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BOUND TO DIFFER?
Wesley Kort on theological differences

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Abstract

Can theological differences be solved? Wesley Kort, in his recent study Bound to differ, argues that they cannot - and should not. He rejects four well-known attempts to deal with theological differences, namely praxis theology, hermeneutical theology, ecumenical theology, and narrative theology. He does this on the basis of his own choice for and defense of discourse analysis. The longing for unity and identity in Christian theology, he says, belongs to the past. We now live in a postmodern culture of belief - and text. This article briefly explains the main thrust of Kort's argument in three sections, and then suggests some differences with Kort's discourse in a final section.

> *'One does not understand theology unless one understands why violent relations among Christians are theologically produced and why social, political, and economic factors readily accompany and complicate theological disputes'* (Wesley Kort)

1. Solving conflict in Christian theology?

Is it possible to overcome differences in Christian theology? Is it possible to deal with theological conflicts? Is it possible to find a common Christian and theological discourse? Is it possible to solve controversies in Christian circles?

In his recent study called *Bound to differ. The dynamics of theological discourses* (1992), the New Testament scholar, Wesley Kort, suggests an interesting answer to the above questions. His answer is even more remarkable when oneconsiders his background. His interest in the topic of theological conflict, he explains, arises from his exposure since his youth to theology:

'I grew up in an environment where theology divided people, at times even ending speaking relationships within families. Theological hostility and conflict were touted as inevitable, even virtuous. 'Rotten wood won't split' was the excuse. People who did not hold and articulate sharp and nonnegotiable theological distinctiveness were judged as lacking conviction. Tentativeness and tolerance were identified with indifference. When I moved from that Dutch Calvinist theological environment to the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, the theological 'orthodoxy' there was process theology ... Theological alternatives to this position were alienated or dismissed, and I responded by internalizing the conflict ... My involvement in theology was, subsequently, highly personal, and it took the form of asking what kind of relation to one another such differing formulations as traditional Calvinism and Hartshornean process theology might have. Differences of this kind, I soon realized, were irreconcilable ... I am, therefore, aware not so much of Christian theology in the singular as of theologies in the plural, not so much of theological conversation as of theological conflict and exclusion' (1992:ix).

Against this background, then, what is his suggestion? He argues that theology *needs* differences and conflict. Some of his remarks can illustrate the radical nature and intent of

his thesis. 'I take theological differences as basic' (1992:ix). 'Differences are not accidental but central to Christian theology itself and without these differences there would be little if any theology as we know it' (1992:ix). He maintains that it is precisely these differences and conflicts that are 'so interesting and productive' (1992:5), and that 'those moments that cast theological discourses into relations of conflict ... generate theological power and significance' (1992:47). The discursive situation of theology, at its deepest level, is 'interdependent and oppositional' (1992:122).

Consequently, *he rejects the popular notion that Christian theological differences should be solved.* 'Christian theology, while noticeably marked by diversity and polemic, usually is taken to be a unified and affirmative enterprise. This assumption resides in the use of the singular noun and in an adjective that suggests shared beliefs. Difference and conflict are relegated to the surface of theology or to its periphery. Christian theology basically or centrally, it is assumed, constitutes a single discourse inclusive of its diversity, and differences among Christian theologians are taken to be either unnecessary or unproductive.

My purpose ... is to show that difference and conflict, rather than accidental or peripheral, are unavoidable and central to the theological enterprise and that theology, rather than unified, is basically divided and conflicted. Differences and conflicts, rather than belonging to the effects of theology, are among its very causes; they serve to determine theological argumentation' (1992:1-2).

In the light of this, he *rejects four major attempts to reduce difference and conflict, namely praxis-theology, hermeneutical theology, ecumenical theology, and narrative theology.*

The first of these *(praxis-theology)*, says Kort, 'under the slogan that 'doctrines divide but service unites,' elevates praxis over theology' (1992:122). He argues against that. 'While there will always be Christians for whom 'hand' is more important than 'head,' that point of difference ought not to be distorted by a retreat from theology ... (W)hile social and political aspects or consequences are always actually or potentially present in theological discourses, I believe neither that those implications always outweigh or determine theology nor that failing to make social and political factors primary is itself an act that should always be interpreted as primarily political ... Theology is also a form of action' (1992:122-123).

'(A) second answer to the problem created by the oppositional and conflictive situation created by theological discourses' is offered by *hermeneutics*, but, says Kort, 'it as an answer that is inadequate' (1992:123). He explains, reiterating arguments from his earlier *Story, Text, and Scripture: Literary Interests in Biblical Narrative*: 'The hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, for example, depend on an inclusive situation predicated on their own particular discourses. Moreover, such projects cannot avoid presaging ahead of language an actual, retreating horizon accommodating conflicting texts or worlds. Finally, they cannot adequately dissociate the narrative of an ever-expanding and inclusive world of meaning from the meta-narrative of Western culture as legitimately and endlessly expansive and inclusive' (1992:123).

Thirdly, he is also 'unconvinced ... that the oppositional character of theological discourses can be, or should be, resolved or transcended by *an ecumenical theology*' (1992:123). 'Theology cannot be elevated to some high ground above the dynamics of theological differences and oppositions. The reason is that there is no ecumenical theology able to resolve or transcend the differences that create the oppositions ... What this more inclusive theology would likely become is a kind of fetishism or abstraction of symbols ... A theology that stands above the dynamics of differing discourses avoids the need of having or choosing a starting point, and it thereby deceives itself by the lure of an Archimedean

privilege' (1992:123).[1]

The position regarding the fourth possible candidate for taking us beyond the differences and the conflicts in theology, namely *narrative theology*, is a little different, admits Kort.[2] It certainly offers 'more potential' (1992:125), but still 'this option, while it holds much that is suggestive and salutary, usually subjects narrative to already established theological interests,[3] rests on inadequate understandings of narrative,[4] and fails to recognize that

1 In a rather remarkable aside, he calls Cullmann's controversial *Unity through diversity* 'an excellent exception' - but then rejects that as well because Cullmann's weak notion of unity is still too strong for his liking! It was controversial, because it strongly defended the typically Lutheran view of ecumenical unity as 'reconciled diversity' against the mainstream ecumenical thinking striving for 'conciliarity' or 'koinonia.' 'What I like so much about this work,' says Kort, 'is its recognition of the differences among churches, including differences that are irreconcilable, theological or theologically significant, and crucial to the identities of the particular churches.' Cullmann appeals to Paul's metaphor of the human body with its different members to support his call for 'unity through diversity.' Cullmann then suggests 'a federation' or council of churches, in which all churches participate without sacrificing their particularities and identities. In such a federation, Cullmann says, all churches can find a place, 'just as they are.' Kort says that he finds this proposal attractive for three reasons: Cullmann never loses sight of theological differences and conflicts; he affirms the diversity and even the oppositional relations of churches and their theologies to one another; and Cullmann does not ignore or dismiss the institutional complications of the ecumenical agenda. However, Kort is of the opinion that this proposal also fails to be theologically convincing ('even though it can be recommended as a prudent course to pursue'). Why? Because the unifying structure that Cullmann proposes has no ecclesiastical identity or force, but even more importantly, also has no theological force or significance. 'This lack of theological significance and power not only makes the council he proposes theologically irrelevant, it also undermines Cullmann's argument, for the Pauline metaphor ... here works against him. Paul's stress is on the unity of the Church, and that unity holds a tremendous, even primary, theological force and significance for him. In contrast, Cullmann proposes a solution to theological diversity and conflict that is theologically contentless' (1992:124-125).

2 Kort in fact remarks that 'readers who know my previous work may expect that, if I do not resolve the question with a theological position, I will turn to narrative as providing coherence in the face of theological dissonance. But that is also a move I do not make ...' (1992:8).

3 He rejects four well-known kinds of narrative theology that all, in his opinion, 'subject narrative to a theological interest', namely narrative theology's interest on the realistic quality of the Biblical narratives (Hans Frei); narrative theology's use of the attitude of the teller in the tale, the teller's relation to the material of the narrative (Richard Niebuhr); the recent attention to narrative time specifically to inform ethics (Alisdair MacIntyre); and therefore the overall and common appeal of narrative theology to wholeness and coherence (Stephen Crites). Kort prefers the views on narrative that retain 'the capacity of a narrative to contain differing voices and discourses without needing to have one dominate the others ... described by no one so well as by Mikhail Bakhtin' (1992:125-129).

4 Narratives and propositions, also within theology, are not that much different. They resemble one another and they need one another. Sentences, and propositions, are potential narratives or distillations of narratives, says Kort (with appeal to Roland Barthes). 'Not only are theological propositions found in narratives and narratives in propositional theologies; it can also be said that narratives are often expanded theological propositions and propositions condensed narratives' (1992:129-130).

The implication is that narrative theology cannot resolve or contain the conflicts inevitable in propositional theologies. '(N)arratives ... are not so inclusive and complete as they are sometimes taken to be ... A story stands not by itself but as different from and in opposition to other stories. So, when one hears talk of *the* Christian story, as though there were something single, inclusive, and independent, one can only conclude that difference and divergence as characteristics of narrative discourses have been ignored or suppressed. As a matter of fact, Christianity is constituted not by one but by many groups each of which could have many stories told of it or could tell many stories about itself. And many of these groups have stories that they tell of one another. When the singular is used to refer to *the* Christian story, some kind of unity is being posited either above this diversity or somewhere within it. Christians do this because of the temptation of Platonism that is so strong for them' (1992:130).

He gives a well-known example. 'When Tatian, in his Diatessaron (150-60 C.E.), created a single narrative out of the four Gospels, and when that narrative became the authoritative text among Syrian Christians for centuries to come, this is a clear indication of the hold of Platonism on those Christians. The

narrative also is discourse, that it is oppositionally determined' (1992:125). 'Stories about other people, especially those for whom I or we have low regard, are indispensable to the process of self and group identity. Narratives secure value and identity both positively and negatively ... *There are no Christians without negative narratives about others*' (127-128). Proper narrative theology and proper reading of the Biblical narratives should therefore, according to him, far from serving unity and coherence, be strengthening the differences and the conflicts. 'A narrative theology, rather than enlist in a campaign to protect theological interests, to insure Christian coherence, or to produce certainty, will serve instead to challenge and subvert Christian certainty, coherence, and identity. A narrative theology will take narrative discourses as liminal places where, like Jacob with the night visitor at the Jabbok brook, one wrestles in order to obtain not only a name (an identity, coherence, or a theology) but also, if not more so, an injured hip, a chronic instability' (1992:134).

How does he arrive at this conclusion? Why does he reject the potential of these four approaches to overcome differences within theology?

2. Analysing conflict in Christian theology?

Kort employs *discourse analysis* in order to understand theology. 'Discourse analysis provided me ... with a way to recognize that theological discourses depend on difference ... Discourse analysis provided me with a way to sustain an analysis that I had begun long ago' (1992:ix).

But what does he mean by 'discourse analysis'? Kort points out that 'discourse analysis' is an ambiguous term, for several reasons. ''Discourse analysis' is in itself far from a single strategy or mode of study. The complexity arises from its multidisciplinary sources; although originating in the social sciences, it represents a range of other interests, including philosophy of language and literary theory. In addition, *discourse analysis must be distinguished from* similar or related, but separable, interests such as '*conversation analysis*' and '*intertextuality*'' (1992:3).[5]

The primary question he is interested in is 'how discourses receive or generate *meaning* and authority, force, or *power*' (1992:12). The shared assumption of discourse analysis is 'that discourse should be taken as deriving or generating its meaning and authority in its relations of dependence and independence, similarity or differences, or confirmation and opposition to other discourses' (1992:12). This assumption, says Kort, implies 'a discounting or dismissal of traditional answers' as to the sources or causes of meaning and authority.

He points to three of these traditional answers that are dismissed. Firstly, 'we are

single narrative had the appeal of a higher form, a single story of which the four Gospels are manifestations of versions. When narrative theologians, then, refer to the Christian story or the story of the Christian community, one should think of Syrian Christianity from the second to the fifth century and its Platonist suppression of diversity and difference in favor of unity and wholeness' (1992:130).

5 He discusses several differences between discourse analysis and 'conversation analysis' (1992:14-16) and between discourse analysis and 'intertextuality' (1992:16-22). With regard to the latter, he explains: ''Intertextuality' as a form of literary analysis is more focused ... on the inclusion and domination of other texts by a text, on the ways in which a text is affected by the actual or threatened influence on it of other texts, and on single texts as sites of these dynamics ... Moreover, 'intertextuality' tends to be an analysis heavily influenced by psychological interests' (1992:16-17). Discourse analysis differs from both in the attention it gives to difference and conflict. In this regard, he quotes Diane Macdonell ('discourses are always agonistic') and Lyotard ('to speak is to fight') approvingly (1992:17).

accustomed to thinking that discourses receive or develop meaning and authority *from that to which they refer.*' Discourse analysis dismisses this, and proposes 'that meaning and authority do not inhere in the referent but are ascribed to the referent by the discourse.' In other words, ''referents' are significant, important, valuable, or authoritative because discourses make them so' (1992:12). Secondly, 'we are accustomed to thinking that discourses derive their meaning and authority *from their speakers and sources*,' from their learning, integrity, credentials, office, qualities of character and mind, and other attributes. Again, discourse analysis dismisses this, and proposes that the authority and significance of the voice or source is instead established by the discourse itself. 'One major function of a discourse ... is to advance norms that will grant its voice or source power and significance. Discourses contain within them, perhaps have as their principal ingredient, reasons why their sources are to be taken as having authority' (1992:12-13). Thirdly, 'more recently ... it has become customary to attribute the authority and meaning of a discourse *to patterns, systems, and structures that antedate discourses and legitimate them*, rules of logic and grammar or social and linguistic codes and structures' (1992:13). Again, discourse analysis dismisses this and proposes that it works the other way round, that discourses project and warrant these systems and structures.

In other words, '(l)ike referent and voice, structure, code, system, and the like are seen more as products than as causes, more as determined than as determining, more secondary than primary ... (A)t *all three* of these points - *referent, voice, or structure* - discourse analysis assumes or effects an exchange; what is ordinarily and traditionally taken as generative of *significance, validity, and authority* becomes secondary and derived' (1992:13).

Kort underlines that discourses do not make these claims, in, fact, they conceal them. This means that '*discourse analysis goes against the grain of a discourse and exposes a situation that, for the sake of a discourse's power and meaning, is concealed*' (1992:13). In fact, '(I)f discourses appear to derive their meaning and power primarily from referents, voice, and system, it is very important for them to conceal that they derive their power and meaning not in those ways but, rather, from their relations to one another' (1992:13).

Discourse analysis, turning attention particularly to differences and oppositions, places more emphasis on *power* than more customary ways of accounting for meaning and authority, says Kort. '(I)t takes the production of meaning out of the uplifted realm of *facts, minds, and language* into a world of social interaction' (1992:14). It is therefore not surprising that discourse analysis finds its principal location in the social sciences (1992:14). In this respect, he makes extensive use of the work of Foucault (1992:17-22) and emphasizes that discourses are *institutionalized.* Institutions house discourses, locate discourses, argues Kort. They set limits to what can be said and to the terms that can be used. 'There are things that should be said, and there are ways of saying them' (again Lyotard, Kort 1992:18). Furthermore, institutions also embody discourses and can become 'the contraries' for the discourses that oppose them. Because institutions are so powerful, they often conceal their embodied discourses. '(T)he power and significance of an institution often depends upon the concealment of the discourse that it embodies' (1992:19). In fact, 'the recognizable or official discourse of an institution conceals an implicit discourse that those identified with the institution do not want known or do not even recognize themselves' (1992:19). Oppositional forms of discourse can, of course, also be institutional. Oppositional forms of discourse therefore often depend on an institution as their target. '(I)ndeed, churches, along with businesses, football teams, and institutions of higher learning in the United States, are largely defined in contrast, even in opposition to,

one another' (1992:21). Therefore, discourse analysis always leads to or implies institutional analysis as well (1992:18).[6]

But, does not this kind of postmodern discourse analysis, interested in *meaning* and *power,* instead of 'fact, mind, and language,' or 'referent, voice, and structure,' threaten traditional theology with invalidation? Kort argues that this is not the case[7] and that he is indeed interested in *theological* analysis, not merely in institutional or political analysis. 'Theological discourses are not only discourses; they are also theological' (1992:23).

Within this kind of 'discourse analysis,' he explains, lies '*a range of differing political interests and objectives*' (1992:3). And he is careful in situating himself within this range. 'Some discourse analysis maintains a political neutrality by describing quite formal qualities of discursive situations, but discourse analysis can also be political; it can emphasize the issues of power and privilege that are built into discursive situations and how discourses are granted authority because of their institutional bases and the social and political powers they serve or that produce them' (1992:3-4). In fact, says Kort, discourse analysis can itself become political 'by exposing concealed political and social interests in discourses and challenging imbalances of privilege that may structure discursive situations' (1992:4).

With regard to these potential political interests within discourse analysis, he wants to maintain a middle position. 'I take a middle pose on the relation of discourse analysis to political interests and questions' (1992:4).[8] What is then *his own middle position*? He 'takes

6 He is certainly aware of the fact that 'the relation of theologies to institutions is complicated' (1992:25). He responds in some detail to Stanley Fish's views on 'professions' (that, with their 'tacit boundaries, engrained assumptions, and continuities of practice, stabilize the interpretive situation and keep the text from meaning everything or anything'), and says that he wants to emphasize difference and conflict, discontinuity and indeterminacy, more than Fish (1992:24-26). He also deals with the unique profession of theologians in an interesting discussion (1992:25-27).

7 He argues that '(t)he intellectual and cultural milieu nominated as postmodernism rests on nothing so much as (the) removal of discourse from its secondary, subservient position in relation to the world of referents and granting to language and discourse a primary and determining position' (1992:31). 'This assumption or strategy ... may at first seem threatening to theological discourses, since it appears to dissolve their truth claims and explicit concerns,' he admits, but adds, 'However, this observation ... need not be ... disconcerting for theology' (1992:31). He then criticizes the position and role of theology in the modern period ('thrown on the defensive by the culture of certainty about facts and reality, or events and entities ...' or in need of 'validating stamps pressed on them by sponsoring minds or subjects' or 'supposedly pre-existent structures or systems', 1992:30-36).

Obviously, he remarks, '(I)n this new situation, theological appeals to 'Church,' 'revelation,' the 'Christian community,' and faith as starting points free from discourses that constitute and validate them cannot be made' (1992:34).

He then discusses and criticizes Lindbeck's *The nature of doctrine* and Mark C Taylor's *Erring* as attempts to do postmodern theology, but texts who, in fact, 'do not provide new ways of reading theologies ... (but, r)ather... attempt to validate traditional, or at least recognizable, theological interests with the help of postmodern assumptions' (1992:37-41).

8 On the one hand, he says, 'I treat discourses and discursive situations as always conditioned by power and marked by political implications and potentials' (1992:4). 'Discursive situations, including those that are recognizably theological, include force as well as significance, and power produces and legitimates inequalities, repressions and exclusions. Any theological situation, therefore, favors some participants over others ... and some discourses are likely to be dominating the field at the expense of others' (1992:4). Theology is therefore less *like a game than like a war*, he says. 'A theological discourse does not become part of a 'game' in which the necessity and legitimacy of theological opponents is assumed and protected. Indeed, a theological discourse will attempt to discredit those potential or actual discourses it opposes so as to expel them from consideration and, more importantly, to conceal the fact that it depends for its force and significance on its contrary relation to those rejected and resisted discourses' (1992:4).

Indeed, 'theologies and the institutional, political, and social investments they carry, validate, and reinforce must be seen in their actually or potentially violent relations to one another if they are to be

theological discourses neither as abstracted from and transcendent to the dynamics of difference and conflict, nor as cloaks that cover the advancement and protection of social, political, and economic advantages' (1992:5).[9] He describes the two alternatives pejoratively as 'reification' and 'reduction' and wants to move between this Scylla and Charybdis, although he admits that, if forced to choose, 'I would declare my sympathies with a stress on the social and political conditions of discourses, for these have too long been ignored' (1992:5).

And what is then the fundamental contribution that he sees in this kind of discourse analysis with a view to analyse difference and conflict in theology? *It provides a possibility to treat a theological discourse* 'not so much in relation to its speaker or referents, or in and by itself, or as an instance of 'creative bricolage,' but, rather, *in relation to other theological discourses,*' says Kort (1992:1). This is the critical point. 'When attention is shifted *from* that to which theologies refer and the sources or voices that claim to warrant them and *to* the ways in which and the reasons why theologies differ from one another, one can see that these differences and the conflicts that arise from them are discursively productive. Theological discourses depend upon a play of differences and conflicts that must be taken into account if they are to be accurately read' (1992:2). *He reads theologies 'not as 'about' that to which they refer nor even 'about' their sources, sponsors, or voices but as 'about' one another'* (1992:3).

This is not the normal way to read theological discourses, claims Kort. 'When we attend to a discourse we usually turn toward that to which the discourse refers, or we evaluate the voice or the source that warrants the discourse, or both. Indeed, theological discourses direct attention to important, even ultimate issues, and it is to be expected that the reader will be less interested in the discourse itself than in the reality, plausibility, or other qualities of that about which the theology speaks. It is also not surprising that readers should attend to the voice or the source of theology, since theologies often depend upon or reveal extraordinary sources - the faith or beliefs of the speaker, some revelation or insight granted either to the sponsor as individual or as community, or the institution the theologian represents' (1992:2-3). He, however, wants 'to sever the ties of discourses to referents and sources and (to) turn attention to the relation of discourses to one another' (1992:3).

But, what is more, '*these relations (between theological discourses) are primarily negative, relations of competition, and even repression*' (1992:1). What is, therefore, important in understanding theological discourse is not what is being said or by whom it is

adequately analyzed and interpreted' (1992:4).

On the other hand, he argues, one should not exchange theological discourses for the political interests and objectives. 'I do not treat theological discourses as concealments or defences of social, economic, and political advantages' (1992:4). He explains that he wants to remain attentive to the force of theological discourses, to the ways they oppose, exclude, and repress actual or potential alternatives to them, and to the reasons why theologies carry persistent political implications. What he calls 'concealment', however, i.e. the way theological discourses ignore or deny their dependence on those theological discourses with which they differ, should not be confused with another kind of 'concealment,' namely 'the cloaking of political and economic advantages and ambitions in the language of theological polemics' (1992:4). Although this may also occur, he interprets 'the matters of power and concealment, dominance and repression, as ways of also gaining *theological* advantage, even though they may, perhaps usually will, grant advantages of other kinds' (1992:4-5).

9 'Indeed, theology is itself, as a profession, an institution, one that is in various ways related to other, especially academic and/or ecclesiastical, institutions. This means that theological discourses are never free, open, and innocent. But it also means that theological discourses need not be viewed as disguised forms of political activity' (1992:23).

being said, but *that which is concealed.* 'This proposal works against the grain of theological discourses themselves because these discourses conceal, by the attention they draw to other things, the determining and basic role these dynamics play in generating force and significance' (1992:1).

3. Propagating conflict in Christian theology?

In a major second part of his study Kort employs his mode of analysis and provides examples. For our purposes, this is less important, although in itself very interesting and suggestive. He argues that there are many differences between theological discourses, that may even seem important or crucial, but that are 'relatively inconsequential' (1992:2).[10] The differences and conflicts that really matter are 'of a limited and specific kind' and his purpose is to uncover them (1992:2).

He develops a model to analyse the dynamics of theological discourses (1992:47-65)[11]

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10 'There are, then, *three ways in which or reasons why Christians differ from one another*, ways that are not treated by this study. Christians find themselves in differing conditions, conditions historically, socially, politically, and culturally created or determined, which give rise to differences among them. In addition, Christianity's sources and its principal texts are complicated and supportive of differing and varying emphases and interpretations. Finally, there are differences that arise when Christians emphasize, as they will inevitably do, one of the three 'theatres' of Christian interest - actions, feelings, or reflection' (1992:45-46).

11 Kort says: 'The dynamics of difference arise from the three separable *meaning effects* produced by all theologies. These meaning effects stand in conflict with one another because any of them can be primary and dominate the other two. In fact, *a theological discourse can largely be described as a set of strategies to establish and defend the domination of one of the these three meaning effects over the other two.*' What are these three? He describes them in a rather abstract way. 'First, theological language ... can be grouped together as signifying matters that are contrary to or apart from what participants in the discourse assume to be the world open to human understanding and control. When words such as supernatural, transcendent, or eternal are used it is to these sort of interests that attention is being drawn ... Although theologians differ in what they take to be the significance and importance of this language, theology requires it for one of its meaning effects ... A second set of theological signifiers concerns various and particular entities or events in our world that form an identifiable class because in them (the former) matters are made available to people. Sometimes the special entities or events are located in the past and people have a relation to them indirectly by reports. Or they can be in the future, and relation to them is available through predictions or precursors. Often the form or occasion is not so distant. Although there are wide variations and differences among theologians depending on what is affirmed to be that form of occasion - Scripture, the Church, the person and work of Jesus, the sacraments, the created order, etc. - all theologies must designate where and how it is possible for people to gain knowledge of, contact with, or participation in (the former) matters ... A third group of theological signifiers can be distinguished from these two. Theologians also are concerned with the conditions and possibilities of the human world. Generally these interests, while starting with the human, become inclusive of the larger world, not only individuals, society, and culture but also cosmos. Evil, both moral and natural, human potential, cosmology, the nature and meaning of human history, the transformations of personal and social life: interests such as these form a third set of theological signifiers that can be grouped under (a third) heading' (1992:48-49). His point is that all three signifiers are always required in all theological argumentation. The task of theological discourse is precisely to set and argue the relations between the three kinds of signifiers. However, while always present, they are not of equal importance. 'Rather, one of the three will be more important than and will dominate the other two ... *I mean that theological argumentation largely establishes its dominant by denying the dominance of the other two kinds of signifiers and by showing why its dominant cancels or absorbs the potential for dominance in the other two*' (1992:49-50).

With these distinctions, Kort can now develop his model and his basic conviction. 'The major premise of a particular theological argument concerns its dominant. This premise is not hidden, but it is often not directly defended ... The 'basic belief' of a theological discourse is the belief in the rightful place of its dominant and, consequently, in the subordinate, dependent, or derivative positions of the other two interests or kinds of signifiers' (1992:51). Theological argumentation ... concerns the relations of these things to one another, their dominant and subordinate positions. What needs to be argued is the rightness of a particular set of relations. *And this is done not so much by arguing for the position of the dominant as by arguing against*

and then applies the model to three examples, namely prophetic discourses (1992:69-84),[12] priestly discourses (1992:85-100),[13] and sapiential discourses (1992:101-120).[14]

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the potential for dominance that seems to reside in the other two interests. Once that argument is made, the theological task is basically completed and the rest is a matter of elaborating or extending the content and implications of this arrangement ... Theological argumentation arises as the consequence of a perceived threat to the arrangement posed by the potential for dominance in one of the other two sets of signifiers or interests. The goal of the argumentation will be to restate the relations ... so as to prevent contrary discourses, in which the subordinated interests would become prominent, from generating significance and force. This is done mainly negatively, by discrediting the potential for dominance in the other two and deforming them toward the dominant ... One theological discourse will be very threatening to another whose dominant differs ... Theological discourses arguing differing relations among their interests are threatening to one another in the extreme ... Theological polemics are likely to be heated and nonnegotiable. *For this reason it is a mistake to dismiss or even underestimate the theological component in interinstitutional tensions, those of heresy trials, religious wars, and the like, in favor of their social and political components ... (P)redictable and virulent conflict is bound to occur ... (T)he resistance of (one) discourse to persuasion by a differing discourse may easily be taken as a certain recalcitrance, religious insensitivity, or perversion in the spokesperson or the sponsoring institution of that discourse. This accounts at least in part, it seems to me, for the frequent ad hominem aspects of theological polemic, the perpetuation of deep animosities among Christian institutions, and the violent consequences to which theological differences in the past have led, including wars and executions'* (1992:53-54).

12 He discusses the theology of Barth and the eschatology of Moltmann as discourses typical of the first, prophetic type. 'In polemic against priestly and sapiential discourses, prophetic discourses will accuse the first of 'idolatry' and the second of 'anthropocentrism.' Priestly and sapiential discourses are attacked as compromising the primacy of 'the prophetic, transcendental' matters. Since their starting point is wrong, what they say is always and radically mistaken' (1992:83).

13 'Theological discourses of this kind will tend to begin with or take a strong interest in Christology and ecclesiology. It can be said, as a general point, that priestly discourses stress a language of entities and places when addressing the relation of God to human life rather than the language of events and time. So, the Incarnation in Christology, the Word of God as text, and the Church and the sacraments as actualities, places, and objects are stressed, the substantiated rather than the temporal' (1992:86). He discusses D M Baillie's Christology, L Boff's Christology, and H Küng's ecclesiology.

14 The traditional theological topics that form the starting point and primary interest of sapiential theologies, says Kort, are theological anthropology and soteriology. '(T)he form or occasion of divine presence in the world, then, is not likely to be a specific time, place, object, institution, or person but, rather, general *ontological, sociological, or spiritual* conditions and occasions' (1992:103).

'The theological discourse of extra-ecclesiastical American culture is, I believe, primarily sapiential, and one finds that out not only when theologians with university appointments begin to speak but also when artists write or editorials call us back to our spiritual or moral roots. 'Sapiential' discourses may have a cultural position today, then, that 'priestly' discourses had for medieval life. They possess a kind of legitimacy and power that tends to marginalize the others. The separation of church and state, of religion and politics, of faith and culture, can also be interpreted, it seems to me, theologically, that is, as the normalization and the cultural institutionalization of sapiential discourses and the particularization and privitization of the other two types' (1992:64).

He therefore sketches how sapiential interests and priorities affect how Americans think about religion and theology. 'Starting with the needs and potentials of the human world has all the force of the obvious. Sapiential theologians will assume that, since we live in a world with real potentials and needs, it is in and for that world that theology should be done. In polemic they will suggest the life-denying obscurantism and privatization of the other discourses. They will point out how imperialistic or irrelevant to human life discourses of the other two types tend to be' (1992:101).

He distinguishes between three different forms of sapiential discourse, in terms of three different directions, orientations, options, or foci. They are directed 'downward', 'outward', and 'upward' respectively (1992:115). 'The first of these orientations is the human world in its natural aspect. This stress can, philosophically, take an ontological or a cosmological form ... But ...(t)he 'natural' can also be an internal or presonal matter, whether individually construed' (1992:102). As examples he discusses William James, Henry Nelson Wieman, and Bernard Meland (1992:105-110).

The second group of sapiential theologies 'can be designated as those concerned with differences and relations among humans, especially the problems and possibilities of human societies' (1992:102). As

It is on the basis of this argument that Kort, *in his conclusions*, 'questions attempts to resolve theological differences' (1992:7), namely praxis-theology, hermeneutical theology, ecumenical theology, and narrative theology. He sees 'the situation of differences and conflict' in a positive light. All theological discourses need other discourses from which they differ and with which they are in conflict. We are *bound to differ*. 'A discourse derives power and significance from its positive and negative relations to others, both to those it largely resembles and confirms and to those it repudiates, represses, or ignores. When conflicts between differing theologies, biblical texts, and Christian stories arise, theologians and other Christians should not view these conflicts with impatience and frustration or as unfortunate, unproductive glitches. Rather, the inevitability and productivity of such conflicts can now be recognizable, and the traditions behind differing discourses can be traced' (1992:134).

How is that possible? Ultimately, because of his understanding of the web, or rather, '*the language or culture of scripture and belief*' in which we live: 'I suggest that the language or culture of differences and conflict can and should be seen also as the language or culture of scripture and belief' (1992:8). Theologians, when they share these presuppositions, says Kort, enter an important cultural situation. The recognition of the nature of discourses will be as important in our day as the culture of reality and certainty was for the modern period (1992:135). He calls this 'a culture of belief' (1992:135), which theological discourses can enter without a sense of intrusion, because they no longer depend upon other discourses, historical, scientific, or philosophical, 'as though these others were in positions to provide a certainty upon which theology needed to depend or to which theology had to defer if it were to be taken seriously by thoughtful people' (1992:135).

The culture of certainty and coherence, says Kort, was a culture of identity. The culture of belief, however, does not 'make the marks of identity and coherence central' (1992:139). Christian identity, according to him, 'may require a sense of autonomy and certainty that is an illusion and that actually depends upon difference, exclusion, and repression. The need to define and defend identity is an important effect of the preceding culture ... Identity, we can now see, is imposition, a social demand characteristic of a complex and officially (but not actually) egalitarian society ... *The pressure to declare a Christian identity, therefore, is not Christian pressure*. Much of what we feel in this regard is the need to categorize and be categorized in order to control and be controlled' (1992:139).

Much of the compulsion for Christian identity and coherence, argues Kort, comes not from the call to witness and be faithful but from the social demand that we distinguish ourselves as individuals or a group. 'We use Christianity to serve a need for social identity and a sense of distinctiveness ... We become subjects to ourselves so that others can be objects' (1992:139). The 'call for Christian distinctiveness,' he adds, may even be seen 'as masking a desire to stand out from above a world that is becoming more crowded, more complex, and, in many ways, more difficult to understand' (1992:139).

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examples he discusses Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Langdon Gilkey (1992:110-114). Their work is 'directed to historical, social, and cultural aspects of the human world. The evils of human society and history in each case are division and conflict, and the aim in each is to uncover the possibilites of unity and wholeness in or for human society and culture' (1992:114).

The final orientation of sapiential theologies 'is towards a transcendental whole that provides human life with a direction for its present course. This is the more 'spiritual' side of sapiential theology. It depicts that sense of unity for which human beings do or ought to yearn, a possibility that, while it lies always beyond human grasp, is yet also an aspect of experience or an object of religious imagination' (1992:102). He discusses Josiah Royce, H Richard Niebuhr, and Schubert Ogden (1992:115-120).

What remains, he says, 'after release from the addiction of identity,' is that *things are authoritative, real, and valuable for people because they believe them to be so* (1992:139). 'Nonfoundationalism and postmodernity' lead to *this culture of shared and differing beliefs* (1992:139).[15] Since, in his opinion, this culture of belief 'is steadied by textuality' he prefers to speak of *the culture of scripture as well as belief* (1992:139).[16]

4. Bound to differ?

We started with the question whether it is possible to overcome differences and to solve conflicts between different theological positions. We listened to a detailed answer arguing that it is not only impossible, but, more fundamentally, not necessary, not advisable, and not something to long for and to work towards.

How do we respond to this position? Are we indeed bound to differ and must we regard differences and conflicts always in a positive light?

Like Kort, I am deeply interested in theological differences and conflict. In fact, in many ways my own exposure to theology has been similar to his. The (Dutch) Reformed tradition in South Africa has almost always been a case book study of internal differences and conflicts (see my 'Reformed theology in South Africa: A story of many stories', 1992). The (Dutch) Reformed community in South Africa has been torn apart, not only but also along apartheid lines, into conflicting churches and communities. Most theologians in the so-called Dutch Reformed Church-family faced questions concerning the church and Christian unity, and therefore questions concerning orthodoxy and orthopraxis, concerning truth and confessional integrity, concerning ideology and heresy, concerning differences and conflicts, almost without interruption. Doing theology in the (Dutch) Reformed Church-family has always been a case of doing theology in conflict.

Doing theology in the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church and teaching systematic theology and ethics at the University of the Western Cape during the struggle years has only heigthened and intensified this awareness of difference and conflict - in many ways. Indeed, perhaps unlike many other theologians in 'safer' and more harmonious surroundings, the colleagues at UWC - like Kort - have always subscribed to the idea of 'theologies in the plural rather than theology in the singular', and were deeply convinced that differences and conflicts are 'interesting and productive', that they 'generate significance'.

Like Kort, I am also convinced that the most fruitful way to understand theological differences and conflicts - and perhaps also to deal with them - is to start with an acknowledgement of the importance of language, with an attentiveness to theological discourses, and with insight into the crucial relationships between language, meaning, and power. At UWC it has been common knowledge that 'social and political aspects or consequences', whether conscious or unconscious, whether open or hidden, whether

15 He is careful enough to claim that he is not suggesting 'that the general discursive situation into which theological discourses ... now enter is an enclosed verbal universe, a walled coliseum of battling discourses severed and isolated from all that is 'real' or 'extant.' While it is the case that the 'real' is never available to us apart from language and is conditioned, even constituted, by language, this does not mean that language, as one of my colleagues put it, 'is all there is' ... An uninterpreted world is unavailable to us. But this does not mean that interpretations create a world and cause things to exist' (1992:137-138).

16 To him this means that every person or group has a 'location somewhere on the textual field,' i.e. 'Every person, group, and society has scriptures, that is, texts that grant and articulate their world's contours, contents, possibilities, and norms' (1992:140-141). He prefers 'scripture' to designate that 'location' instead of 'canon' or 'writing' (1992:140).

admitted or denied, are extremely important factors in all theological discourses. And yet, most of us would also agree with Kort that theological discourses should not be reduced to these factors alone, and that it is more appropriate to look for a 'middle position' between reification and reduction, taking 'theological discourses neither as abstracted from and transcendent to the dynamics of difference and conflict, nor as cloaks that cover the advancement and protection of social, political, and economic advantages'.

Like Kort, I have therefore been involved in several attempts to understand and describe theological differences and conflicts in South Africa (see e.g. the papers on differences and conflicts in South African ethical discourses, De Villiers & Smit 1994; 1995; 1996; the papers on a common moral language in South Africa, Smit 1994a; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; the papers on the fact that all theological claims or propositions are imbedded in wider socio-historical and institutional discourses, 1988, including claims concerning the authority of Scripture, 1991a; 1991b, so that power relations must always be taken into account), and to consider the rhetorical strategies in theological discourses (see in particular Smit 1996a, with literature).

Still, I feel bound to differ. Space does not permit detailed discussion. I shall therefore indicate my major hesitations by merely referring to other well-known discourses, thereby indicating 'differing theologies and theologians' whom I would like to 'resemble or confirm' and with whom I would like to retain 'positive relations', in order to derive 'power and significance from them'. (In the process, I shall also deliberately 'attempt to conceal' those discourses, those theologies and theologians, with whose discourses I have negative relations and whom I would like to 'repudiate or repress' by deliberately 'ignoring' them ...)

My major complaint is that Kort does not do justice to the four positions that he criticizes and then rejects. They indeed represent major alternative visions for dealing with theological differences and conflicts, and I am convinced that all four deserve more respect and appreciation than Kort seems to give them. Although in themselves very different from one another and in some ways contradictory, they all offer valuable contributions which Kort seems to ignore. He achieves this by making caricatures of all four positions, and not taking their strongest points and their best exponents seriously enough.

Hermeneutical theologies, in their purest forms, may indeed suffer from the shortcomings Kort suggests. Indeed, hermeneutics may not solve many differences and conflicts - but it has definitely helped us to understand many of our differences and conflicts much better, and that is already a step in the direction of facing them and dealing with them (see Smit 1996b and 1996c for discussions of the way in which hermeneutics can help us to see and understand differences and conflicts; and Smit 1994c for a discussion on some of the causes of differences and conflicts within South African hermeneutics itself). Therefore, several well known theological discourses in the hermeneutical tradition, in spite of their own different approaches, obviously offer much more promising ways of dealing with differences and conflicts. One could think of Tracy's very instructive hermeneutical attempts to deal with pluralities and ambiguities (already Tracy 1981, on pluralism; but particularly in Tracy 1987) and, more recently, difference and the other (Tracy 1990); or Sundermeier's inspiring 'hermeneutics of the stranger' (for the first development of his notion of convivendi, see Sundermeier 1986; for considerations on encounters with the other and the stranger, see 1990, 1991 and 1992, and even the sermons, 1994a; for a useful collection of essays, see 1995; but for the hermeneutical contribution itself, see 1991, and then the fully developed 1996); or Arens' work on intercultural communication in the tradition of Peukert and Habermas (Arens 1995). In short, in Kort's approach I miss the element of commitment, whether to conversation, to truth, to tradition, to the text, or to the other and the others, that

is so characteristic of hermeneutical theologies.

Ecumenical theology, should it be anything like Kort's description of it, would indeed deserve his criticism, but his description of ecumenical theology is a complete caricature. It is difficult to recognize any well-known ecumenical position in his picture of a theology 'elevating itself to some high ground above the dynamics of theological differences and oppositions', or a theology that seeks to be 'inclusive' in that it 'avoids the need of having or choosing a starting point' and 'deceives itself by the lure of an Archimedean privilege'. This is certainly not applicable to the actual ecumenical discussions, in the context of Faith and Order, and the painstakingly difficult struggles for consensus and reception between real differences and in the face of real conflicts. His description does not fit the way people involved in the ecumenical movement have described the dilemmas and the thrust of ecumenism - to mention only Lange (1979) and, more recently, Raiser (1989; 1994). It is even less applicable to the work of some of the best known ecumenical theologians of the last decades and years, like - for example - Schlink (1961; 1983), Wainwright (1980), or Lindbeck (1984). One only has to read Evans' instructive studies on the problem of authority in the reformation debates (1992), on the problem of the church and the churches (1994), and on ecumenical methodology and the lessons that have been learnt (1996), or Kinnamon's useful discussion of 'diversity and its limits in the ecumenical movement' (1988), to find much more careful and nuanced ways of dealing with theological differences and conflicts. And even theologians critical of ecumenical theology, like - for example - Jenson (1992), offer more balanced discussions. In short, I miss the element of community, of koinonia, of the acknowledgement that we belong to one another and that we want to grow in this community, in Kort's sometimes almost cynical delight in diversity and conflict.

Narrative theologies receive a much more nuanced and appreciative treatment. Still, narratives are eventually also reduced to mere difference and conflict. They are also, finally, oppositionally determined. They also, ultimately, receive their meaning and power from the fact that they are negative about others - and this is precisely what Kort finds so wonderful about them! If the element of narrative is to be retained, it is precisely because narratives, in his opinion, are better suited than other forms of discourse to resist all questions of identity, truth, and unity. Again, there is an obvious truth in these claims. In earlier papers, I have also warned against a naive trust - often found in narrative theologies - in the power of narratives to bridge conflicts and to offer a common language (see Smit 1989b, 1990, 1994d, Adonis & Smit 1991, Vosloo & Smit 1995). Still, the extraordinary power of narratives both to describe identity, and to create understanding, to bring people together, to overcome differences, conflict, and enmity cannot be denied. The concrete experiences of so many South Africans bear witness to this power. In situations of radical apartheid, personal encouters and personal stories, personal accounts of own experience, hurt, pain, even hate, have often bridged differences where all other forms of discourse have seemed to fail. This is precisely the idea, or rather, the hope behind the present work of the Truth and Reconciliation-Commission. People can be reconciled with their own histories, experiences, and identities, but also with other, people, even former enemies, through the - often extremely painful - process of telling and listening to stories (see e.g. Botman & Petersen 1996). Obviously, this is just hope. The process can also become destructive and alienating as narratives also harbour a strong potential for division and conflict. Narratives offer no magic solution to differences and conflict. Yet, there is certainly more to it that Kort seems to acknowledge. I miss in his comments the potential of narratives to help us find and describe our own identity (or grammar, or axioms, or truth, or whatever one may wish to call it) as well as the potential of narratives to help us to communicate with others.

Narratives offer possibilities with regard to both *Identität* and *Verständigung* which Kort seems to underestimate or to deny.

Finally, *praxis theologies* can certainly not solve all our differences and conflicts. However, there can be no denial that theologies emphasising 'service', 'praxis', 'hand' or 'social and political factors' bring an extremely valuable contribution to Christian reflection and life. Once again, there is a danger of caricature. These theologies do not necessarily call for or lead to 'a retreat from theology'. On the contrary. They do, however, remind us of the importance of discipleship, of responsibility, of solidarity with those who suffer, of ethics and integrity, for Christian theology. And certainly, experiences in apartheid South Africa have convinced many of us that a moment of truth, a status confessionis, can arrive for the church and for theology, when it is no longer possible to regard all theological differences and conflicts as merely 'interesting and productive'. With reference to a large number of completely different theologians holding diverse theological positions but sharing a feeling of responsibility in the face of davastation, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza once said: '(w)hile a theological conversation between these diverse theologians will never reach consensus because of their fundamental theological differences, they nevertheless can collaborate with each other because they share a common theological commitment, ethos, and passion' (1989:10).[17] In the way Kort rejoices in the differences, I miss this element of commitment to ethos and passion, to a common responsibility and solidarity, to truthfulness.

Taken together, all these considerations cause my basic feeling of discomfort with Wesley Kort's position - in spite of all my sympathy with his project and approach. Ultimately, he seems to propagate a 'descent into discourse' (see Palmer 1990). His solution - perhaps in spite of his intentions - eventually leads to a typically postmodern cynical arbitrariness, that Lawrie, in a sustained, albeit critical, argument with postmodernist thought, describes as 'ruthlessness' (Lawrie 1996, see his excellent doctoral thesis, especially the final chapter).

His conclusions are already given with his emphatic choice for discourse analysis, understood and defined in a very particular way. Having made that choice, in spite of all his common sense denials and qualifiers, there is simply no way out.

The inevitable result is that, ultimately, nothing really matters. Everything is possible. 'Things are authoritative, real, and valuable for people because they believe them to be so.' It almost suggests that we can read the texts we want to read, believe what we choose to believe, be who we want to be, do what we want to do ... Everyone chooses his or her own texts that grant and articulate the contours, the contents, the possibilities, and the norms of their world ... and that is that. The fact that they differ from the texts of others, the norms of others, the worlds of others, is simply interesting and productive. As true and as tempting as this may be, I believe that more must be said. And the call for commitment from hermeneutical theologies, the call for community from ecumenical theologies, the call for

17 Her position can in no way be misunderstood as a plea for a naive 'doctrine divides but practice unites' position, in the way Kort describes this alternative. The point of her address is an explicit rejection of the striving for 'consensus and integration'. This, however, does not lead to a cynical, postmodern celebration of difference. 'Rather than striving for consensus and integration (theological discourse contributing to a religious critical consciousness and cultural moral imagination) aims for a pluralistic collaboration that respects the particular social locations and religious reference communities of its practitioners and seeks for connections between diverse theological and cultural discourses. Since it invites a plurality of often contradictory responses to the problems at hand it produces deeply felt tensions that will turn into sectarian divisions if they are not articulated in terms of a shared vision of well-being for all' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1989:9).

identity and communication from narrative theologies, and the call for responsibility and truthfulness from praxis theologies all remind us - I believe - of some of this 'more' that must be said.

Ethics (praxis theology), conversation (hermeneutical theology), consensus (ecumenical theology), and identity and communication (narrative theology) all completely disappear from his project. They are replaced by a culture of texture and belief. It becomes futile, yes, indeed typical of an 'addiction' from which we must be 'released', to talk about and think about questions of identity, foundation, grammar, and truth. They all belong to the era of modernism, which is something of the past. When faced with difference and conflict, therefore, theologians should - happily - give up all attempts to talk about criteria of any kind.

Is it indeed so impossible to overcome differences in Christian theology? Is it so impossible and unnecessary to strive for a common Christian and theological discourse? Is it completely futile to attempt to solve controversies in Christian circles? Are our differences so irreconcilable?

I am not convinced. I believe that it is precisely the four discourses that he criticizes and rejects that offer more fruitful possibilities to deal with concrete and specific differences and conflicts. It is not without reason that all four of these approaches emphasize the actual, real, concrete encounters of living people: a spirituality of meeting (Wainwright, describing ecumenical spirituality), a real dialogue with the living other (Tracy and Sundermeier), the willingness to listen to the stories of others (even Hauerwas, so often accused of a sectarian mentality: we cannot tell our own stories without listening to the stories of others), and the common involvement of discipleship and responsibility (common service unites!). In the end, theological differences and conflicts are not between systems, but between living believers.

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