain content, a *fides quae creditur*. It also shows how it is able, because of this, to achieve the critical freedom which is related to the history of social freedom. In the perspective of the eschatological message, the Christian is called upon in faith to bring about this freedom. The biblical traditions and the doctrinal and confessional formulae that are derived from those traditions appear in the light of this interpretation as formulae of *memoria*. In other words, they are interpreted as formulae in which the claim of promises made and past hopes and fears that have been experienced are recollected in the memory in order to break the grip of the prevailing consciousness, to obtain release from the compulsions and restrictions of the world of today and to break through the banality of the present and the immediate future.

This interpretation of the meaning of the Christian formulae and confessions of faith is perhaps an unusual one, but it may seem more convincing if the particular situation in which modern society finds itself and in which Christian faith has to be handed on is considered. Modern society is, after all, becoming increasingly divorced from history and memory. In it, it is more and more apparent that traditions can only be preserved and kept alive in the present if they have to do with institutions and the formulae by which those institutions understand themselves. The individual is bound to be increasingly exposed to a loss of memory. A Christian

may be able to live completely independent of the institution today and continue in his own generation to be nourished by the substance of Christian faith. The succeeding generation will, however, have no point of contact with that faith. It will be more than ever exposed to the danger of the prevailing loss of memory and history.

The process of remembering, in other words, the process by which a memory is made present and the present is overcome, cannot exclusively or even primarily take place in the individual. As formulations of the collective memory, dogmas may therefore have an entirely new part to play here. They can, as it were, compel me to recollect in the present something that I cannot grasp or realize on the narrow basis of my own personal experience. In other words, dogmas prevent me from letting my own religious experience operate simply as the function of a prevailing consciousness.

Dogmatic or confessed faith is being bound to doctrinal statements which can and must be understood as formulae of mankind's memory that is subversive and dangerous and that has been repressed and misunderstood. The criterion of the genuine Christianity of that memory is the critical and liberating dangerous quality which can redeem man and with which it is able to introduce the remembered message to the present age, with the result that men are, as Bonhoeffer has suggested, astonished and frightened by it and overcome by its force.⁵ These dogmatic formulae and confessions of faith are dead, meaningless and empty—they are, in other words, unsuited to the task of saving Christian identity and tradition in the collective memory—when there is no sign of their danger—to society and the Church—in their remembered contents, when this dangerous quality is extinguished by the mechanisms of its institutional mediation and when the formulae have the exclusive function of preserving the religion that transmits them and of reproducing an authoritarian Church institution that is no longer, as the body responsible for publicly handing down the Christian memory, subject to the dangerous claim of that memory.

This can in fact be demonstrated on the basis of the classical formulae of faith.⁶ An attempt has been made by Erik Peterson, for example, within the framework of his writings about the political implications of monotheism,⁷ to criticize the doctrine of the Trinity and in this way to make its redeeming and liberating quality of

danger visible. Peterson did this by considering the monarchical concept of domination that is criticized in the Trinitarian formula, but failed to apply that criticism to the structure of the Church itself. We can also say in this context that our understanding of the memory of Jesus Christ as the memory of the coming of the kingdom (or domination) of God in Jesus' love for the oppressed and rejected can also be used as a dangerous and liberating force to change the direction of the classical Christological formulae. This is a task which theology could undertake and which would, in my opinion, be extremely fruitful.

If the Christian formulae were to be interpreted as formulae of mankind's dangerous memory, this would lead to a corresponding growth in our understanding of faith itself. Faith would in that case not continue to be dead, authoritarian faith or the opium of the people, a people not yet come of age. Faith, then, should, by being interpreted as memory, be made comprehensible as the hermeneutical expression of man's freedom and as the memory that functions within the contradictions present in a history of human freedom which is interpreted as linear and moving in one direction (and which believes that it can overcome past sufferings and hopes, obliterate the challenge of the dead or, without any sacrifice of freedom, ignore the past). If we are to avoid the error of making the inheritance of the modern history of freedom harmless by the application of romantic or restorative methods or of sacrificing that inheritance to a middle-class or totalitarian idea of progress, we must harness the strength of dogmatic memory.

This dogmatic or definite (defined) memory can never empty itself so entirely of the content of memory that all that it preserves of that content is what can be mediated exclusively by means of critical reflection. (This has been stressed again and again in this book). As a definite (or defined) memory, it always has certain aspects of a consenting but critical appropriation of the kind that is also encountered in the historically mediated form of Christian faith. It is true that this definite memory affects only part of modern society, but, especially when it is a memory of Christian faith, it is directed towards all men in their threatened freedom and hopes.

The critical and liberating strength of Christian dogmatic memory—as a definite memory—therefore never has a purely intellectual or theoretical attitude. Its critical power is characterized by the

definite nature of the memory itself. In this memory, it is conscious of the deadly conflict between God's promises and a history that is dominated by man's alienated desires and interests. Its criticism is not a total criticism. It is characterized by the renunciation of self and the persistence, the impatience and the patience that are required by the Christian memory as the imitation of Christ. In this sense, then, dogmatic faith and the praxis of imitation are indissolubly connected to each other.⁸ Dogma can be seen in this light as practical memory.

Notes

1. This excursus is an adapted version, rewritten to fit into the whole concept of the book, of a text originally written in 1968 and first published as part of my contribution, 'Politische Theologie in der Diskussion', to H. Peukert, ed., *Diskussion zur 'Politischen Theologie'*, op. cit.

2. It would be interesting to investigate how it was possible for the memory to change so much in sacramental theology and, to the detriment of the memory and the sacrament, to be isolated and frequently given a wrong ritualistic interpretation, devoid of the subject.

3. See J. B. Metz, 'Technik—Politik—Religion', W. Heinen and J. Schreiner, eds., *Erwartung—Verheissung—Erfüllung* (Würzburg, 1969); id., *Reform und Gegenreform heute* (Mainz and Munich, 1969).

4. I tried, in my *Reform und Gegenreform heute*, to clarify the meaning of dogmas as formulae of a dangerous memory.

5. D. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Munich, new ed., 1970), p. 328; E. T. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London, 1967).

6. The document published by the Synod of German bishops, *Unsere Hoffnung*, can be regarded as an attempt to set out the central statements of the Christian confession of faith in their social character and as dangerous pronouncements. I am preparing a full explanation of this document, which will, I hope, go further in this direction. It will be published as *The Faith of Christians*.

7. E. Peterson, 'Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem', *Theologische Traktate* (Munich, 1951), pp. 45–147.

8. For the constitutive significance of imitation and its implications for Christology, see J. B. Metz, *Followers of Christ*, op. cit.

12. Narrative¹

In this part of the book, I have often referred to the narrative and practical structure of theology, especially, for example, in connection with its eschatological and apocalyptic teaching (in Chapter 10 above) and its soteriological concern with salvation and redemption (Chapter 7). Christology too should have a narrative and practical structure.² In Chapter 9, we also considered the need for a narrative and practical (or mystical and political) form of Christianity rather than a transcendental and idealistic form in view of the problems of identity confronting theology today. The short apology for narrative that follows in this chapter is undertaken as an attempt to make good the almost complete absence, in the German-speaking countries at least, of the idea of narrative in any of the more recent theological and philosophical works of reference. Lexicons are very revealing, especially in what they leave out. In this short apology for narrative, I am particularly indebted to the work of the specialist in the field of the science of literature, Harald Weinrich.³ In it, I stress above all the narrative structure of the category of dangerous memory that I discussed in the preceding chapter.

I cannot hope to deal systematically or fully here with the theological theme of narrative, but can only mention a number of different and significant points. I have not attempted a linguistic analysis, partly because I am simply not competent to do so. Another reason is because it is not theologically relevant to incorporate the narrative potential of Christianity into a linguistic theory (in order to close it as a form of pre-scientific communication). An even more important reason is that narrative processes have to be protected, interrupted in order to justify them critically and even guided in the direction of a competent narrative without which the experience of faith, like every original experience, would be silenced!