POSTMODERNISM AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

THE A/THEOLOGY OF THE 'OPEN NARRATIVE'¹

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Introduction

Let us begin with some comments of a thematic nature. The title of this article indeed reads 'postmodernism and negative theology' and not 'deconstruction and negative theology'. With the term deconstruction, one immediately thinks of the well-known French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, in whose work it received early expression. Moreover, the second part of the title, negative theology, would not add much to the first element, considering that Derrida himself has already posited a link between deconstructionism and negative theology.² This article would thus rather situate itself within an entire series of attempts to clarify and work out further the link introduced by Derrida.³ Instead of 'deconstruction', the term 'postmodernity' - or better still 'postmodernism', as the theory of postmodernity - forms the first element of the title of this conference. The point of departure is not Derrida, but his fellow French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard. It is in the light of his language-pragmatics and philosophical esthetics, among other things, that we propose the couplet 'negative theology'.⁴

To enter into the postmodern context and in search of authors to explain or

¹ A former version of this text has been delivered in Dutch during the annual conference of the 'Nederlandse Vereniging voor Godsdienstwijsbegeerte' (Dec. 9, 1995). Translations by Dr. E. Guzman and Dr. J. Bloechl.

² Cfr. J. Derrida, 'Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations' in Idem, *Psyche. Invention de l'autre*, Paris, 1987, 535-595.

³ Cfr. e.g. H. Coward and T. Foshay (ed.), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, 1992; A. Van Sevenant, *Deconstructie. Een multidisciplinaire benadering*, Leuven/Amersfoort, 1992 (ch. 5: 'Derrida en de theologie', p.63-77); I.N. Bulhof, 'Open zijn als een vorm van negatieve theologie', in Idem and L. ten Kate (eds.), *Ons ontbreken heilige namen. Negatieve theologie in de hedendaagse cultuurfilosofie*, Kampen, 1992, 91-124; R.P. Scharlemann, *Negation and Theology* (Studies in Religion and Culture), Charlottesville, 1992.

⁴ One final point on the subtitle: we borrow the term 'a/theology' from Marc Taylor, but refrain from necessarily aligning oneself with his use of it (cfr. M.C. Taylor, *Erring. A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago, 1984).

illustrate it, is to be immediately confronted with a diverse, non-reconcilable body of descriptive analyses in the philosophy of culture and programmatic projects, each instance of which describes itself as postmodern or, while closely resembling those do so, nonetheless refuse the term. It is not the intention of this article to clarify this. Others have already done so and are still doing so. Naturally, however, we cannot escape from it entirely. We, too, shall attempt to clarify the postmodern condition, and our exposition will likewise involve the mutual implication of descriptive and programmatic elements. The postmodern condition is described with the terms 'radical, often conflicting, plurality of ever particular discourses and narratives'; postmodernity is contained in the triad 'conflict', 'plurality' and 'particularity' (part 1). In part 2, we develop the model of the 'open narrative' as a mode of coping with the postmodern condition. Subsequently, when we study the fundamental presupposition of a theory of the 'open narrative', it will soon become clear why postmodern philosophers discover an affinity between postmodern thought and the tradition of negative theology, and sometimes attempt to enrich or specify their own reflections in a study of negative theology as well (part 3). Afterwards, in part 4, we will investigate the place apophatic theology can (or needs to) acquire in postmodern theologizing, when the reflexive framework of the model of the 'open narrative' is employed to sketch the general features of a postmodern theology.⁵ As it happens, such a recontextualization of theology provides - after further consideration - a number of insights concerning discussions of the transcendent, the divine, God. All of this results in the need for an apophatic structuration of contemporary theologizing.

1. Postmodernity: plurality, heterogeneity and particularity

In an attempt to clarify our present-day postmodern context and to ascertain the critical consciousness of our time, we will study a number of main lines of thought in the work of Wolfgang Iser, Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty. Each one of them had emphasized an aspect that is perhaps characteristic for the postmodern time. Iser identifies the postmodern with the coming to consciousness of radicalized plurality, Lyotard with the attention for the moment of radical heterogeneity that shines in the midst of plu-

⁵ We have noted elsewhere that such a recontextualization of theology is necessary due to the shift from the modern to the postmodern context. Cfr., among other places, L. Boeve, 'Kan traditie veranderen? Theologie in het postmoderne tijdsgewricht', in *Collationes* 26 (1996) 365-385.

rality, and Rorty with an insight into the radical particularity and contextuality of each narrative. A discussion of and with this threesome, yields our model of the 'open narrative' as a possible form of the contemporary critical consciousness, which is to say as a possible authentic mode of existence in the postmodern context.⁶

1.1. *Wolfgang Welsch: radical plurality*

In *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Wolfgang Welsch labels the experience of radical plurality as the basic characteristic of the postmodern age.⁷ For him, this means that one and the same reality can be considered, with as much right, from completely differentiated perspectives, and that each specific point of view is valuable in itself, even if they are not strictly compatible with one another. This basic experience presents itself in such extremely diverse areas of the human lifeworld as literature, architecture, sculpture and painting, the philosophies of culture and of science, economics and politics. It results from a multi-faceted process of change, a process of radical pluralization and differentiation. This process began with modernity and is nearing, at present - in postmodern form - its completion. Welsch describes postmodernity then as radicalized or realized modernity: the completion of the process of differentiation (secularization, pluralization, de-traditionalization, emancipation, individualization).

Plurality persists as a presupposition of all thought and action. Each claim to universality and all-encompassing-totality is critically unmasked as a particular point of view that has been absolutized. The latter explains why Welsch retains the term 'postmodern', and does not describe himself, for example, as 'radically modern'. In modernity, one still attempted to regulate the differentiation process into a 'grand narrative' (Lyotard); i.e. an all-encompassing, systematizing structure which is able to consider pluralization from a unifying point.⁸ One becomes postmodern when these attempts at unification are

⁶ Sections 1 and 2 are more extensively developed in L. Boeve, 'Een postmoderne theologie van het 'open verhaal'', in *Onze Alma Mater* 50 (1996) 210-238; also see further: Idem, 'Het 'geschil' van Jean-François Lyotard met Wolfgang Welsch en Richard Rorty', in W. Derkse, A. Leijen en B. Nagel (ed.), *Subliem niemandsland. Opstellen over metafysica, intersubjectiviteit en transcendentie*, Best, 1996, 103-117.

⁷ Cfr. W. Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Acta humaniora), Weinheim, 1987; see also: 'Einleitung', in Idem, (ed.), *Wege aus der Moderne. Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion* (Acta humaniora), Weinheim, 1988.

⁸ Welsch himself distinguishes between 'Moderne' and 'Neuzeit' where he identifies the former with pluralization and the latter with the grand unifying narratives. He takes aim at what comprises the latter,

discontinued and when one realizes their futility: the postmodern person consciously describes his/her world as plural; he/she does not mourn the lost unifying view but joyfully sees broadened opportunities for freedom and humanity in the multiplicity of rationality types, patterns of action and lifestyles. Welsch nevertheless pleads not only for the recognition and acknowledgment of the fact of radical plurality, but also, and at the same time, for its further development in its normativity. With this, the postmodern person consciously assumes radical plurality as an opportunity to come to a quantitatively increased and qualitatively intensified freedom. The relativizing of any absolute truth claim does not necessarily lead to a general *laissez-faire* relativism, but can lead to a new self-understanding with its very own critical consciousness in the indictment of any pretension to unity. The gradual occurrence of different possibilities in thinking, acting and living does not lead, therefore, to indifference - i.e. a capitulation to an irreversible multiplicity by means of which all distinction is swallowed up in indistinctness. On the contrary, this new situation offers a reserve of modes of thinking, acting and living which invite - even require - people to make choices and new combinations. Freedom is present precisely in the coercion to select.

In this postmodern coping with plurality, one can - in accordance with Welsch's view - likewise discover a new form of reasonableness, a 'transversal rationality', which no longer functions meta-rationally (modernity), but inter-rationally (postmodernity). This reasonableness does not seek to encompass the plural differentiated strands of rationality from an absolute unifying point, but offers the possibility to orient oneself in the midst of multiplicity by laying out transverse connections between the diverse strands.

1.2. Jean-François Lyotard: radical heterogeneity

Welsch's concept of plurality has been inspired by Lyotard's philosophy of language pragmatism, but does not follow it entirely. Lyotard himself is not primarily concerned with the strands of rationality, but prefers to speak in the categories of language pragmatics. What is more important for Lyotard is that with the identification of the postmodern condition as radical plurality, more still needs to be said. In his view, multiplicity is not a static but a dynamic reality; plurality brings about conflict, is tantamount to irreconciliation and

the utopian schemes of the Enlightenment, the philosophical-historical unifying views of idealism, industrial modernity with its accompanying scientific positivism, the grand socio-economic designs of society and the idea of scientific progress.

irreconcilability.⁹

Lyotard attempts to clarify this by examining what takes place during speaking, during the sequence of one sentence following the other. Such a sequence does not simply transpire as if by design. After a certain sentence 'A' - already belonging to a specific order of sentences (descriptive, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory) - numerous sentences can, in principle, follow, and all according to the nature of the discourse-type which regulates the 'linking' of the sentences. Examples of such discourse-types include the narrative, the argument, prayer, education, humor,... What is specific to plurality consists, according to Lyotard, in the fact that the many discourse-types are heterogeneous and incommensurable among themselves, and that no single discourse-type is privileged. All discourse-types possess equally the right to provide for something in the linking. What is only assured is *that* a sentence (only one sentence) always follows - even silence is a sentence - not *which* sentence follows. This means that between two sentences, a moment of indeterminacy, of indecision, always occurs. Every sentence that has happened arouses an expectation; every new sentence implies an event. The nature of the new sentence which intends to fill in the expectation aroused by the former sentence is always contingent. Two sentences are thus separated by an elusive moment of relative nothingness. This, however, can be called just as much a moment of absolute fullness, or yet: a moment of not-to-be-recuperated heterogeneity, difference - inutterable, inexpressible, irreducible - an event.

Plurality thus understood, necessarily implies conflict, irreconciliation and irreconcilability. However it may be considered, each choice for a specific sentence to complete the linking resolves a conflict (a 'differend') unjustly, considering that diverse legitimate possibilities are already at hand. The linking of this specific sentence prevents the actualization of other, no less justified possibilities. In the absence of a meta-language or an all-encompassing discourse-type, it is therefore impossible to fill in the created expectation adequately. No single sentence succeeds in totally expressing the multiplicity of possible linking sentences, or better still, the moment of indeterminacy, of heterogeneity. In other words, no single sentence is capable of

⁹ For the following discussion, see for example: J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, 1979; *Le différend*, Paris, 1983; *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers*, Paris, 1984; *L'enthousiasme. La critique kantienne de l'histoire*, Paris, 1986; *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants. Correspondance 1982-1985*, Paris, 1986; *Pérégrinations. Loi, forme, événement*, Paris, 1988; *L'inhumain. Causeries sur le temps*, Paris, 1988 and *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, 1993.

pronouncing at the same time its own being-event. The feeling of 'it happens' cannot be contained in words, in a sentence. But neither can it be mastered hegemonically. What Lyotard thus leads to think of as a sensibility for the impossible sentence, can not itself be stated, but only referred to. One can only bear witness to it; or better still, one must bear witness to it. The sense of the event demands witnessing. Moreover, it mobilizes action against any hegemonic, totalizing discourse that proclaims itself the privileged master of the linking, thus weakening, forgetting or rejecting the event as event.

Lyotard considers such witnessing to the event to be the task of present-day philosophy. In this way, philosophy functions as a critical consciousness and it questions that which does not respect the event, the so-called - not necessarily modern - grand narratives. Such discourse-types, which claim to be privileged, aim at regulating the linking exclusively, and therefore hegemonically. Such hegemonic discourse-types make themselves the master of the event or they exclude it because this event interrupts time and again the ongoing narrative and punctures its pretensions to absoluteness. Narratives which either negate the power of the appeal of the event or subjugate it to the recounting of its own narrative become totalitarian. Lyotard reproaches the modern great narratives of rationality and emancipation for precisely this. Since they were not able to allow their own narrative to be interrupted by the moment of indeterminable heterogeneity that accompanies every linking, they became counterproductive and were reduced to their antithesis; they actually became narratives of irrationality and oppressive alienation.

1.3. Richard Rorty: radical particularity

Richard Rorty has also been struck by plurality and the conflict that this implies. What interests him the most is the disappearance of the epistemological position of the observer, the third person who availed of objectivity. For Rorty, human knowing and living are caught in an ineluctable perspectivism. Our manner of coping with plurality is characterized by radical particularity.¹⁰

Already in 1979, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, published in the same year as *La condition postmoderne*, Rorty pleads for a philosophy that abandons the mirror-metaphor. There is no pre-given reality that is reflected

¹⁰ Cfr. R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, 1979; *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, 1989; *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Philosophical Papers, 1), Cambridge, 1991; *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Philosophical Papers, 2), Cambridge, 1991.

in our knowledge, over which reality itself eventually judges concerning truth claims. Rorty rejects epistemological foundationalism and pleads for a hermeneutic philosophy which distances itself from any privileged perspective. He develops this further in his view on language. Language consists of propositions and language-games or vocabularies, corresponding roughly with what Lyotard indicates with sentences and discourse-types.¹¹ He describes a vocabulary as a tool in order to reach a specific goal. With this, success is only reserved for the best tool. The efficiency of vocabulary, in comparison with other vocabularies, eventually determines whether that vocabulary is used or not. Moreover, which vocabulary to use does not depend in the first place on the user, but on the reigning context which provides the conditions of existence and use. In other words, the criteria for judging vocabularies are provided contextually.

In the multiplicity of vocabularies, Rorty distinguishes between basic and final vocabularies. These latter are the fundamental narratives or foundational theories that attempt to bring the presuppositions of an effective particular language use to expression - in other words, to also make the context (partially) explicit. They can only be judged in themselves; no overarching, correctly mirroring basic vocabulary can provide a definitive answer to the truth claim, albeit unjustified, of a specific vocabulary. Rorty indicates such a final vocabulary with the term 'narrative' (in preference to 'theory'). A narrative connects the present with the past and the future. It offers, on the one hand, a re-description - or better yet: a recontextualization - of the past. The narrative wants to show why someone is what he or she is, how it has come about that he or she is what he or she is. On the other hand, it looks forward to the future, articulating expectations and hope.

For Rorty, vocabularies and narratives are not static entities of sentences and linkings. Through the constant confrontation with novelty, they remain incessantly involved in a process of re-description, or recontextualization. Novelty can, on the one hand, be absorbed or integrated within the fixed current framework. On the other hand, it can lead to a breaking open of the existing framework. The framework thus presents itself as incapable of reworking the new, but needs to be reorganized in order to take up the new, such that the original vocabulary is fundamentally changed in its constitution. Such nov-

¹¹ However, in contrast with Lyotard's term 'discours', the terminology of the 'vocabulary' expresses more the aspect of the material contextuality of every speaking, so that the formal or procedural aspect (the orders of sentences, the linkings, the objectives of the differentiated vocabularies) is less emphasized, even though Rorty indeed pays some attention to it.

elty, Rorty contends, can only be woven into a learning process where the current context shifts accordingly - as in the way one learns a language. The altered vocabulary is then irrevocably different. This novelty can come from very diverse sources: it can be caused by metaphors - words which in the entirety of the existing vocabulary do not possess any literal meaning, any contextual predictability and therefore are not entirely fitting; or it can arise either from the encounter with other vocabularies, or from the occurrence of exceptional events.

2. The 'open narrative' as the specific postmodern narrative

What is typical for postmodernity, according to Lyotard, is not so much a coming to awareness of plurality in itself (Welsch) as indeed a sensibility for *radical heterogeneity which is revealed in the midst of plurality*. The absence of an over-arching hegemonic discourse-type or grand narrative causes an elusive moment, a now-moment of indeterminacy and inexpressibility that comes to light with every linking of two sentences - an inexpressibility which, on the one hand, makes speaking possible, and, on the other hand, determines it in its specific limitedness.

With Lyotard, we can distinguish two ways of coping with the feeling for heterogeneity, for the event. The strategy of the 'grand narrative' unfolds a discourse that makes all linkings and all strategies of linkings (other discourse-types) hegemonically subordinate to its own finality (for example, the establishment of the classless society, or of the free market, or the restoration of an earlier image of the world and of society, etc.). Sensibility to the event receives no chance or it is taken up along with the narrative. The other, non-hegemonic way of dealing with the event is seen by Lyotard as present in the discourse of philosophy. He deems this capable of coping with a multiplicity of finalities (discourse-types) that are irreconcilable among themselves, without having to be master over them. This can emerge in the linking of two sentences by witnessing to the event, to the now-moment of indeterminacy.

Lyotard, however, does not pay sufficient attention to *the radically particular character of this witness*, an element that Rorty strongly emphasizes. As a matter of fact, Lyotard's philosophical discourse is also woven into a diachronic and synchronic context, and uses a very specific vocabulary, specific sentences and strategies of linkings, in order to give witness to the 'event'. In so far as the inexpressible that accompanies speaking is truly inexpressible, the witnessing thereof will never evoke it completely, but only contextually.

Every witnessing thus receives the character of a radically particular recontextualization whereby the event as 'novelty' breaks open the narrative that is taking its course and compels it in an appropriate way to witness to this novelty. Perhaps, Lyotard's philosophical discourse is not alone in its capacity for such a recontextualizing witnessing, but shares it with other narratives and narrative-traditions which can also cope in an analogous - but always particular - way with the event. He himself mentions that this is the case in Jewish thought.¹² Hence, in contrast with the way in which *hegemonic* narratives cope with plurality and heterogeneity, this mode is better entitled the '*open narrative*'.

'Open narratives', on the one hand, stand open for the event and accept the claim which this makes on the narrative that is taking its course. They are, on the other hand, aware of the fact that every witnessing to the event is always radically particular, that the inexpressible can only be brought into the discussion in a contextual way and by manner of reference. Precisely from the constantly erupting sensibility to the inexpressible, 'open narratives' refuse to put forward claims to absoluteness and universality and are always prepared to recontextualize.

This distinguishes the 'open narrative' from the position that Rorty takes. It is not recontextualization in itself that is typical for 'open narratives', but rather the habit of openness towards the event. What is characteristic is the receptive openness towards novelty (or better, alterity), in a sort of fundamental contemplative attitude, whereby the character of the event that resolutely breaks open and makes claims for its own narrative is appreciated. With Rorty, recontextualization does not reach that far. For him, the point of departure and the final goal form a single narrative that sees in the encounter with alien novelty a renewed opportunity to establish itself. As a matter of fact, Rorty's fundamental thesis of the non-representational character of language may then exert a fundamental critique upon every narrative that claims to be reflective of reality. This presupposition likewise implies for Rorty that every critique of one's own narrative can only be discourse-internal. The event has never been so perceived that it puts speaking in itself under critique. The conflicting heterogeneity between the diverse discourse-types and narratives is not a symptom of the inexpressible that requires critical witnessing, but is simply a factual situation where the strongest wins - where the most he-

¹² Cfr. J.-F. Lyotard, *L'inhumain*, p.86. For a broader reflection on 'Jewish thought', cfr. *Heidegger et 'les juifs'* (Paris, 1988) and 'La terre n'a pas de chemins par elle-même' (in *Moralités postmodernes*, 95-102).

gemonic regulates the linkings conclusively and compellingly. Critique can only be intra-narrative. The event does not radically tear the narrative as narrative into pieces.

To express this differently, 'open narratives' bear within themselves the impelling force towards continual radical contextualization: the event as novelty precludes adequate description in either existing or renewed vocabulary. Every attempt to inscribe the event is coupled with a fundamental dispute of what has been written earlier, even if its own narrative and its own narrative-tradition remain as the background of every attempt to witness, and are themselves always recontextualized along with it. The narrative-tradition keeps on offering a source in order to witness to the event insofar as it is also re-described in the existing, opened vocabulary (tradition cannot be received in a non-re-described way - we always read it within the frameworks of the present context). Or, as Rorty puts it: in a narrative that binds the past with the present and the future, we also come to know who we are. An 'open narrative', however, functions only insofar as it is actually, consciously, particularly 'narrative' and 'open'.

We have applied this reflexive framework of the model of the 'open story' elsewhere in order to delineate a postmodern theology as an 'open narrative' - a present-day theology which complies with both theological and postmodern, culture-philosophical criteria.¹³ In our last sections, we shall return to this point.

3. Negative theology and the 'open narrative'

Whoever takes cognisance of postmodern philosophy, including deconstructionism, often tends - insofar as postmodern authors themselves have not alluded to it - to discover some *affinity between postmodern reflection and the tradition of apophatic theology*.¹⁴ In their introductory considerations in *Ons*

¹³ For an evaluation of the Christian narrative as a grand narrative according to Lyotard's criteria, cf. L. Boeve, 'Theologie na het christelijke grote verhaal - in het spoor van Jean-François Lyotard', in *Bijdragen* 55 (1994) 269-295. For some reflections on theology as 'open narrative' and a plan for a theology of the 'open narrative', see 'Een postmoderne theologie van het 'open verhaal'' (footnote 5).

¹⁴ Thus, for example, D. Carabine in the epilogue of *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Leuven, 1995, p. 325. For a postmodern appreciation of the power of 'negative thought', see also: M. Westphal, 'Postmodernism and Religious Reflection', in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995) 127-143.

ontbreken heilige namen, Ilse Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate¹⁵ label the recent attention for negative theology as a current or symptom of the postmodern uneasiness about modern Western culture. To be sure they immediately nuance the intention of the revival of negative theology in postmodern philosophy of culture: such a negative theology would not only stand for a continuation of the old distrust of every knowledge and arrogation of God by humans, but also more fundamentally for a distrust for negative theology itself, as if this would be a last attempt to bring into the discussion - or to conquer - the quandary God, the absolute. Critical postmodern thought puts the experience of the limit central, the limit of language (and the silent emptiness beyond the limit). Hence, a new speaking about God does not result in the first place from the culture-philosophical interest for negative theology, so much as, indeed - after the disappearance of God - a speaking about the limits of theological speech. What remains with us is only a “‘theology’ that is aware it is not able to speak anymore, but at the same time, must indeed speak about this not-being-able...”¹⁶

Negative theology serves, as a philosophical notion, a hope to leave behind metaphysics and ontotheology. Negative theology becomes a synonym for disputing the supposition that ‘meaning’ or ‘being’ could be fully understood from the reference to a first origin, ultimate goal, center, final ground, foundation, presence. Contemporary thinkers thus agree with the philosophical presupposition - accepted by researchers of negative theology, like Deirdre Carabine - that a fundamental ontological premise lurks behind kataphatic and apophatic theology: kataphatic theology would take as its basis the more Western view that God is the fullness of being, while apophatic theology understands God more preferably in terms of non-being.¹⁷ Others, like Raoul Mortley, refer to the relationship of our times with the discovery of silence in late-classical thought, which emerged from a growing awareness that language which intends to reveal, conceals...¹⁸ This silence consists of the absence of language; it is a kind of gap, not to be understood as emptiness but as positive absence, without structure, to be neither grasped nor understood.

¹⁵ Cfr. I.N. Bulhof and L. ten Kate, ‘Negative theologie: echo’s van een verlegenheid. Inleiding’, in Idem (red.), *Ons Ontbreken heilige namen. Negative theologie in de hedendaagse cultuurfilosofie*, Kampen, 1992, 7-26.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.20. See also: H. van den Bosch, ‘Nee, niet God, ook net niet niet-God, nee’, in *Speling* 47 (1995) 3, 19-29.

¹⁷ D. Carabine based these theses on her recently published study on the neo-platonic and Christian roots of negative theology (cfr. *The Unknown God*, p.3).

¹⁸ Cfr. R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence. II. The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Theophaneia. Beiträge zur Religions- und Kirchengeschichte des Altertums), Bonn/Frankfurt a.M., 1986, p.250ff.

Still, a different negative theology is presented in our times than that of the late-ancient, Hellenized Christianity. Negative theology no longer forms a way of coping with the question regarding the nature of God, a question which arose with the Hellenization of Christianity, in which an already existing kataphatic tradition on God's nature was regularly referred to.¹⁹ On the contrary, it attempts to provide an answer on the questioning of this question itself.

As a philosophical notion, *negative theology* also functions as a background for the model of the 'open narrative', and this within a radicalised perspective. The interpretation of the event, as an axis of the open narrative, is not so much a matter of the negation of an affirmation in a *via negativa*, resulting in the negation of the negation; here, an affirmation of the negation seems much more to be in order. The event is immediately described in terms of an elusive moment, indeterminacy, inexpressibility, irreducible heterogeneity, indecision,... However, the negation of the negation eventually also appears here: these terms as well are incapable of grasping the ungraspable now-moment and they constantly shortchange it in their particularity.

In the model of the 'open narrative', the dynamism essentially returns - Turner posits the dialectic²⁰ - which is characteristic for the tradition of negative theology. In the apophatic tradition, negative theology is not purely considered, as it often happens, as a complement to positive theology - as an added relativization of what was expressed - but also forms the *abiding and conditioning background of every positive speech about God*. Apophatic theology is seen in this perspective not as a way of theologising *alongside* positive theology, but as the reflexive expression of the radical hermeneutical awareness out of which all theology which is conscious of its own nature finds its basis.²¹ Such a radical hermeneutical-critical consciousness also depicts the model of the 'open narrative', and the fundamental contemplative attitude qualifies the openness into which the event can enter. An additional, not unimportant, remark in this connection: insofar as the event, however,

¹⁹ Cfr. *Ibidem*, p.275.

²⁰ Cfr. D. Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Message*, Cambridge, 1995.

²¹ See e.g. D. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, p.10. Dennis Turner, among others, also develops this point in *The Darkness of God* (p.252ff). He speaks of a 'first order' and a 'second order' apophasis, wherein the first level consists of the kataphatic use of the dialectic between negation and affirmation, and the second level stands for the negation of the negation itself, the rise of the 'first-order descriptions', i.e. negating in such a way that we no longer know what the negations do, as a critique of the first level: we still know which affirmations we negate, but not what we affirm in the negation.

splits the apophatic speaking itself, eventually every negative theology generates time and again a *negative theology of the negative theology*. Every speech is necessarily deficient. And every speech regarding this deficiency is likewise rooted in a *docta ignorantia*.

However, in addition to this fundamental embedding of the model of the 'open narrative' in a negative theology that determines every speech, *apophasis* - as correction of what is expressed *kataphatically* - also has its place.²² Insofar as an 'open narrative' wants to bear witness, in the linking, to the event, and insofar as every linking sentence attempts to attest to the openness of the narrative, the dialectic interaction of *kataphasis* and *apophasis* determines the nature of the linked sentences. Such sentences intend to communicate in spite of themselves, being parasites to their own being-sentence. They attempt to broaden the field of what can be expressed, or better still, to go beyond the specificity and particularity of speaking. Through this interaction of *kataphasis* and *apophasis*, the characteristic quality of the linked sentences lies - despite the radical particularity of every speaking - not so much "in what is being said, but in the way in which something is said; not in the content but in the form of the speech. The apparent oppositions and the confusing metaphors work like a cleft or a breach by which a reference is made to 'an-I-don't-know-what'".²³

Traditionally, however, negative theology does not only stand for a linguistic methodology, i.e. an exceptionalized manner of speaking of God, but also or perhaps more so for a manner of relating to God, i.e. *a formation of a lived-through praxis that is God-centered*. Knowledge is not a matter of 'coming to know' but of 'turning towards'.²⁴ Apophatic theology thus stands for a spirituality, a way of being within reality. In the postmodern re-discovery of negative theology, this practical element likewise seems important.²⁵ In the dynamism of contemplative openness to the event and the searching and groping witnessing of the event, the contours of a praxis of the 'open narrative' become clear. This is a way of standing within life, of relating to and

²² For a conceptual development of the *via negativa*, see R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence. II. The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek*, pp.251-254.

²³ Quote from B. Blans, 'Een wolk van niet-weten. Een oriëntatie in de negatieve theologie', who attempts to describe with these words the nature of mystical language. (in I.N. Bulhof and L. ten Kate (eds.), *Ons ontbreken heilige namen*, 27-45, p.35-36).

²⁴ Cfr. B. Blans, 'Een wolk van niet-weten', p.30-31; see also pp.43-44.

²⁵ Here, I would like to refer to the philosophical spirituality which has developed from the encounter with the thought of Jacques Derrida - from the orientation to emptiness; cfr. I.N. Bulhof, *Naar een post-moderne spiritualiteit?* (Inaugural lecture R.U. Leiden), Leiden, 1992; 'Filosofie en spiritualiteit', in *Streven* 60 (1993) 780-802.

coping with what can happen, with the other, making space for this other, without intending to master it; a way of living, practical wisdom which is coupled with a critical attitude with regard to narratives which hegemonically attempt to master the other, the event - in speech, this inexpressible becomes easily forgotten, or, better still, the forgetting becomes forgotten. It is the nurturing, and then again the not-nurturing, of the awareness that the inexpressible at the same time makes speech possible in its greatest depths, accompanying but also limiting, breaking through, tearing apart.

The tradition of apophatic theology has a double origin.²⁶ The first of these was platonic thought, especially the late-ancient speculative neo-platonist thought that resolutely confronted the limits of philosophical speech concerning the absolute. Jewish-Christian faith in God and the reflection on this faith in, among others, patristics, functioned as a second source. A first important moment in the meeting of both sources took place in the multi-faceted thought of the Jewish Hellenist, Philo of Alexandria; a second moment occurred in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, the result of an interaction of neo-platonism and faith in God seeking understanding.²⁷

Even for today, that same Christian faith in God is seeking understanding in the line of the Anselm's adage *fides quaerens intellectum*. The theologian searches in the current context for traces, patterns, images and models in order to clarify the faith shared in his or her community. Like his/her predecessors, s/he attributes special importance to contemporary philosophical thought in which s/he hopes to discover a contextual self-clarification. The theologian is confronted in postmodern thought with an unmatched challenge in contemporary critical consciousness. And the challenge is no less great, but perhaps still more interesting and even intriguing, when the same theologian ascertains that precisely this postmodern thought re-discovers a piece of his/her tradition in order to reach clarity about our contemporary context.

4. Apophasis, theology and postmodern culture

It certainly has not escaped theologians that postmodern philosophy, in spite

²⁶ The double origin of negative theology is studied in the works of D. Carabine and R. Mortley which we have cited, but also, among others, in J. Hochstaffl, *Negative Theologie. Ein Versuch zur Vermittlung des patristischen Begriffes*, München, 1976; B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism, I. The Foundations of Mysticism*, New York, 1991.

²⁷ Carabine himself speaks in this connection of a fructification of Christian faith in God by neo-platonism (*The Unknown God*, p.1).

of itself, is interested in searching for connections with the tradition of apophatic theology. Conversely, theology discovers opportunities precisely in this junction of contemporary philosophy and negative theology for rendering an account of its own apophatic tradition.²⁸ This junction, moreover, enables the theologian to make both postmodern thought as well as negative theology fruitful for his/her own theologising.²⁹

It is to the advantage of a theological recontextualization to attentively follow the postmodern-philosophical exposure of a part of the Christian tradition and to reap the fruits thereof. The theologian, however, should not forget to perform the recontextualization process out of the Christian narrative itself and, in that way, to lay open the Christian tradition itself as a witness of the God of Jesus Christ. All too often, in the recontextualization process, only half of the work is accomplished, and the Christian narrative is used or illuminated upon from the form given to the evocation of present-day life-sensitivity. Really performing the recontextualization, on the contrary, involves much more: The question is not in the first place a re-interpretation of the Christian tradition, or making use of it to express the current sensitivity, but essentially to relate the Christian narrative itself - expressed in the words of Edward Schillebeeckx: to involve ourselves in the dynamic process of being inheritor and testator.³⁰ The theologian, then, attempts - from the already increasingly deployed involvement of one's own narrative tradition with the models of thought which s/he encounters in his/her particular context - to qualify *theologically* the current life condition, *out of* actually reflexively standing within the Christian narrative.

In what follows, we tentatively offer a first *reflection concerning the discussion of God in the postmodern context*, from the conviction that the Christian narrative tradition as well will (or needs to) present itself in a postmodern way as an 'open narrative'.³¹ Afterwards, we indicate that not only the theoretical level does require an apophatic structuring, but that at the same time at the level of praxis, apophasis and theology (need to) find each other.

²⁸ Turner states plainly that precisely the thought that is called 'postmodern' is capable of making the theologian conscious of "the 'deconstructive' potential of human thought and language which so characterized classical mediaeval apophaticism" (D. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.8).

²⁹ See e.g. David Tracy's plea, under the influence of postmodern philosophy, for a retrieval of apophatic theology in current theologizing: D. Tracy, 'The Hermeneutics of Naming God', in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 57 (1991) 253-264; 'Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology', in *The Journal of Religion* 74 (1994) 302-319; 'Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity', in *Theology Today* 51 (1994) 104-114.

³⁰ *Mensen als verhaal van God*, Baarn, 1989, p.99.

³¹ Cfr. footnote 14.

In an 'open narrative' the inexpressible reveals itself as both a condition of possibility and a limit for all speaking. The speech of the 'open narrative' involves itself with the inexpressible and is at the same time bounded by it. In sustaining this tension between the inexpressible and speech in the 'open narrative', a *new manner of conceiving the relationship between transcendence and immanence for our times* appears. The involvement of transcendence with immanence and its converse is expressed in the dynamic interaction of narrative-breaking event and narrating witness. The transcendent event breaks open the immanence of the narrative time and again, while precisely the immanent narrative, in bearing witness to the event, involves itself with the event. In such a concept the relationship of transcendence and immanence is not understood as bi-polar, as if they would form two distinct layers within reality. Rather, transcendence is interpreted as a breach moment inexpressible in words amidst the immanent reality of language.

This sets the basis for a theologian who in the postmodern context wants to discuss God in an 'open narrative'. For the one who stands consciously within the current context, the contemporary basic characteristics of conflicting 'irreconcilability', irreducible plurality and unsurpassable particularity is illuminated in every speech about God. What is characteristic of the post-modern time is, after all, a heightened sensibility for that which always escapes speech and precisely in escaping fundamentally determines this speech. God is then preferably brought into the discussion in terms of the unspeakable and ungraspable/incomprehensible heterogeneity which accompanies and interrupts each speech, as a condition of possibility and, at the same time, as a limit of this speech. In speaking about God, one takes into account sensitivity to, on the one hand, transgression, excess, breakthrough, infringement, and, on the other hand, to speechlessness, and the incapacity to put it into sentences. In speaking, one can only refer to the divine whereby the latter can never be fully contained or exhausted in words. The ever particular-determining language is in principle deficient in articulating the indeterminate-inexpressible. This insight precisely implies that throughout history (of theology, of religion), a radical-hermeneutic and dialectic process of articulation of the unspeakable has occurred and continues to occur: a process that describes itself in terms of continuity and discontinuity, tradition and event, narrative and breach. In the event and breach, the ever particular-determining quality of the tradition, of the narrative, is revealed and thus the non-identity between the word (tradition, narrative) and the inexpressible.

This manner of understanding transcendence can be made theologically fruit-

ful and prevents theology from becoming hegemonic. Such a notion of transcendence deprives theology of the possible pretension that in its speech God could be comprehensively grasped and given a place within the immanence of reality. God is revealed anew time and again in the event of grace³² but is not to be localized there. Indeed, from the perspective of thinking, God is to be localised nowhere. Our postmodern reflexive frameworks are no longer capable of giving God a determined place, and now let God really be God.³³ In the (grace)event, God makes Godself known as the non-present, the hidden, the elusive, ungraspable, always other, and at the same time lays open the expectation of the God who will come as boundary of and breach in/of time.

Thus in the dialogue with postmodern thought, theology can actually take up again the ancient tradition of apophatic theology. In a theology of the 'open narrative', negative theology does not form an element of the twosome of which positive theology makes up the second element. Negative theology does not purely function as a supplement to positive speech about God, which it then critiques and thus steers. Rather, negative theology in principle problematizes (with an eye to God's insurpassability) every speech about God in itself, goes beyond this speech and keeps on encompassing it.³⁴

³² For the (grace)event - the 'event of grace' and 'grace of the event' - see L. Boeve, 'Theologie na het christelijke grote verhaal', pp. 291-294.

³³ In this connection, if we study the place of God in the 'sentence event' as conceived in Lyotard's language pragmatism, this means that God can never be identified with an instance of the universe of meaning, even though there are diverse genres where a quasi-identification happens. (Lyotard distinguishes four instances in every sentence: addressor, addressee, meaning and referent.) God is not to be identified with the addressor, even though the prophet speaks God's words: 'Thus says the Lord...'. God is also not to be caught up in the place of the addressee, even though praying to God (or a profession of faith) is the first theo-logy. And further: Localizing God in the place of the meaning is only possible when one recognizes that that meaning cannot be exhausted and can, moreover, only be spoken of in an ever concrete, particular context. In this expressing, the determining necessarily betrays the indeterminable - even though the theologian actually intends to express something when s/he pronounces or writes the word God. Concerning the referent-instance, God can only be spoken of - with Lyotard's analysis of the Idea in mind - as a quasi-referent, even though theology defines itself as speaking about God. In the mentioned genres of speaking about God, the speaking to God and the speaking about God, 'God' indeed takes in a specific instance, but at the same time withdraws from it. God is never just addressor, addressee, meaning or referent but is always ever different. From a theological point of view: bearing witness to the grace-event is only possible by placing God in one of the instances, while the witness as witness precisely implies that God is not, paradoxically enough, to be localized in one of the instances, and that therefore the witness is never God, never expresses God, or better still: that the presentation never makes God fully present in the presentation; on account of speech to and about God, it must always be clear that God does not belong to the order of determining, of determinability.

³⁴ In this sense, this indeed connects with the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (end of the fifth-beginning of the sixth century) re-discovered by postmodern philosophers and theologians. Josef Hochstaffl writes on the concept of negative theology in Dionysius: "Negative Theologie in ihrem unfas-

It is not only via the postmodern-contextual reflexive patterns of present-day culture - the theoretical level - that theology discovers that it needs to be apophatic. The ever concrete and particular praxis in a postmodern world which is marked by inevitable conflict, 'irreconcilability' and suffering likewise leads to a necessary accentuation of apophatic structuring in present-day theologising. Precisely in 'irreconcilability' and suffering from 'irreconcilability', the acute postmodern experience of the structural absence of God (and of a possible reconciliation) arises. Bringing this absence to the discussion theologically belongs to the task of a postmodern, negative theology: a theology that finds its basis on the structural absence of God and the principal incapacity to present God completely as present (an a/theology). Herein, the revelation of God's hiddenness is no longer (eschatologically) linked to the historical consciousness of the hegemonic modern (great) narratives, but, on the contrary, the interruption of/in history becomes the focus of God's self-revelation. After all, the hiddenness of God is the reverse side of irreconcilability, of conflict, of the confrontation with oppression and marginalization. Theologically, the irreducible esthetical-ethical moment of the event becomes recontextualized as the breaking open of the hegemonic discourse by a sensibility to the hidden God - a feeling that immediately propels one to engagement, compels one to witness, to ethical-political praxis, to the praxis of the 'open-narrative'.

And in conclusion: in the light of the affinity between a postmodern recontextualized theology and apophatic theology, the postmodern theologian will perhaps fruitfully study the historical modes of appearance of apophatic theology. Not only can this sharpen his/her insight into the apophatic structuring of every theological speech and the ensuing religious critical consciousness, but at the same time - and most importantly, perhaps - the opportunity arises here for a rediscovery of the indissoluble bond between spirituality and thought, mysticism and theology.³⁵

senden areopagitischen Begriff ist der Verweis von positiver Theologie auf affirmative Theologie [Eminenztheologie] und ist so selber das prinzipiierende Telos aller theologischen Prinzipientheorie: 'Im Hinblick auf das Göttliche sind die Verneinungen wahr und die Bejahungen unzureichend..., so daß Göttliche durch die wahren Verneinungen geachtet wird'" (J. Hochstaftl, *Negative Theologie*, pp.136-137, Hochstaftl quoted from *De caelesti hierarchia* 2,3-5).

³⁵ In *The Darkness of God*, Turner offers a remarkable contribution on this account. From his study of the medieval apophatic/mystical theology, he criticizes the modern (scientific) notion of experience that led to a theological positivism in which the mystical experience begins to function as the proof of religious truth claims. Mysticism then becomes for theology what sensual experience is for the sciences. The apo-

Summary

To clarify our present-day postmodern context and to ascertain the critical consciousness of our time, we present a number of main lines of thought in the work of Wolfgang Iser, Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty. Each one of them has emphasized an aspect that perhaps is characteristic for the postmodern time. Iser identifies the postmodern with the coming to consciousness of radicalised plurality, Lyotard with the attention for the moment of radical heterogeneity that shines in the midst of plurality, and Rorty with an insight into the radical particularity and contextuality of each narrative. A discussion of and with this threesome, yields our model of the 'open narrative' as a possible form of the contemporary critical consciousness, which is to say as a possible authentic mode of existence in the postmodern context. In as much as 'negative theology', as a philosophical notion, in contemporary thinking stands for the attempt to leave behind metaphysics and ontotheology, it also functions as a background for the model of the 'open narrative': apophasis serves as ultimate, and at the same time, necessarily correction of what is narrated kataphatically. In this junction of contemporary philosophy and negative theology, the theologian not only can discover opportunities for rendering an account of his/her own apophatic tradition; at the same time, this junction may enable him/her to make both postmodern thought as well as negative theology fruitful for his/her own theologizing. We illustrate this by discussing the speaking about God in a christian theological 'open narrative'.

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phatic, the mystical, indeed belongs essentially to the method of theology, however not as confirmation or proof, but rather as a critical instance within the theological. And one approaches this, according to Turner, if one, in the line of classical mysticism, understands negativity as the absence or the negation of the *experience* of God (and not as the experience of the negation or the absence of God *tout court*, as B. McGinn understands it in *The Presence of God*, because God is not an object of the consciousness neither as presence, nor as absence).