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Dispute for the Sake of Heaven?

Reflections on a Fundamental Theological Theory of Conflict

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Dispute for the Sake of Heaven? Reflections on a Fundamental Theological Theory of Conflict

Thomas Fornet Ponse

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“[S]ocial conflict is a mechanism for adjustment of norms adequate to new conditions”¹. In the following, I will adopt the conflict-sociological view of Lewis Coser (building on reflections by Georg Simmel) and explore the role that conflicts play in renewing the church and theology, as well as how they can promote such renewal. To do this, I will begin by discussing some sociological reflections on the productive and integrating power of conflicts, before examining them from a fundamental theological perspective. Finally, I will briefly discuss how to handle a controversy in theology and the church, which is both inevitable and useful if properly regulated.

Conflicts as instruments of (social) change

Although conflicts may be initially perceived in a negative light, from a sociological perspective, they can actually play an important role in and for society, as long as they are not ignored or suppressed, but rather properly addressed. The ideas of Georg Simmel have been particularly influential in the development of conflict theory, as he viewed conflicts as a way of constituting groups. As such, they can serve as a form of socialisation and have an integrating function.² When an existing group enters into a conflict with an external entity, internal connections are tightened, and unity is increased, but there is also a risk that internal antagonisms become insurmountable, leading to the group’s disintegration. This risk can be mitigated by adopting an “elastic” form. Of the various ways to resolve a conflict, a

¹ Coser, Lewis A., *The Functions of Social Conflict*. London and New York 2001, 154.

² Cf. Simmel, Georg, *Der Streit*. In: *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Form der Vergesellschaftung*. Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe Bd. 11. Hg. Otthein Rammstedt. Frankfurt a.M. 1992, 284-382.

compromise is based on a common standard of values according to an objective mode and is thus the social form of ending conflicts.³

Lewis Coser expanded on Simmel's ideas, taking a functionalist perspective that emphasizes the relationship between conflicts and social structures, as well as the conditions under which conflicts can serve to maintain, adapt or adjust relationships or structures. In addition to the conflict issues, the type of social structure is decisive. „One safeguard against conflict disrupting the consensual basis of the relationship, however, is contained in the social structure itself: it is provided by the institutionalization and tolerance of conflict.”⁴ According to Coser, flexible social structures and open societies are more tolerant of conflict, as they allow members to mobilize their energies in different directions. Additionally, it is important to avoid being constantly in external conflicts, as this can make it easier to admit internal deviations from the group unit. Norms can continue to exist under changed conditions, whereas rigid systems are at risk of catastrophic collapse if warning conflicts are suppressed. Furthermore, conflicts tend to be functional when they arise from specific demands within a relationship that have been frustrated and relate to the frustrating object rather than being an end in themselves to relieve tension.⁵

Regarding the role of conflicts in ecclesial and theological renewal, several central aspects emerge from this brief overview: First, there is the issues of internal unity and responding to new conditions and challenges, with strategies that may include increased internal homogeneity or greater openness to internal plurality.

With regard to whether or not the basic assumptions of a relationship are affected, theological conflicts can be understood as a consequence of the various possible human responses to the divine offer, as well as the negotiation processes concerning the ways of communicating these possible responses, given the historicity of structures and beliefs, and thus the need for constant reform. This plurality arises from the inescapable plurality of contexts and historical situations, where conflicts are inevitable and must be addressed if theological questions of such complexity are to be adequately examined. This requires regulatory mechanisms that do not seek to eliminate the causes of conflict, but instead allow for compromise where possible – even if only in the sense of “we agree to disagree”.

³ Cf. Simmel, *Streit* 376.

⁴ Coser, *Functions* 152.

⁵ Cf. Coser, *Functions* 156.

Plurality and Diversity as Expression of the Faithfuls' Responsibility

The brief review of sociological considerations regarding the constructive and productive power of social conflicts suggests that even inner-church and theological conflicts should not simply be viewed as deficiencies to be eliminated, as they can pose a threat to church unity. Sociological and historical studies on Catholic identity demonstrate how pervasive conflicts around normative claims in the church are which "suggests to understand contestation as a formative dimension of normative ecclesial tradition"⁶. Conflicts can serve as important catalysts for appropriate and relevant positioning in the respective situation and thus for renewal.

Thus, first of all, the hermeneutics of controversy, which is very present in various forms of (not only contemporary) Judaism, can be taken up.⁷ The well-known story from the Talmud tractate Eruvin 13b, in which the heavenly voice declares both contradictory assertions of Hillel and Shammai to be valid interpretations, but the halakhah is to be decided according to the school of Hillel on the basis of its modesty, shows a basic motif of Jewish thought: the halakhah is supposed to be uniform, but in the area of the aggada (to which theology is to be assigned), contrasts and contradictions are desired. If there are no theological grounds for deciding the halacha unambiguously, it can be decided according to the attitude in which the respective positions are presented. An essential reason for the enormous diversity within Judaism is the epistemic understanding of religious authority that prevails in many currents of Judaism since, in principle, every Jew can apply the one Sinaitic revelation on his or her own responsibility. „Since the same event can be described in many different ways, with different legal rules being suitable for the different characterizations, more than one view will be applicable to any event."⁸ Controversy and dissent are thus part of the Torah's path and are even divinely authorised as such since the various contradictory opinions originate from God. Dissent, diversity and plurality are consequences of an understanding of revelation in which the individual is responsible for applying the revelation once given to the

⁶ Call for Papers for the Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology XIII. <https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/lest/lest-xiii/cfpprintable> (accessed 13 April 2023).

⁷ Cf. Fornet-Ponse, Thomas, *Ökumene in drei Dimensionen. Jüdische Anstöße für die innerchristliche Ökumene*. Münster 2011, 340-343.

⁸ Ben-Menahem, Hanina, *Controversy and Dialogue in the Jewish Tradition. An interpretative Essay*. In: *Ibid.* / Hecht, Neil S. / Shai Wosner, Eds., *Controversy and Dialogue in the Jewish Tradition. A Reader*. London 2005, 1-41, 17.

concrete situation. Insofar as dispute and discussion help to discover the truth in and for the concrete situation, disagreements are allowed and are dealt with within the community. However, this willingness to live with different points of view and opinions, since the search for truth can never be completed, is not limitless. Rather, Avot 5:17 formulates as a criterion for a constant dispute that it is conducted for the sake of heaven.

On this basis, we can first ask what consequences follow from the dialogical understanding of revelation as God's self-communication for dealing with plurality and differing opinions. In an understanding of revelation that is conceived as a communicative relational event with the climax of God's personal self-communication, the subjectivity of the believers plays a decisive role. The resulting diversity of human responses and possibilities of reception of God's offer of revelation cannot be reduced to a single one, neither synchronously nor diachronically. Similarly, no single human attempt can fully express the richness of the Christ event as the culmination of the relational event between God and humans. Instead, all human attempts are limited and need to be complemented by others.

If these different perspectives can already create tension and conflicting views, then Christian theology, as an expression of following Jesus Christ, inevitably encounters the inherent conflictivity of Christology. On the one hand, this is based on Jesus' prophetic practice and his call to conversion, which is an orientation towards God that must always be renewed. Everything that does not serve the kingdom of God, whether it is unjust social structures or entrenched ways of thinking, is radically criticised. If the human possibilities of receiving divine revelation can be very plural due to different cultural and contextual imprints, the same applies to the concrete shaping of life and faith in a faith community such as the Catholic Church as a universal sacrament of salvation. If the social nature of the Church is expressed through the perspective of *Lumen gentium* from the members and the mutual connection of people with each other becomes the ecclesiological theme, then all believers, in their diversity, are taken into responsibility. The independent realisation of the Church in each local Church, in its concrete historical reality, through which it forms itself as a "culturally-polycentric universal Church"⁹ (Metz), and the tense relationship between the local Church and the universal Church associated with this, also brings conflicts.

⁹ Metz, Johann Baptist, Im Aufbruch zu einer kulturell-polyzentrischen Weltkirche. In: ZMR 70 (1986) 140-153.

Cultural and contextual factors play a decisive role in the field of epistemology. Not only does a classical approach such as that of Melchior Cano emphasize the plurality of theological sources of knowledge, which must be put in relation to each other with their respective claims, but the fundamental limitations of human beings and the inherent contextuality of all philosophy also apply to theology. Therefore, it is necessary to engage in a dialogue with other contextual and culturally limited positions and to recognise alternative discourses. Moreover, theology is dedicated to the theo-logically rational responsibility of the Christian faith and utilizes various rationalities and types of rationality for this purpose. If these rationalities can be understood in the sense of a “methodological complementarity” as complementary or opposing directions of reflection, conflicts between the respective positions may not arise, but they cannot be easily mediated with each other or reduced to each another. Therefore, the plurality of co-existing approaches must be acknowledged. Additionally, theology deals with very diverse inquiries “from outside”, whether of philosophical, scientific or social scientific nature or from other religions. To engage with them intellectually honestly, theology must embrace their disciplinary rationalities and become interdisciplinary. However, these different rationalities are not easily commensurable without necessarily contradicting each other. When different perspectives are connected, and the challenges arising from these dialogues with “the world”, other churches and other religions are taken up, conflicts take on a further epistemological moment. “Precisely as a disturbance and questioning of the given, they form a place of theological knowledge that initiates learning processes, confronts us with foreign perspectives and in this can bring to light new aspects of a truth whose fullness is reserved for God himself.”¹⁰

These brief remarks demonstrate that plurality and diversity present in the church and theology are not solely the result of different contexts in which the relevance of the Christian message is to be rearticulated. Rather, they are based on an understanding of revelation and an ecclesiology that takes the individual believers seriously as subjects, promising and expecting them to act responsibly in the relationship between God and humans and within the community of believers, adapting to new challenges and changing conditions for their life of faith. Thus, they are closely related to the historicity and provisionality of all theological and philosophical statements. To the extent that this includes different claims and

¹⁰ Kirschner, Martin, I. Dialog und Konflikt. Zur Zielsetzung dieses Buchs. In: *Ibid.*, Ed., Dialog und Konflikt. Erkundungen zur Orten theologischer Erkenntnis, Ostfildern 2017, 7-13, 7.

interests that cannot always be reconciled, this plurality and diversity harbours potential for conflict. However, existing or emerging conflicts can be put into perspective with regard to such presuppositions, which can reveal whether they affect the basic assumptions and endanger the communion of the church or express it precisely by being enacted.

How can ecclesial and theological conflicts be settled?

“If conflicts are, objectively speaking, an expression of contradictions, then, if they are allowed to come to the fore, they are at the same time the way to overcome them”¹¹. If Seckler argues in favour of settling conflicts in order to overcome the contradictions or the causes of the conflict, this does not mean dissolving the diversity underlying the contradictions in the direction of uniformity. Rather, it is to be preserved in order not to produce any rigidity or one-sidedness. In connection with this, he understands church unity not as the greatest possible homogeneity and absence of inner contradictions, but as a community that can endure opposites and settle conflicts in a regulated way, whereby the weaker parties also have a fair chance to have their voice heard and their interests considered. Comparable to the Jewish understanding outlined above, unity is not the unity of convictions, but consists in the unity of communication, i.e. in a common practice.

In order to resolve conflicts in a productive way, there have been various models in the history of theology, from the Apostles' Council to the behavioural proposals for the abbot in Benedict's Rule to the scholastic disputation. What they always have in common is that they take into account different parties and claims to truth and aim for a compromise, which – as at Vatican II – can also take the form of an “adversarial pluralism”¹².

In order to achieve such compromises, or even dilatory or factual compromises, conflicts must be dealt with according to transparent rules of conflict resolution that are fair to all sides.¹³ For the Roman Catholic Church, this presupposes an understanding of the Church's teaching office as a pastoral one that is less

¹¹ Seckler, Max, *Konflikt und Einheit in der Kirche*. In: *Ibid.*, *Im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft und Kirche. Theologie als schöpferische Auslegung der Wirklichkeit*. Freiburg i.Br. u.a. 1980, 87-98, 95.

¹² Seckler, Max, *Über den Kompromiß in Sachen der Lehre*. In: *Ibid.*, *Spannungsfeld*, 99-109; 212-215, 108.

¹³ Cf. Fornet-Ponse, Thomas, *Christologie als Konfliktgeschichte. Die Konflikte um Edward Schillebeeckx, Jon Sobrino und Jacques Dupuis und ihr Beitrag zu einer fundamentaltheologischen Konflikttheorie*. Paderborn 2021, 565-571

concerned with heresiological mechanisms of exclusion and more positive and inclusive in preserving the tension between identity as a Christian message and relevance in the concrete situation. In addition to a high degree of sensitivity for the respective contextual backgrounds and challenges in academic discourse, this includes equal rights for all participants and, above all, in the case of conflicts between theologians and representatives of the teaching authority, a clear separation of accusing, defending and judging authorities, as well as their equal rights and an appeal authority with which the unavoidable asymmetrical relationship can be somewhat mitigated.¹⁴ Insofar as such procedural rules can mediate between the respective concerns and perspectives of, on the one hand, safeguarding the faith handed down, offering assistance to the faithful and serving the unity of the church, and, on the other hand, reflecting and formulating the faith in a way that is appropriate to the context and situation, such conflicts can be dealt with productively.

The key to dealing with conflicts in a regulated way is being able to distinguish between conflicts that express legitimate plurality and diversity and the common struggle for truth or its appropriate form of expression and do not endanger the ecclesial community, and conflicts that function from other motives and can lead to division. At the collective level, this depends on the existence or non-existence of a social structure which is flexible and open to internal plurality, takes into account the plurality of a church as a universal church which is active in the most diverse contexts, and sees unity as continued communication rather than uniformity of conviction. At the individual level, this corresponds to an attitude of (epistemological) modesty and humility already called for in the Talmud, recognizing that the fullness of revelation can only be understood from diverse and possibly conflicting perspectives. Furthermore, as in the above-mentioned rabbinic discussion about which dispute is being waged for the sake of heaven, it is also important to consider the causes of conflict, whether they stem from different methodological, philosophical or sociological basic assumptions related to the confession of Christ and take place within the framework of common communication practices, or whether they explicitly challenge common basic values such as denying the other party's Christianity or Catholicism.

If these criteria are met, then we have a good chance of a productive conflict – that is in the sake of heaven and therefore will last.

¹⁴ Cf. Örsy, Ladislav, *Gerechtigkeit in der Kirche und die Rechtskultur unserer Zeit*. In: *StZ* 216 (1998) 363-374.