EDITORIAL ESSAY

BEYOND THE MODERN-ANTI-MODERN DILEMMA: *GAUDIUM ET SPES* AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT¹

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The Church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual human questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related. There is a need, then, to be aware of, and to understand, the world in which we live, together with its expectations, its desires and its frequently dramatic character (*Gaudium et spes* 4).²

I. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church (*Gaudium et spes*) has had a major impact on the theological-epistemological developments in Roman Catholic theology. It has stimulated modern, so-called "progressive" theologians and church leaders to intensify an appreciation of the relation between the Church and the world, faith and history, in order to continue the Council's *aggiornamento*. At the same time, this has caused a great deal of worry to, and the resistance of, many so-called "anti-modern" or neo-conservative theologians and church leaders, afraid of a too far-reaching adaptation of Christian faith to the modern, secular world,

¹This essay originated as a position paper delivered at two joint conferences commemorating the fortieth anniversary of *Gaudium et spes* (Leuven 2004, Rome 2005). Despite its obvious European roots, I wish to offer it to my North American colleagues as a contribution to our collegial reading of "the signs of the times," our mutual reflections on the status and role of Christianity and the Church in the contemporary world.

²*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:1070 (hereafter in the text as GS with paragraph number).

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putting at risk the specificity or identity of Christian faith. Whereas modern theology stressed the fundamental continuity between faith and the world in order to construct a plausible and relevant Christian faith, anti-modern theology accentuated, for the same reasons, the discontinuity between the two. Discussions about whether the openness to the world has led to mere adaptation or not are most often stretched between these poles. The more recent postmodern criticism of modernity's claims and presuppositions would seem to support the anti-modern criticism of *Gaudium et spes* and its reception. Because of modernity's loss of plausibility, it would appear that not only has the theological project of dialogue with modernity become implausible, but also that the concept of dialogue itself in theology is disputed.

It is in relation to this discussion that I will reflect here on the contours of a theological methodology for today, which at the same time can claim contextual plausibility and theological legitimacy. Being a European theologian myself, my starting point obviously is the current European context. I am confident, however, that many of the issues raised in this essay will be familiar to an American theological audience as well, and might encourage further dialogue between European and American theologies. After a presentation of *Gaudium et spes* and its distinctive modern and anti-modern receptions, I will list in short form the contextual changes that occurred in the last decade of the previous century up to the present. I will do so in order to shed some light on the challenges these changes imply for theology's dialogue with the world, and for the dilemma of modern and anti-modern positions in this regard. I will contend that theology, precisely from a renewed dialogue with the postmodern context, can go beyond the methodological dilemma of modern and anti-modern theologies and their respective presuppositions of either continuity or discontinuity between faith and world. In order to substantiate this claim, I will introduce the theological-epistemological category of "interruption" in which continuity and discontinuity are held together in tension. It should be clear that in this essay only the contours of such a "post-modern" theology of interruption can be drawn.³

II. *Gaudium et spes: Understanding and Communication*

With the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* the Church engaged in an attempt to *understand* and *communicate* its place and its

³The ideas and the line of thought presented in this essay have recently been articulated in more detail as a contextually-anchored theology of interruption, with case-studies and illustrations, in Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in Times of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

role in the modern world ("examining the signs of the times"), thereby expressing its wish to cooperate unreservedly with humankind in reaching its destiny, in order that "human persons might be saved" and "human society be restored."

With this attempt at *understanding* the Church explicitly intends to take up its responsibility, "with the guidance of the Paraclete, to continue the work of Christ who came into the world to give witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served" (GS 3). This attempt is from the start theologically motivated, intrinsically linking the salvific role of the Church to the world and salvation history to the history of humankind. Understanding therefore implies at the same time understanding the world as well as self-understanding, in their mutual relation. In order to attain this, the Church enters into a dialogue with the modern world. Such dialogue is fruitful for both: it helps the world to carry out to its destiny, and offers the Church new possibilities to proclaim the Christian faith.

At the same time, in the Pastoral Constitution the Church wants to *communicate* this understanding both within and beyond the borders of the Catholic Church and the Christian community at large, thus both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Indeed, unlike other conciliar documents, *Gaudium et spes* is explicitly directed to all human beings. The first doctrinal part deals with Christian teachings concerning the human being, the world, and the Church's relation to the world, while the second pastoral part, covering specific urgent topics, is thus intended to express the Church's views "in a manner appropriate to the *current* generation" (cf. GS 4).

Regarding its interpretation, note 1 of *Gaudium et spes* mentions that the methods of regular theological interpretation apply to the constitution; one has to take into account, however, the contingent, changing elements with which the document is concerned in the second part. It is precisely these theological-hermeneutical methods that have become the object of a virulent, divisive theological debate.

III. Gaudium et spes as the Catalyst of Modern Catholic Theology

For modern theologians *Gaudium et spes* was not only the last document of Vatican II but also pointed out the direction in which the Church and theology had to go in the post-conciliar period; the council did not end with its formal closure. For example, Edward Schillebeeckx considered the pastoral constitution "as the criterion by which to measure the success of the Council as a whole" and as the "prime example of a [renewed and comprehensive] theology of culture," for "in modern times human existence with its existential experiences

needed to be taken up into the church and faith."⁴ This turn toward the world resulted in the many modern and late-modern theologies attempting to relate Christian faith to what is at stake in the world and history (liberation theologies and political theologies are two prime examples). These theologies often include the following characteristics: hermeneutical methods proceeding from the historical-contextual embeddedness of Christian tradition and faith; low instead of high christologies; utopian expectations grasped from within the tension of the eschatological reserve; an intrinsic link between salvation history and history; orthopraxis as the criterion for orthodoxy; interdisciplinary methodological approaches (among others, socio-economic mediations).

In one way or another, according to David Tracy, all these theologies are to be categorized as "correlationist theologies."⁵ The modern strivings for rationality, human freedom and social liberation were considered privileged *loci theologici* from which to recontextualize the Christian faith in a God who is involved salvifically with human beings and their histories. Where human beings strove after human dignity, God could not be absent. Secular culture was no longer considered to be alienated from Christianity, but rather the place where God was actively present in the struggle for an authentic subjectivity and social justice. Modern theologies thus presumed as a starting point the principle that there is a *continuity between modernity*, with its striving for rationality and emancipation, *and Christian faith*. What was at stake then, was *to critically (cor)relate* the salvific message of Christian faith with the modern context. Correlation theologies, therefore, sought a consensus between culture and faith: the Christian was at least as modern as the average modern human being, and offered even a surplus where modernity reached its limits (e.g., eschatologically correcting mere inner-worldly utopian expectations). But on the final account, the modern project was an endeavor in which Christians could participate,

⁴Erik Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian in His History*, trans. John Bowden (London/New York: Continuum, 2003), 346. See also p. 358: "According to Schillebeeckx's reading, the final message of the Council documents was that the Catholic Church was really itself only if it succeeded in giving credible form to God's salvation for the world in its structure, its speech and action. . . . He thought that the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* above all marked off an area. It bore witness to what for an official document was a new "worldly" spirit, supported by faith in the Creator God who at the same time is our unmerited salvation, so that the whole of the concrete reality in which we live comes to us as grace in the ordinary things of every day, in the face of our fellow human beings and in the great aspirations of present-day humanity" (quoting Edward Schillebeeckx, *Eindresultaat*, in idem, *Het Tweede Vaticaans Concilie*, vol. 2 [Tielt/Den Haag: Lannoo, 1966], 69).

⁵David Tracy, "The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 548–70.

together with all other "people of good will"—and this on theological grounds.

Because of the presumption of continuity between Christian faith and context, insofar as secular reason reaches truth, Christian faith cannot but comply with it. *Therefore, in this case, faith adds to, or qualifies, what human beings know by secular reason alone; or faith makes visible and motivates what is already at work at the heart of the modern project.* It would appear that the discourse of ethics has especially been conceived as the bridge between modern context and Christian faith, both testifying to the latter's lasting validity, plausibility and rationality, and communicating it in a universally acknowledgeable language, resulting from the very dialogue.

IV. *The Anti-Modern Criticism of the Modern Theological Reception of Gaudium et spes*

Soon after its appearance, *Gaudium et spes* met with the criticism of anti-modern theologians who were wary of the identification of Christian hope with the modern belief in the progress of humanity. Because of its secularism, the modern world could not be viewed as an ally of Christian faith and its promise of the Kingdom but rather as its opposite, because the modern world wants to create its own salvation instead of expecting it from God. The modern projects of rationality and emancipation, critics claim, lead to self-created truth and empty freedom, being respectively the other side of nihilism and irrationalism and of amorality and relativism. Authentic truth and freedom are not self-made but given, not empty but bound to the positive determination of it in Christian revelation.

This criticism arose not only because of the growing ambiguities of modernity itself which darkened the optimism of the 1960s, but also because the reception of the Pastoral Constitution in modern theology was viewed as a license that furthered theology's turn toward the world. In 1973 Joseph Ratzinger noted that "the tragic one-sidedness of the last conciliar debates consisted in the fact that they were dominated by the trauma of backwardness and a pathos to catch up with modernity, a pathos which remained blind for the inherent ambiguity of today's world".⁶ Ratzinger argues later on that in no way can *Gaudium et spes* be considered a plea for an ongoing progressivism, a never-ending process of adjustment to modernity. On the contrary, the Pastoral Constitution was not meant as a starting point for an unrestricted

⁶Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Angesichts der Welt von heute. Überlegungen zur Konfrontation mit der Kirche im Schema XIII," in idem, *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich: Wewel, 1973), 183-204, at 199-200.

dialogue, but rather determined its limits. Moreover, it is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church that ought to direct a contemporary hermeneutics of the Pastoral Constitution and not the other way around.⁷

This negative attitude has resulted in a radical critique, not only of the modern presumptions of theology's dialogue with the late-modern context, but also of the principle of dialogue itself. For anti-modern theological epistemology, the identity, plausibility and relevance of Christian faith are not reflected upon from the presumption of continuity but of *discontinuity* with the world. Theological rationality is at odds with the rationality of the world. Inasmuch as a great deal of postmodern criticism would appear to corroborate the negative analysis of modernity, some of these theologies welcome this criticism, but also strive to overcome immediately the postmodern context by introducing pre-modern theological thinking patterns. Examples of such thinking appear in much of the current reception to Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology (as a kind of theological-aesthetic antidote to post-modern aestheticization), and the positions taken by John Milbank and his Radical Orthodoxy movement (appealing on the basis of a neo-Augustinian participationist metaphysics to safeguard the integrity of the finite in its participation in the infinite).

V. *From Modern to Postmodern: Detraditionalization, Pluralization, and Sensibility for the Other*

In Western Europe the ambitious project of modern theology was carried out in a context marked by a still-existing *factual overlap between context and Christian faith*, which contextually supported its epistemological presumption of continuity. There remained a common cultural horizon, very much influenced by Christian tradition. In the last decades, however, through *detraditionalization* this common Christian horizon has more or less vanished.⁸ Though the majority of people are still nominally Christian, the widespread familiarity with Christian discourses and practices has disappeared. In reality, Christians have become a minority in a pluralizing society.

The second distinguishing feature of the current European religious context is its *pluralization*, both from an intra- and interreligious

⁷For this paragraph and further references see Lieven Boeve, "Gaudium et spes and the Crisis of Modernity: The End of the Dialogue with the World?," in *Vatican II and its Legacy*, ed. M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis, BETL 166 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 83–94. The present essay is a further elaboration of the points raised there.

⁸See the results of the European Values Study, which shows a detraditionalization and de-institutionalization of religion in Europe, leading not to its disappearance but rather to its transformation. Cf. Y. Lambert, "A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19, 1 (2004): 29–45.

perspective. The consciousness of this pluralization is also, and more specifically, the result of physical and mental migration (communications media), of contacts with other religious traditions, and growing interreligious contacts. An analysis of the current religious and ideological situation in terms of a continuum between "churched Christian" and "professing atheist humanists", therefore, is no longer helpful. It should be replaced by *an analysis in terms of a plural field of interacting religious positions*, among which the variety of classical religious traditions are distinct positions alongside the diversity of individual spiritualities. Even nihilism and religious indifference should be considered particular positions in their own right, to be distinguished on this plural religious field. Christianity has not been replaced by a secular culture but by a plurality of worldviews and religions have moved in to occupy the spaces left vacant as result of its diminishing impact.

At the same time, modern epistemological standards (universality, transparency, and communicability) have been critiqued by much of postmodern thinking, thereby expressing a typically postmodern critical consciousness. Since the 1980s *postmodern sensibilities* have questioned some basic presumptions of modern secular culture, calling for more attention to heterogeneity and radical historicity. Having learned from the lessons of twentieth-century history, they have become suspicious of totalizing frameworks (the so-called "master narratives") and call attention to the limits, contextuality, particularity, and contingency of any construction of meaning. They give rise to thinking patterns that start from a sensitivity to otherness and difference, and remain aware of the ever-persisting danger of the hegemonic closing of our ways to deal with them.

Similar to the anti-modern theological reactions to the changes that accentuate the discontinuity between Christian faith and contemporary context, modern theological reactions adhere to their epistemological *presumption of continuity*. Late-modern theologies, highly critical of so-called "postmodernism" (viewed as nihilism, relativism and aestheticism), often turn to thinkers who *call on the resources of modernity itself* to develop further a rational and emancipatory humanistic project (e.g., Jürgen Habermas, who is opposed to such a theological maneuver) to remedy the ambiguities accompanying its realization. Or, influenced by postmodern criticism of the master narratives of rationality (e.g., by Jean-François Lyotard or Jacques Derrida), the dialogue of theology with the postmodern context results in the evacuation of specific Christian particularity in postmodern philosophical and theological negative theologies promoting a "pure religion" without the

contamination of language and particularity (John Caputo and, in his own way, Richard Kearney).⁹

VI. *The Dialogue of Theology with a Changing World*

The debate as to whether or not adaptation is desirable appears to be framed from within this anti-modern versus modern theological dilemma, between the presumptions of discontinuity or continuity. It is my claim that both positions forget the call of *Gaudium et spes* to read the signs of the times, "interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (GS 4), a hermeneutical endeavor of *recontextualization of Christian faith in the current, so-called 'postmodern' context*. In so doing, I affirm the intuition of modern theology that the Pastoral Constitution has opened the way to a hermeneutical theological paradigm, accentuating the irreducible and intrinsic link between faith and tradition on the one hand, and history and context on the other. From a theological-epistemological perspective, I hold that the context contributes intrinsically to the development of tradition, and thus refute the claim, made by many anti-modern approaches, that the relationship between tradition and context is first and foremost an extrinsic one.

Against anti-modern theologies, I would argue that although the specific content of *Gaudium et spes* can be questioned because of the crisis of modernity, it remains valuable to preserve the method manifested in *Gaudium et spes*. For our purpose the question "what does *Gaudium et spes* do?" is far more pressing than the question "what does the text of *Gaudium et spes* say?". In addressing the first question, one observes that the Constitution did not favor the modern world of the early 1960s as such, but allied itself with the contemporary, critical consciousness, present in the contemporary philosophy of personalism. Herein the human person is goal and measure of modern (technical) developments. By adopting this contemporary critical consciousness, *Gaudium et spes* succeeded in incarnating Christian faith in the modern world of the 1960s so that Christian faith itself acquired the ability to function as a critical consciousness.¹⁰ By closing itself off

⁹See, e.g., my analysis of Richard Kearney's *The God Who May Be* in "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics. A Critical-Constructive Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion", in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 81 (2005): 305–33.

¹⁰Cf. D. R. Campion, "The Church Today," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 183–98, at 185; Enda McDonagh, "The Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*)," in *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, ed. Adrian Hastings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96–112, at 102. See also Dolores L. Christie, *Adequately Considered: An American Perspective on Louis Janssens' Personalist Morals*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 4 (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 101–06, regarding the similarities between *Gaudium et spes* and the

from the current context, anti-modern theology isolates itself from the contextual experiences and sources even while it attempts to reply “to the continual human questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related” (GS 4). Without continuing recontextualization, theology is doomed to repeat a fossilized past (repeating answers given to past contexts), which will result in a withdrawal of the Church from the world.

Although its response is very unproductive, anti-modern theology would appear to be right when criticizing the taken-for-granted presumption of continuity in modern theology. The transformation of religion in today’s European societies results in many instances in a vague religiosity (sometimes borrowing freely from the narratives, rites and practices of old and new religious sources). This kind of “continuity” almost necessarily leads to a kind of post-Christian religiosity which not only exposes an embarrassment with Christian particularity, but also loses track of a faith in God revealing Godself in the contingencies and particularities of history, above all in Jesus Christ. In some other accounts, the particular thickness of Christian narrativity is viewed as merely a beautiful story or an illustration of what is already present in general human terms, and thus something easily dispensed with—which is in fact what numerous “post-Christians” seem to have done.

Furthermore, because detraditionalization to a great degree has dispelled the overlap between culture and Christianity, the hermeneutical horizon or basis for the presupposed continuity of modern theologies is no longer present. There is no longer an immediate link between “being human” in general and “being Christian”. The specificity of the latter no longer follows quasi-automatically from the former. Experiences and expressions of contingency, hope and joy, grief and anguish, transcendence and wholeness no longer immediately link up with Christian frames of interpretation. (The Christian) God, as such, is no longer self-evidently connected to what it means to be a human being. Only for those initiated into the Christian narrative, and still living from it, does such an interpretation appear to be plausible and relevant.

Moreover, on closer inspection, our very concepts of being human have been *pluralized*, often reflecting the various positions from which one speaks. In our context, therefore, theology is no longer engaged in a unilateral dialogue with secular culture, but is immersed in a dynamic, irreducible, and often conflicting plurality of religions and world and life views. The secular-humanist discourse on humanity

personalism of Louis Janssens (who in turn was influenced by the French personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier).

itself has become merely one discourse among many. It is no longer a kind of meta-discourse that particular traditions could and should use to communicate and judge their own views. All positions are now participants on the dynamic playing field of religions and life views; any claim to “neutral observer” status is illegitimate and risks totalitarianism.

VII. *Theology in Dialogue with a Postmodern Context*

Against anti-modern theology, I would argue that the intrinsic link between faith and theology, and history and context, the principle of dialogue should not be given up—thus, no discontinuity. Beyond modern correlation, I suggest that the way in which the two are related should be reconsidered—thus, no naïve presumption of continuity. And what is more: it is precisely *the dialogue with the postmodern context that offers a way out of this dilemma*. For the current context, both culturally and as regards its critical consciousness, challenges Christian faith to recontextualization.

On the cultural level, detraditionalization and pluralization, on the one hand, have sharpened Christian faith’s awareness of its own particular narrativity and the truth claim expressed by means of it. On the other hand, the context of plurality has made it clear that Christian faith is situated among a variety of other religions and ideologies that on the basis of their own particularity offer equally serious but different truth claims. Christianity (in all its internal diversity) is a participant in this plurality, with its own history, narrativity, and profile. Moreover, the concrete dialogue with the other teaches us that in what seem to be similarities there often reside the greatest differences. For instance, precisely that which binds together Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—the three so-called prophetic religions or “religions of the book” (“religions of revelation”)—at the same time fundamentally distinguishes them: the way that they perceive their “prophet” (Muhammad, Jesus or Moses), the role played by each religion’s holy scriptures (Qur’an, Bible or Torah), and the way in which the revelation of God in history is understood.

Postmodern critical consciousness reinforces this culturally-conveyed awareness. Like all narratives, Christianity tends to close itself off from the challenge of difference and otherness. It threatens to become a hegemonic master narrative immediately excluding or including otherness. Only as a narrative that succeeds in bearing witness to the very otherness of the other could Christianity prevent itself from turning into a master narrative. Such consciousness includes an awareness of one’s own particularity and historicity. It questions all-too-easy

claims to a neutral observer's position, as if one were not already implicated from the very beginning in the dynamic interplay of particularities. The dialogue between Christianity and its plural context thus no longer leads to any attempted rational universalization of what is particularly Christian, but rather makes this particularity all the more manifest. Otherness interrupts the lapse into a master narrative.

It is indeed the *acknowledgement of the otherness of the other* which forecloses any easy appeal to continuity, consensus or harmony. There is no reconciliation to be found in a kind of (Christian) meta-discourse that attempts to appease the irresolvable, often conflicting plurality of religions and world views. With the absence of a foundational and legitimating meta-narrative, the other, in light of its otherness, constitutes the boundary to our particularity, a boundary that we cannot make our own, which constantly recedes from us and which we cannot overtake. There is always otherness (another option) revealing the limits of our own position and escaping every attempt to overtake it. There is always something unforeseeable, ungraspable, unexpected, unmasterable—something *other* that interrupts our narratives.

VIII. *The Interruption of Theology: Towards a Theology of Interruption*¹¹

Theological recontextualization, however, is not a mere adaptation to the context, a capitulation to a postmodern, critical consciousness on contextual grounds. A legitimate recontextualization can only be achieved when there are *profound theological grounds* for it. And it is here that the dialogue with the contemporary context promises new possibilities of presenting Christian faith in a plausible and relevant way. For it would seem that the other who challenges Christian faith is not as such an external other, but may well *reveal itself from within Christian faith itself*. From this dialogue the insight may be gained that, from within a Christian hermeneutics (i.e., a particular narratively determined stance), the encounter with irreducible otherness may be precisely the place where traces of God become manifest. For has God not always been the Other of our narratives, especially when these narratives have threatened to close?

¹¹It is, of course, from Johann Baptist Metz, that I have borrowed "interruption"; see his *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, (Mainz: Grünewald, 1977), 150, thesis VI; *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury/Crossroad, 1980), 171; also published in *Unterbrechungen: Theologisch-politische Perspektiven und Profile* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1981), 86. I have endeavored, however, to elaborate this "Metzian" intuition as an theological-epistemological category, enabling us to profile contextually the Christian critical consciousness, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

It appears at least fruitful to use as a reading key this perspective of *interruptive otherness* to disclose the potential traces of God. First it would seem that this reading key already fits the Old Testament. When Israel is enslaved and held prisoner in Egypt, it is God who, through Moses, breaks open this story of enslavement and alienation. When the Jewish kingdoms close themselves off from YHWH and begin to worship other gods, commit injustices against the poor and the strangers, and fall into corruption, it is God who repeatedly sends prophets to criticize this closure. The New Testament also provides an account of the continuing interruption of closed narratives. Jesus forgives sins and heals the sick on behalf of God, opening new opportunities for those who were considered outcasts by the religious and social authorities. On behalf of the same God, Jesus criticizes those who would reduce religion to the mere observance of the Law, to a scrupulous making of the required sacrifices, or to a striving after merely political goals. He asks us to become like the children, like the poor, the outcast, and the persecuted (because they are blessed), like the widow who sacrifices only one penny. He invites us to follow in the footsteps of the father embracing his youngest son and not to partake in the incomprehension of the older son. He teaches us to recognize him in the poor, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, the naked—in short, in the vulnerable and wounded other: “‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink . . . ?’ ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Mt 25:37b, 40b).

On closer inspection, the whole Christian narrative, with its metaphoricality and dynamic character, appears to be permeated by interruption on behalf of God, through the confrontation with otherness—and this includes our own narratives.¹² This is illustrated by important motifs such as vocation, exodus, desert, mountain, cross, resurrection, conversion, pilgrimage. In no way is the Christian narrative allowed to close itself. For precisely at these moments the God of love breaks the narrative open. Interruption functions here as a *theological category* that recognizes God’s initiative. Ultimately, the resurrection of the Jesus who died on the cross, is the paradigm of interruption. God interrupts the closing of Jesus’ narrative by the religious and political authorities by radically opening it. It is precisely here that God makes clear that the narrative of the one who lives like Jesus, professed by his disciples as the Christ, cannot be closed in death. Rather, such a nar-

¹²See Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Post-modern Context*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 30 (Leuven: Peeters/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), chap. 6.

rative has a future *beyond* death. Following Jesus means engaging the challenge of the other who interrupts our narratives.¹³

It is through the encounter with others that the Christian narrative is challenged and interrupted. And precisely this interruption could well be the place where God is revealed to Christians today. For, theologically speaking, interruption is not a formal, empty category, but an intrinsic aspect of the narrative tradition of the God of love revealed in concrete history. *Imitatio Christi* thus calls for a praxis of both being interrupted and interrupting—respecting the very otherness of the other while at the same time becoming the other of the other, questioning, challenging the other, criticizing him or her where he/she tends to become hegemonic. The category of interruption then indeed appears to be a productive way to articulate God's salvific engagement with history, including our involvement in history and the way we perceive God's relation to it. The challenge caused by otherness to Christian faith then becomes a *locus theologicus*. As a particular narrative, the Christian narrative is interrupted by God, confessed as the One who interrupts closed narratives. In so doing, Christianity itself is called to interrupt closed narratives.¹⁴ Out of this double praxis of interruption, the Christian community lives its commitments and contributes to the recontextualization of its narrative tradition, both retrieving and renewing it for the sake of its contemporaries and of future generations.

From a theological-epistemological perspective, one of the main advantages of the category of interruption is that it relates thought patterns involving discontinuity with those of continuity. Overemphasizing one at the expense of the other is both theologically and pastorally unproductive. Interruption has not so much to do with breach, rupture, or discontinuity as opposed to continuity, but rather actually presupposes continuity. Interruption "interrupts" something that "goes on," and thus challenges, influences and alters this "going on." At the same time, however, interruption points out the limits of continuity and makes them more visible. Interruption occurs where discontinuity and continuity meet each other, the one not without the other. More

¹³Even Jesus had to learn this, according to the testimony of the gospels of Matthew and Mark (Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30). When Jesus moves to the region of Tyre and Sidon, he encounters on his way a Canaanite or Syrophoenician woman, a non-Jew, who dares to ask him to cure her daughter possessed by a demon. At first, Jesus rejects her begging, and claims that his mission only concerns the Jewish people ("the lost sheep of the house of Israel"). It would be even illegitimate to be occupied with others ("it is not right to take the children's bread, and to cast it to the dogs"). The woman, however, refutes his refusal, "yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." At that instant, Jesus' narrative is likewise interrupted, and he starts to learn to open his narrative further, so that others too have their place in it. In the faith of the woman, God manifests Godself also outside the borders of Israel.

¹⁴For an alternative rendering of this point, see *God Interrupts History*, chap. 9.

specifically, to trace in the interruption a trace of God, one already necessitates both a narrative to be interrupted and a God who is recognized as interrupting it.

IX. Conclusion

In a detraditionalized and pluralized context, the encounter with the other challenges Christian communities to recontextualize the narrative by which they live. By doing so, they engage in the age-old process of being responsible to and for the Christian faith tradition. In the current context such recontextualization may well lead to a Christian community that becomes more aware of its particular narrative identity and the truth claims involved in it, while at the same time recognizing the challenges posed by other narratives and their respective truth claims. Such a dynamics demands a public forum marked by a kind of qualitative pluralism—not a “pluralism” that settles for the lowest common denominator, but rather one that involves real dialogue and confrontation, in an attempt to forge a way of living together in difference. Identity-constituting narratives then do not lapse into hegemonic master narratives. Toleration can no longer be mistaken for a relativizing of one’s identity in view of a “neutral” secular meta-discourse or a remaining in silence “out of respect for the other.” Rather, toleration implies an active, dynamic project in which Christians, on behalf of their interrupting God and in their own terms, participate. In so doing, they strive actively, together with all other people of good will, to further the cause of peace and justice, of personal well-being and social wholeness, against the many totalitarian master narratives of our day, whether they be economic, political, ethnic, cultural or religious in nature.

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