Communicative Theory and Theology: A Reconsideration

K. L. Afrasiabi
Andover Newton Theological School

Judging by the proliferation of a new body of theological works that have eι. couraged a deliberate rethinking of the intellectual premises of Christian theology,[1] scholarly discussion appears to have come to the juncture of an exciting though unpredictable stage in theology. Perhaps this is nowhere clearer than in the realm of the ongoing dialogue on the theological relevance of communication theory associated with the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. Contrary to what has become an article of faith in recent theological forays into social theory, I contend: (a) that Habermasian theory has little to contribute to theological thought and is more valuable as an indirect aid in critiquing various deficient theological discourses; (b) that the current Habermas-sympathetic attempts at a communicative theology are, by and large, open to criticism for the same shortcomings and problems found in Habermas's own works; and (c) that the need to address these problems necessarily points us toward an alternative postcommunication theology.

---

[1] See, for example, Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Milbank's claim that "theology is social science" and his exclusivist Christianity as a "metanarrative realism" leave a great deal to be desired. He collapses the distinction between idealism and realism by adopting a perverse notion of (meta-) narrative that obviates any and all standards of evaluation external to it.

Communicative Theory and Theology: A Reconsideration

K. L. Afrasiabi
Andover Newton Theological School

Judging by the proliferation of a new body of theological works that have ei. couraged a deliberate rethinking of the intellectual premises of Christian theology,[1] scholarly discussion appears to have come to the juncture of an exciting though unpredictable stage in theology. Perhaps this is nowhere clearer than in the realm of the ongoing dialogue on the theological relevance of communication theory associated with the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. Contrary to what has become an article of faith in recent theological forays into social theory, I contend: (a) that Habermasian theory has little to contribute to theological thought and is more valuable as an indirect aid in critiquing various deficient theological discourses; (b) that the current Habermas-sympathetic attempts at a communicative theology are, by and large, open to criticism for the same shortcomings and problems found in Habermas's own works; and (c) that the need to address these problems necessarily points us toward an alternative postcommunication theology.

---

[1] See, for example, Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Milbank's claim that "theology is social science" and his exclusivist Christianity as a "metanarrative realism" leave a great deal to be desired. He collapses the distinction between idealism and realism by adopting a perverse notion of (meta-) narrative that obviates any and all standards of evaluation external to it.

■ Christian Theology and the Seduction of Habermas's Communication Theory

By all accounts, various Christian thinkers have invested a great deal of hope in the recent encounters with the aporias of Habermasian theory. For the most part, their intention is not simply to find in Habermas some hints of compatibility with theological concepts, but rather to assimilate Habermasian thought to a theological discourse.[2] Such sympathetic enlistments of Habermas, focusing on his multifaceted notion of social action and rationality, his universalistic "communicative ethics," his evolutionary defense of modernism against the relativistic assault of "anti-metanarrative" postmodernism, and the like, have sparked a new depth in theological investigations.[3]

Döbert, for instance, has relied on Habermas's theory of communicative competence and his concomitant view of the "internal history" of worldviews to provide an evolutionary model of religious development.[4] According to Döbert, indices of religious evolution (such as the expansion of the profane in the sacred, the demythologization of cosmology, the autonomization of moral consciousness, and the related reconstruction of religious consciousness) confirm the basic hypotheses of social evolution put forward by Habermas. While Döbert's insights run parallel to the Habermasian enterprise, Peukert, Badillo, Fiorenza, and others attempt a more direct convergence of theology and communicative theory.

Peukert's "theology of communicative action" represents, first and foremost, a sophisticated blending of Habermas's social theory, Metz's praxis-oriented fundamental theology, Bultmann's Heideggerian existentialist theology, and Rahner's hermeneutic-transcendental theology. Undergirding the intermeshing of these diverse thinkers is the claim that the thoughts of Metz, Bultmann, and Rahner harbor elements of Habermasian communicative rationality. Thus, while Peukert utilizes Lenhardt's concept of "anamnestic solidarity" and Benjamin's notion of "repressed past" to substantiate a Metz-sympathetic communicative theology of the cross, this is complemented by a selective, critical appropriation of Bultmann's historicist eschatology and Rahner's transcendental "I-Thou" conceptualization.

---

[2] See, for example, Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Robert P. Badillo, *The Emancipatory Theory of Habermas* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991); Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Toward a Theology of Communicative Action* (James Bohman trans.; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984); and Rudolph J. Siebert, *From Critical Theory to Communicative Political Theology* (Darmstadt: Lang, 1989).

[3] A decent explication of Habermas's thought appears in Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[4] Rainer Döbert, *Systemtheorie und die Entwicklung religiöser Deutungssysteme* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

In a similar vein, Badillo has engaged in a theological reconstruction of Habermasian theory that finds its precursor in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. He attempts a Habermasian revisionist reading of Aquinas and other classic theologians whereby, to give an example, Aquinas is said to have interpreted the "gift of creation" as an act of communication. In Fiorenza, on the other hand, one finds a more guarded recourse to Habermas that is highly critical of the latter's failure to appreciate the role of churches as "communities of interpretation," providing an institutional locus of the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*)[5] for the discussion of moral and practical issues. Fiorenza has, moreover, distanced himself from Habermas's "formalistic" discourse ethics and has called for a historicist approach to "public theology." Despite these criticisms, however, Fiorenza remains commited to the notion that a substantive and methodological fusion of Habermasian theory and theology is both possible and necessary.[6] Fueling this conclusion are the signs of reconciliation toward religious worldviews in the recent writings of Habermas, works that emphasize religion's "therapeutic experience" and its role in fostering a communicative ethics and protecting the cultural lifeworld from the incursions of the "mediatizing power and money."[7]

In his "reply" to the writings of Fiorenza, Peukert, and others, Habermas has conceded sizable ground to his theological critics by revising his earlier "hasty" conclusions about the disintegration of religious worldviews and his circumspect view of the "religious sphere."[8] While acknowledging the potentially important contribution of "public political theology," Habermas has also assigned a larger role for religion in his theories of needs and social action: according to him, religious and other traditional values function as "stencils according to which needs are shaped." Similarly, the renewal of religious tradition is said to be "ever more strongly dependent on individuals' readiness for critique and capacity for innovation." Without doubt, the traditional rivalry between theology and atheistic social science has been somewhat undermined by the provocations of a mutually enriching encounter that seemingly confirms a logic of convergence in current reconstructive efforts in social theory and theology. Still, the hopeful expectations of the convergence thesis, al-

---

[5] A hermeneutic concept found in Gadamer, Ricœur, Habermas, and others denoting the totality of the moral, cultural sphere. In Habermas, "lifeworld" is counterposed to "system," that is, economic and bureaucratic systems, and deals with their interpenetration, reification of lifeworld by system, etc.

[6] See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology," *Proceedings of the CTSA* 30 (1975), 63–110.

[7] For more on this, see Fred Dallymer, "Critical Theory and Reconciliation," in Browning and Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, 95–121. Unfortunately, Dallymer misses the irreconcilable gaps between Habermas and theology discussed in this writing.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World," in Browning and Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, 226–51.

ready negated by postmodern heresies,[9] are held back by the lingering problems that prevent the narrowing of the gap between these thought traditions.

■ The Problems of a Communication Turn in Theology

The question of whether or not Christian theology is reconstructible within the framework of a Habermasian communicative theory is an open question that is, unfortunately, often taken for granted instead of proven. This is the problem with Döbert, who not only generalizes about world religions on the basis of religious experience in the West but also commits the error of uncritically endorsing Habermas's secularist insights concerning "metaphysical" consciousness.

To elaborate, in his critique of "metaphysical thoughts," which owes more to Feuerbach and Heidegger, Habermas contends that the main fault of these metaphysical reflections is that they "put the world as a whole at a distance by means of a history of salvation or of a cosmology."[10] One must ask whether the idea of metaphysics that Habermas is rejecting is really an adequate one. Certainly, the notion of an attenuated deity in which God is conceived as a distant being beyond the universe is flatly rejected by most contemporary Christian thinkers. Thus, for instance, Jürgen Moltmann writes: "The indwelling presence of God is the source of the light that interpenetrates everything and makes it shine."[11] Similarly, Gordon Kaufman has written that God works within this world and is "directing the world beyond into perfection."[12] An added problem with Habermas's celebration of "postmetaphysical thinking" is that it is marked by the beginning of a self-reversal, that is, a circumspect embrace of metaphysics that runs contrary to his theoretical system. He writes, for example: "Without the spur of an idealizing world projection and a transcendent truth claim, objectifying science is swallowed up by its contingent contexts."[13]

Döbert excuses himself from applying any religiously-based critique of Habermas (for example, of Habermas's unecological notion of human/nature in-

---

[9] This is particularly true of Derridaian "negative theology." For more on this, see Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginality: Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Bible* (New York: Brill, 1996). For an apt discussion of postmodernity and its resignation to bottomless fragmentation and ephemerality, see David Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

[10] Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 119.

[11] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 318.

[12] Gordon Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 415.

[13] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking,* 134. The example of Habermas recalls Emil Brunner's insight that "even philosophical thought cannot get away from God" (*The Christian Doctrine of God* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949] 156).

teraction under the rubric of instrumental rationality). One cannot fully address such a lacuna in Habermasian theory short of, at a minimum, a reembrace of quasi-Kantian transcendental interests featured in Habermas's earlier writings—writings which Habermas himself has long abandoned. Nor is Döbert capable of acknowledging the sacral views of nature, so paramount in some Eastern religions, which have neither changed over time nor become irrelevant to the contemporary ecotheological concerns.[14]

With Peukert, on the other hand, the reversal of the classical (antagonistic) relationship of critical theory to theology is at bottom indebted to the honing of a key hermeneutical idea: intersubjectivity. Briefly, for Habermas intersubjectivity is the central organizing principle of his systemic theory in all of its subsets, that is, views on speech-acts and their validity claims, consensus theory of truth, ideal and distorted communication, and religion.[15] Accordingly, religion in all its aspects becomes an intersubjectively mediated social tradition. In his magnum opus Habermas focuses on the "linguistification of the sacred," thus asserting that religious convictions "owe their authority less and less to the spellbinding power and aura of the holy, and more and more to a consensus that is. . . brought about communicatively."[16]

Peukert endorses this idea wholeheartedly and seeks to substantiate it within theology by, for example, sighting Rahner's view of "love of neighbor" to drive home the point that the transcendental experience of God is necessarily intersubjectively mediated.[17] In hindsight, however, this raises the question of whether or not Peukert has engaged in a selective and highly imaginative reading of Rahner. This question owes its origin to Peukert's curious oversight of Rahner's basic theological assumption regarding humanity's foreknowledge of God.

For Rahner, the self exists in intrinsic relationship with the deity, and religious experience transpires as the ultimate depth of every personal experience at the presocial level.[18] The assumption (latent in Rahner and, before him, in Hegel)[19] of an intrinsic communication with God incarnate that has existed in all human be-

---

[14] See, for example, Minocher Sethna, "Zoroastrianism and the Protection of Nature," in idem, ed., *Religion, Nature, and Survival* (New Dehli: Parcham, 1992); see also, K. L. Afrasiabi, "Toward an Islamic Ecotheology," *Hamadard Islamicus* (1995) 33–45; and idem, "Islamic Populism," *Telos* 105 (1995) 99–127.

[15] For more on this see, Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979) 272–358.

[16] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, (2 vols.; Boston: Beacon, 1987) 2. 89.

[17] Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology,* 272–74

[18] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978). For more elaboration on this issue see, John Haught, *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

[19] "Humanity implicitly bears within itself the divine idea, not bearing within itself like something from somewhere else but as its own substantive nature." Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 3. 109.

ings from the beginning is foreign to a communicative theology burdened with a one-sided, purely intersubjective notion of transcendence.[20] To be fair to Peukert, he recognizes the need to address the question of the existence of God; his championing of communicative rationality, however, forces him into a certain reticence on this issue. He does not link up with Rahner's notion of interior self-communication of human beings as embodied spirits; consequently, he moves within the area of this theistic question. Nevertheless, owing to the subversive power of his communicative bias, he misses Metz's recognition that one cannot evaluate the claim that God exists by the epistemic standards of intersubjectivity.[21] Like Habermas, Peukert inflates intersubjectivity and thus closes off the option of understanding "rationalization of belief" in an entirely different sense from that proposed by Habermas.

What Habermas means by rationalization is a "decentered understanding of the world."[22] In an analogous manner, Habermas bases the rationality of an expression on its criticizability and claims that religious or metaphysical thought requires a "fusion of ontic, normative, and expressive aspects of validity"; its basic concepts are thereby "immunized against objections."[23] This criticism is, however, applicable only to a limited approach to theology, such as that of Alvin Plantinga, according to whom "it is rational. . . to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all."[24] The problem with Plantinga's interpretation is twofold. First,

[20] "The relation to God is then possible only in the turning to the other in solidarity." Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology,* 218. This statement is ultimately based, on the one hand, on an anthropocentric view of religion and, on the other, on an oversight of the theological insight concerning the priority of individuals' relationship with God.

[21] See John B. Metz, "Unglaube als theologisches Problem," *Concilium* 6–7 (1965) 484–92. In a key footnote in another writing, Metz has stated, "My reflections about a political theology began therefore with a criticism of transcendental theology based on intersubjectivity" *(Faith in History and Society* [New York: Crossroad, 1980] 238). The same criticism applies, *mutatis mutandis,* to Mark C. Taylor, whose Derridaian "carnivalization" of Scriptures represents a long detour to intersubjectivity; note, for example, his claim: "With the realization of the total reciprocity of subjects, the entire foundation of economy of domination crumbles." *(Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984] 134). In addition, Taylor's "a/theology," with its call for the overcoming of unhappy consciousness, represents a closet Hegelianism that contradicts its pretensions of wandering erring; a/theology's claim to be irreducibly marginal is ill-matched with its self-privileging as a "decisive" moment in modern thought. Taylor's attempt to anchor a/theology in a range of philosophical terms and maneuvers is, from the outset, greatly at odds with itself; at bottom, the errors of *Erring* are that it is not deconstructive enough and proceeds by setting up pseudoenemies in theology and logic, embracing a "radical christology" that does not belong to the theological syndrome precisely because it lacks any notion of divine transcendence.

[22] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 1. 72.

[23] Ibid., 2. 189.

[24] Alvin Plantinga, "On Taking Belief in God as Basic," in Joseph Runzo and Craig K. Ihara, eds., *Religious Experience and Religious Belief* (New York: University Press of America, 1986) 1–19.

he conflates the issues of rationality and rationalization of belief, reducing the latter to the former and thus presenting a monological view of theology as such. This is precisely where Habermas, with his theoretically rich distinction between rationality and rationalization, becomes useful. Second, Plantinga relies on a full-blown, maximalist notion of belief in God as "trusting in God, accepting his purposes, committing one's life to him and living in his presence."[25] This broad notion, emphasizing action and intentionality, contradicts his basic thesis, which is supportable only by reference to a more restrictive (that is, minimalist) notion of belief. What is missing in Plantinga is the recognition of the world of difference between a basic, primordial belief in God and a systematic belief in God, one that requires a thematic knowledge of God's purposes and the obligations of the knower-subject. Similarly, Plantinga fails to probe the triggering factors and/or actuating processes that make the evolution of primordial belief to systematic belief possible. Such an insight requires a communicative theology based on a notion of reference that points toward the path of belief.

Despite its usefulness as a critique of deficient theologies illustrated above, the nub of the problem with communicative theology, as formulated by Peukert and others,[26] is that it is limited in its freedom to reconstruct the theoretical framework within which its theology works itself out. It is exposed to the syndrome of a methodological atheism that forms a specific barrier to the stated objective of a transcendental hermeneutics. To elaborate, communicative theology is wedded to Habermas's pragmatic theory of meaning, in which meaning is assimilated to intersubjectivity. This is, however, precisely what makes communicative theory a theology-nullifying endeavor; the theological meanings nullified are those that belong to the elements of "God-consciousness."[27] This corresponds to the dissolution of any sense of foundational "transcendental grounding." That the

---

[25] Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?" in C. F. Delaney, ed., *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) 7.

[26] For example, Gary M. Simpson, "Theologia Crucis and the Forensically Fraught World: Engaging Helmut Peukert and Jürgen Habermas," in Browning and Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology,* 173–206. See also, Rudolf Siebert, *The Critical Theory of Religion* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985) and Marsha A. Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Hewitt's uncritical endorsement of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's brand of feminism constitutes its major shortcoming; Hewitt overlooks the noncritical, consensus motivation of Schüssler Fiorenza's thoughts and concepts (for example, "wo/men"), which undercuts the oppositional strand. Like Taylor, Schüssler Fiorenza wants to be both a marginal outsider, that is, "resident alien," and yet occupy the center at the same time. See *Discipleship of Equals: A Feminist Ekklesialogy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

[27] Thus my fundamental objection to the term "God-talk," which has a built-in tendency to give primacy to the intersubjective, communicative dimension of God-consciousness. According to Habermas, a key fault of this kind of consciousness is its fetishization of ontologi-

Habermasian theory precludes a minimum insight into this dimension can be inferred from the fact that Habermas provides little insight on the domain of an "inner world."

Habermas's comments on the "inner world" tie into his speech-act theory, which maintains that utterances about any such inner world raise claims to sincerity of self-presentations, which may be authentic or inauthentic; truth claims per se inexplicably disappear from this realm. Habermas, however, somewhat reverses himself when returning to the issue of "authenticity" (*Authentizität*) in the context of teleological and norm-guided action, which he calls "dramaturgical action." Here, the assessment of (in)authenticity is directly related to the possibility of self-deception, that is, whether a person expresses a true feeling or need. In other words, implicit in Habermas is the recognition that even in dramaturgical action one cannot get away from the question of truth.[28] This applies even to the religious sense of "avowal" that Habermas detects in the "inner world," although without bothering to hypothesize about its origin and social consequences.[29] At bottom, this la-

---

cal oneness that breaks down in the face of a "disenfranchised plurality" (*Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 120–21). This overlooks a basic insight concerning a Triune God, that is, if theology has to do with the Trinitarian presence of eternity in the moment, then the problem of absolutism collapses of its own accord. This criticism is applicable to Fiorenza, who writes: "Universality. . . presupposes an underlying common human nature and practice. It undercuts diversity and plurality, which are reduced to a fundamental oneness." Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism," in Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark L. Taylor, eds., *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 298. Fiorenza's attempt to find a third alternative between universalism and historical particularism with respect to human nature remains an unfulfilled agenda, not the least because of his inability to see the implicit universalist claims concerning human nature in Habermas's communicative rationality, which he endorses.

[28] Of course, the question of what constitutes "truth" has always been a controversial one. In his discussion of the sense of numinous in the "faith state," Charles Hardwick has maintained that "God-talk could well be objectively, solidly true even when 'God' refers to nothing" (*Events of Grace, Naturalism, Existentialism, and Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996] 69). Although this statement makes sense from within a philosophy of language, it does not remain accurate when invoked theologically, from the prism of its system of concepts, which presupposes the existence of the referent, God.

[29] As part of his recent, slow reconciliation with religion, Habermas has penned: "we are exposed to the moment of a transcendence from within." Yet he holds back this rudimentary insight with his resilient philosophical scepticism: "But this does not enable us to ascertain the countermovement of a compensating transcendence from beyond" ("Transcendence from Within," in Browning and Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, 238). Bernstein has noted that Habermas has an action-oriented notion of "avowal." See Jay M. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995) 74. Interestingly, there is no hint of a suggestion in Bernstein about the turn to theology by Habermasian theory discussed here. This (one step forward, two steps backward) turn has brought Habermas closer to Peter Berger, who has similarly written about

cuna is connected to the fact that Habermas has yet to give central attention to the nature of this "inner world."[30]

Without, however, a more elaborate conception of the "inner world," which may imply a reconstruction of the theory of rationality from the bottom up, Habermasian theory remains fundamentally inadequate and without much seductive power for theology.[31] The current assimilation of Habermas by Peukert and Fiorenza, among others, is owing to the fact that their criticisms of Habermas do not go deeply enough and, consequently, result in discovering untenable points of similitude and harmony between his theory and theology; their interpretations are handicapped by systematic distortions about metaphysical thought and religious worldviews detectable in Habermas. The foregoing critical diagnosis of the limitations of communicative theology points toward the need to delineate the elements of a postcommunication theology arising from such criticisms.

■ Postcommunication Theology: Toward A Theory of Theological Competence

Starting with a "hard" notion of theology as God-knowledge first and foremost, the theological perspective offered here finds its intellectual antecedents in the twin pillars of Calvin and Schweitzer. There are significant, yet largely unrecognized, similarities between these two thinkers. Both held comparable views on the nature of deity and attempted to integrate all aspects of existence within a theory of reverence for the divine. In addition, they both saw their intellectual endeavors and ethical responsibilities flowing naturally from certain absolute and fundamen-

---

the "signals of transcendence" (*The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* [Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967]). Unfortunately, Berger fails to draw the full implication of his insight, namely, that these "signals of transcendence," above all a primordial desire for God, are inborn in human beings, whose struggle for deciphering and recognizing them provides the moral force that is ultimately responsible for the development of the "sacred canopy."

[30] In a footnote in one of his recent publications, Habermas states rather obliquely: "A corresponding hypothesis concerning the construction of an inner world and how it is delimited from the objective and social worlds need not concern us here except in so far as the subjective world and its thematizable experiences represent a further basic attitude and perspective, rounding out the system of world perspectives" (*Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990] 190).

[31] The same criticism applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Seyla Benhabib's more elaborate philosophy of the subject in her work, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). In spite of her insights, Benhabib's work is interlaced with the same theoretical shortcomings in Habermas discussed here; thus, for example, Benhabib gives only cursory attention to the role of religious experience in the constitution of "inner identity" and, relatedly, fails to explain the way in which truth and authenticity are interconnected within a transcendental subjectivity.

tal principles. Schweitzer's philosophy of "reverence for life" complements Calvin's "reverence for God" in a way that the contemporary context of theology should find significant for an integrative theology of God, humankind, and the social and physical world.

Calvin equates reverence for God with piety and understands it as "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."[32] This reverence is a reciprocal and dialectical one; it is relatable to a desire of God to "render himself near and familiar to us" through his "common grace" to humanity by planting the "seeds of religion" in "every heart." This, in turn, invokes a "desire for God" that manifests itself in human beings' passion for religion. One might describe this notion of religion as illuminism, that is, the notion that knowledge of God is "illuminated through faith by an internal revelation of God."[33]

The illuminism that Calvin calls faith is defined as "a steady and certain knowledge of Divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our mind and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit."[34] Interestingly, this view strongly resembles the thoughts of the Muslim theosophist Suhrwardi, whose method of describing esoteric knowledge in *Philosophy of Illumination* shifts from "being" to "light" and, in a manner similar to that of Calvin, refers to an "inner eye."[35] Parenthetically speaking, it is also noteworthy that Moltmann's latest work evinces a similar preoccupation with divine light:

> The light that shines through everything is a visible sign of the all-penetrating presence of God, and of the perichoresis which does not destroy created beings but fulfills them. The countless and multifariously bright reflections of the divine light shows the richness and the eternal participation of created beings in the present glory of God.[36]

In terms of comparative theology, this raises the curious question of whether one is now witnessing the beginning of a quiet convergence of Eastern and Western theological reflection!

---

[32] Calvin *Institutes,* 1.5.15.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 1; 3.2.7.

[35] "Once the inner eye opens, the exterior eye ought to be closed. Lips must be sealed and the interior senses should begin to function so the person, if he attains anything, does so with inner being, and if he sees, he sees with the inner eye, and if he hears, he hears with the inner ear. . . . Therefore, when asked what would one see, [the answer of the inner self is] it sees what it sees and what it ought to see. . . . The beginning of illumination is detachment from the world; the middle way is observation of divine light; and the end is limitless." (Quoted from Wheeler M. Thackston, *Mystical and Visionary Treatise of Suhrwardi* [London: Octogon, 1982] 181).

[36] Moltmann, *Coming of God,* 318.

Schweitzer carries Calvinist illuminism several steps further within a civilizational discourse that is based on the ethical philosophy of "reverence for life"; he understands the latter as elemental piety.[37] What is more, the very realization and knowledge of this philosophy is related to an illuminist discovery.[38] Schweitzer, however, neither worked out the connection between his philosophical "reverence for life" and the theological "reverence for God," nor, as a result, was he ever able to understand his own illuminist experience theoretically, that is, as part and parcel of a theory of theological competence. Such a theory is necessary for the exposition and surfacing of Schweitzer's deep theological inclinations lying behind his philosophical concerns. The goal of this theory is an explicit description of the process that a typically competent theologian must travel in order to form adequate theological knowledge. It would show that, contrary to Schweitzer's own self-representation, the "reverence for life" principle was not triggered by an utterly isolated *cogito*, but by the internal and external impression on a consciousness of the fact of its presence within a web of existence in the theologically-interpreted context of nature and others.[39] Taking this analysis one step further, one may claim that the theological presupposition of Schweitzer's illuminist philosophical discovery was not context-bound, and that it represented a pure form of metatheoretical knowledge issuing neither from a communicative understanding nor directly from an interest in "care for others." Rather, it was first generated by a concern to render meaningful the nature of being (*Dasein*) through self-communication.

The idea of self-communication serves to highlight the non-intersubjective dimension of inner life that, when theologically understood, underscores the primary phenomenological perception and desire of deity.[40] It also denotes the key link in a chain of theological learning, consisting in one's learning to conceive of

[37] Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (New York: Holt, 1944) 235.

[38] The phrase, "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben" came to Schweitzer while observing nature on a riverboat trip in Africa. Ibid., 156.

[39] Indeed, far from an exception, Schweitzer's illuminist discovery is shared by a number of other theologians throughout history. For example, Anselm's famous ontological argument is related to a sudden moment of illumination. See Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1972). Another example belongs to Nicholas of Cusa and his sudden discovery recorded in *De Visione Dei*.

[40] Relevant works are Nelson Pike, *Mystic Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). My argument runs contrary to both Peukert and Taylor who, each in his own way, espouses a theology of despair by associating God-knowledge with death. My view is closer to that of Tracy, who focuses on the ambiguities of existence. See David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

oneself, as well as the entire universe, from the normative perspective of the Creator.[41] That there are other links in this chain one can infer from, among other things, Schweitzer's ecological and humanist "reverence for life," the articulation of which itself represents a sign of evolution of theological competence (at the theoretical level). This is so because Schweitzer's infusion of an ethics of the human/nature relationship arguably represents a qualitative broadening of the theological horizon, not unlike the recent contribution of feminist theologies.[42] Anticipating Habermas, Schweitzer maintained that rationality was an integral part of his ethical thought and of any coherent philosophy of civilization.[43] The increased differentiation and complexity of theological thought in these cases provide us with the justificatory explanation of a theory of theological competence that operates at both practical and theoretical levels.[44]

Seen in this light, Moltmann's sophisticated, multifarious "immanent Trinity" represents a recent example of creative imagination in theology, which works as a

[41] Following this line of reasoning, everyone has a generative, deep competence to think theologically. This does not mean jumping to the conclusion that we are all theologians, which is reserved for those who have advanced to a postgenerative level blessed with a coherent, full-fledged theology. In a certain sense, both Luther and Calvin are guilty of overlooking the internal differentiation of the (stages of) theological competence and the external (that is, church-related) requirements of cultivating and surfacing this competency. My approach builds on the "stages of spiritual knowledge" in medieval mysticism. See, for example, St. Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God* (Indianapolis: Hacket, 1956); and William of St. Thierry, *The Golden Epistle* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

[42] So far, an overall discussion of feminist contributions to theological thought is lacking. As far as this author is aware, in terms of doing "hard" theology, feminist theologies have not really made any contribution, save the notion of mother-father God, which deals only with the metaphorical aspect of theological language. This is clearly discernible in Elizabeth Johnson's trinitarian feminist theology which adopts a roundabout way of endorsing Rahner's theology of God. (See *She Who Is*, 116). A relevant work in this connection is Sandra Harding and Merril B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983).

[43] Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1981) 22, 80. In his critical assessment of Schweitzer, Moltmann completely glosses over the theological contribution of Schweitzer's philosophy of civilization and confines himself to a debunking of Schweitzer's lopsided view of theology-as-eschatology, without bothering with the significance of Schweitzer's philosophy for Christian eschatology (Moltmann, *Coming of God*, 7–10). The same criticism applies to Steven C. Rockefeller in his "The Wisdom of Reverence for Life," in John E. Carroll, Paul Brockman, and Mary Westfall, eds., *The Greening of Faith: God, the Environment, and the Good Life* (Hanover, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 1997) 30–44.

[44] At the practical level, one may conceptualize the reign of Soviet communism as a systematic distortion of theological competence that finally dissolved under the contradictions of its own system as well as the (theologically-informed) resistances of the lifeworld in Eastern Europe.

motor force of theological competence. Moltmann's somewhat "half-realized" eschatology, when conjoined with a neo-Schweitzerian ecofeminist "reverence for life," forms the basis of a feminist "ecoeschatology" that is both immanent and transcendental, salvic yet pragmatic, a future-oriented theology anchored in the here and now, and is, therefore, by definition dialogical and communicative.[45] Yet, because its path is informed by an "innate" theology of reverence for God, it remains above and beyond the purview of intersubjectivity and is thus authentically postcommunicative.

In conclusion, while the exact shape and orientation of this postcommunication theology has yet to be worked out, the foregoing cursory examination has, I hope, established the need to work out its details by following a comprehensive agenda for theological research.[46]

---

[45] By "ecoeschatology" I mean, first and foremost, a theology of suspicion with respect to the Enlightment notion of progress and its "instrumental rationality." Unfortunately, the ecological dimension is missing in recent literature on escatology. See for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Geoffrey W. Bromley, trans.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1998) 3. 527–645. Also Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990). For a recent work that misses the eschatological argument in ethics/nature discussion and presents a purely social theory of action, see Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery,* 194–210.

[46] For more on this see, K. L. Afrasiabi, "Critical Theory, Feminism, and Theology," *Telos* (special issue on religion, forthcoming 1998).