

**PLURALISM IN THEOLOGY?
AN OLD TESTAMENT INQUIRY¹
PART II
THAT ALL MAY BECOME ONE:
GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CHRISTIAN THINKING**

Erhard S Gerstenberger
Department of Old and New Testament
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

One of the most serious errors theologians make, at least in the Western hemisphere, is to see themselves as having the absolute truth, so that all other theological positions become error. This arrogant certitude has a long history. It can be found in some biblical writings, and even in some ancient Near Eastern documents written long before Israel came into being. Circumstances and realities, however, do not support those lofty claims. We live in a transient world: Our bodies, minds and capacities are not of the eternal fibre we wish they were. Even if divine actions and words descended into our time and space they would become stale and decay, like the manna of Ex 16, as we attempted to conserve, formalize, and manipulate them. Theology is essentially a thoroughly transient science; God-talk is a precarious affair: The words cannot be fixed but must constantly be renewed. To ears attuned to Western theological attitudes, Biblical witnesses do not point to enduring stability and unchangeable validity: They teach the transience, contextuality, and pluralism of human theological insights.

This article is a follow-up of a previous study (Part I) which presented a brief survey of concurrent as well as successive models of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Key Concepts: Old Testament theology, ethics, modern interpretation

1. Exilic and Post-exilic Communities and their Global Faith

The 6th century BC was a great turning point in Israel's religious history. Mental and spiritual horizons changed fundamentally among those people as we able to see in their written heritage. The reasons for such dramatic theological leaps, as far as our knowledge is concerned, are plainly historical, social, and cultural. But there may be more to this phenomenon: Karl Jaspers, e.g. considered this century an "axis"² of human spiritual history,

¹ This article was first delivered as a paper in November 2003 as the Henry Gustafson Lectures at United Seminary of the Twin Cities, New Brighton, MN; in August 2004 the substance of the matter was treated in a postgraduate course of the Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch University, South Africa; cf. also my book on "Theologies in the Old Testament", cited below in note 4.

² Jaspers talked about "Achszeit" (axis of history) e.g. in his book "Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte", München: Piper Verlag 1979.

because it was not only in Israel that a new faith emerged, but also in Persia and in India, with the towering figures of Zoroaster and Buddha entering the stage of the world. We could say: The one and eternal Deity made itself felt in various cultures and humans reacting to the overtures within respective cultural, social and historical contexts. Be that as it may, Israel experienced an unprecedented upheaval by suffering defeat and then exile to Babylonia in the first two decades of the 6th century BC. With their national identities (monarchy; state religion) gone or severely damaged the people of Yahweh had to reorganize themselves within their home territory as well as in diaspora situations. Those who hoped for a restitution of national autonomy among the survivors were soon frustrated (cf. Hag 2:20-23; Ezek 34:23-24 etc.). The other Judean people formed a new kind of religious, confessional community, the ancestors of Christian parishes. They no longer adhered to monarchic or state ideologies, but drew on family and village traditions to constitute religious bodies into which individual confession to the living God became the entree, regardless (in theory) of ethnic background. At the same time, personal faith, built on traditional values, began to take on universal dimensions, from the World's Creation to the World's Demise, geographically transcending national and cultural borderlines. The new congregational organisation among adherents of Yahweh sprang up between Babylonia and Egypt and soon won its universal centre in Jerusalem. In its wake new concepts of God, and a new faith and ethos were born.

We need to consider three centuries, from the 6th to the 4th century, as decisive in this innovative process of reconstruction and renewal. Unfortunately, our knowledge about this period of Biblical faith is quite limited. The historical events have been particularly scantily documented. On the other hand, about 80%-90% of Biblical writing either originated in this period or was thoroughly reworked and re-edited at that time. So we need to consult the Scriptures in our quest for social and theological information. Archaeology as well as analogies from contemporary ancient Near Eastern sources provides some help.³

We know something about the living conditions of the people of Judah, the exiles in Babylonia, and the Jewish mercenaries and possibly colonists in Egypt or we can deduce them from archaeological data, including some of the archives from Babylonia and Elephantine (Egypt), or from literary allusions. While there were indeed places and periods of prosperity, as a rule the economic situation was probably bleak for the minority groups in world empires, which used to exploit their conquered provinces relentlessly. Neh 5 gives us an example of the suffering of ordinary farmers on account of some of the rich families who collaborated with the occupation forces. This general situation of dependence is also lamented in the penitential prayer of Neh 9:

Here we are, slaves to this day – slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress (Neh 9:36-37).

But notwithstanding this dire situation, or ironically because of it, the Judean communities rallied around their old elites, priests, Levites, scribes, sages, ritualists, and spiritual lay-leaders, and around the old traditions of Abraham and the arch-parents, Moses and the exodus from Egypt, Aaron the prime priest, Joshua, the conqueror of the promised land,

³ Cf. JL Berquist, "Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach", Minneapolis: Fortress 1995; RP Carroll, "Exile, Restoration and Colony: Judah in the Persian Empire", in: LG Perdue (ed.), "The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible", Oxford: Blackwells 2001, 102-116. My book on "Israel under Persian Rule" will shortly be forthcoming in a German edition as vol. 8 of "Biblische Enzyklopädie", ed. by Walter Dietrich, at Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart.

and prophetic figures from Hosea to Jeremiah. They set up places of worship and care for the poor, spiritual instruction and courts of justice, seasonal feasts and pilgrimages to Jerusalem, rules of personal behaviour and religious duties for males and females. The amazing creative power of this new beginning reached a peak with the learned and pious assemblage of Holy Scriptures.⁴ The Torah was and is an astounding mosaic of precepts, narrations, poems, and sermons in vogue at that time among Israelite communities. Ezra symbolizes the scribe, sage and priest dedicated to cultivate this written tradition. The words of the scrolls, under the formal custody of the congregation (Neh 8:1), soon received cultic veneration: People prostrated themselves and worshipped Yahweh after the public reading (Neh 8:6). A sermon-like interpretation of the Hebrew words, probably in contemporary Aramaic, completes the kerygmatic part of the service (Neh 8:8). The books of the Torah became the central piece of Jewish identity; it did contain the full, exhaustive revelation of Yahweh for his elected people, first communicated to Moses on Mount Sinai, but transmitted through the generations as well as preached by a whole string of prophets until Ezra. Here it was, Torah, the living will of God to guide His communities forever.

The Torah of Yahweh is perfect, / reviving the soul;
 the decrees of Yahweh are sure, / making wise the simple;
 the precepts of Yahweh are right, / rejoicing the heart;
 the commandment of Yahweh is clear, / enlightening the eyes;
 the fear of Yahweh is pure, / enduring forever;
 the ordinances of Yahweh are true / and righteous altogether.
 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
 sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb (Ps 19:8-11; NRSV vv. 7-10).

What were the theological concepts of the Divine that arose from Israel's intense experiences with Yahweh in the context of pluralistic empires with dominant state religions? Theologians under the pressures of tremendous political, economic, religious outward forces envisioned their divine sovereign as the exclusive one, the sole creator of heaven and earth, the invisible, spiritual supreme power,⁵ the one who had chosen Israel to be sole possessor of eternal truth, who would come again and salvage his community of faithful from its miserable state of subjection and raise it above all other nations. Thus Second Isaiah proclaims in the name of Yahweh:

I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god (Isa 44:6).
 All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame (Isa 44:9).
 Thus says Yahweh, the Lord: ... Kings shall be your foster fathers, /
 And their queens your nursing mothers.
 With their faces to the ground / they shall bow down to you, / and lick the dust off your feet.
 Then you will know that I am Yahweh; / those who wait for me shall not be put to shame
 (Isa 49:22-23).

The main traits of this universal and exclusive deity, Yahweh, the God of Israel, with all his supreme powers, his wisdom and wrath, were certainly taken from the religious traditions of

⁴ Cf. Philipp Davies, "Scribes and Schools", Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1998.

⁵ For the rise of monotheism in postexilic times cf. ES Gerstenberger, "Theologies", 207-272.

Mesopotamia and Persia; they are not authentically Israelitic.⁶ The essential difference of Judaic theological concepts is that they were designed not in a position of political supremacy, but within the perspective of a hopelessly insignificant, exploited minority, in sheer self-defence against immensely powerful overlords. Judean aggressiveness and vengeful feelings are evident in the preaching of Second Isaiah. Sometimes this mood is toned down to offer full participation in the blessings of Torah to all nations (cf. Isa 2:2-4; 49:6). Thus we may say that the roots of the wonderful idea of one exclusive Deity for one, indivisible world were partly adulterated by very human ambitions for restitution and power. The theological notion of one, almighty, omniscient, omnipresent God in its human, contextual guise among early Jewish communities was an instrument of self-defence against the arrogant superpowers in the 6th to 4th centuries BC. When, after 1000 years, Christian state religion took over the doctrines of monotheism, they unfortunately became deadly instruments of subjugation and oppression. The new Judaean theology tended to be universalist and exclusivist, a means of identification and self-defence against other cultures and deities.

On the other hand, the congregations of Yahweh experienced utter impotence in a foreign dominated, pluralistic world, and this experience was translated into theological concepts. While proclaiming their supreme claims to universal powers to the outside world, internally they lamented the seeming desolateness of their fate, being forsaken and even delivered to butchers by their own God:

You have made us like sheep for slaughter / and have scattered us among the nations.

You have sold your people for a trifle / demanding no high price for them (Ps 44:11-12).

The communal complaints in the Psalter for the most part reflect with varying degrees of intensity the sufferings of the exilic-postexilic Judean congregations (cf. Pss 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83; 89; 123; 126; 129; 137). They in part convey the image of a deity who is a cause of evil, not a salvation from it. Texts in the book of Isaiah, centring on the “suffering servant-figure” also suggest the changeability of Yahweh and the painful notion of his absence or ineffectiveness. Some passages hint at the extreme suffering of the unnamed “Servant of Yahweh”, be it an individual figure or – more likely – the community herself as a whole:

He was despised and rejected by others; / a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces / he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely, he has borne our infirmities / and carried our diseases;

yet we accounted him stricken, / struck down by God, and afflicted (Isa 53:3-4).

In the Book of Jeremiah, finally, some passages come close to attributing not only full responsibility for the misery of the people to God, but also giving him the credit for His personal involvement in punitive action and, strangely enough, at the same time being on the side of the losers (cf. e.g. Jer 4 – 6). The voice of the speaker may be that of Yahweh himself:

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! / Oh the walls of my heart!

My heart is beating wildly; / I cannot keep silent (Jer 4:19).

...my people are foolish, / they do not know me;

they are skilled in doing evil / but do not know how to do good (Jer 4:22).

And Yahweh certainly is portrayed of being intensely involved in the downfall of his people. He, indeed seems to suffer with them. The “Theology of God’s Suffering” which

⁶ The idea of world rule, e.g. has been virulent in the Ancient Near East since the 4th millenium BC, cf. Erhard S Gerstenberger, “World Dominion” in *Yahweh Kingship Psalms: Down to the Roots of Globalizing Concepts and Strategies*, HBT 23 (2001) 192-210.

arose in Japan after World War Two can be counted as a direct outcome of exilic Israel's pains and doubts in turbulent times. What we observe, then, is a conglomerate of theological thinking in the emerging Jewish community, which is in accordance with its diversified structure and experience. Without the scaffolding of a political structure, the vulnerable Yahweh faith congregation organised itself around old family and clan parameters, but was open to accepting foreign confessing members. It was a particular ethnic group living according to a universal set of rules, a social micro-organism reflecting the macro-world of its divine overlord. Therefore the theological concepts of the group comprised small and big concerns, suffering and glory. All these ideas lacked the support of political power, in great contrast to later Christian church organisation. The exilic-postexilic community of Judah and in the diaspora has effectively forged a new kind of theological thinking and congregational life which still operate in our post-modern times, where Christian confessions are rapidly losing their medieval state sanctioning.

The cult and ethos of the emerging Jewish faith in Yahweh alone were colourful, pluralistic, and creative, and they also have shaped subsequent traditions including Christian ones, down the ages to our own time. There are hardly any traits of present day Christian life and worship, instruction and theological designs which cannot be traced to those formative centuries of 2nd temple theology. Keeping the Sabbath and circumcision became eminent outward symbols of belonging to the Jewish confessional community.⁷ The cycle of seasonal festivals would govern the lives of the faithful ones. By 515 B.C. that is, about seventy years after the disaster of the Babylonian conquest, the Jerusalem temple was restored. Sacrificial cult in Jerusalem could be resumed, however alongside, so it seems, with synagogal services of proclamation and instruction. Tensions between synagogue and temple remained, visible especially in power struggles between priests and sages. In the long run, Moses and Ezra, archetypal guardians and interpreters of Scripture, prevailed over Aaron, the leading figure of sacrificial service to God. Still, the holiness prescriptions of priestly provenance have influenced Jewish and Christian thinking to no small degree.

Apart from the first and second commandments – exclusive adherence to Yahweh in an uniconic devotion, a direction to which Persian Zoroastrianism also leaned – most of the material ethical standards were well known and widespread in the Ancient Near East. To denounce other religious faiths as immoral has always been a very dubious tool of self-preservation. If we summarize some main concerns of old Judean ethical thinking we nevertheless come across characteristic emphases, some of them still inherent in our faith. Allegiance to the one God is an entirely personal matter requiring positive decisions and responsibility for one's own life. The faithful ones do not exist in isolation, however, but in communion with others. This community of believers in many ways became the family of all Yahweh followers, with concomitant notions of being socially intertwined with each other as brothers and sisters in God. "You are our father" a prayer of communal complaint cries out (Isa 63:16; 64:7). His children, logically, are to lend support especially to those who are vulnerable and redeem them (cf. Exod 22:20-26; Deut 15; Lev 25). The ethos of the community, then, did address itself to the individual (also to make him or her agreeable to God), but was designed in the first place to maintain harmonious relationships between the members and thus stabilize the family-like-groups in turbulent times. Holiness prescriptions (cf. Lev 19:2) fit into this general picture, extending sacerdotal norms to lay people. Ethical stances towards outsiders were different. Those who came into the

⁷ Antonius HJ Gunneweg in his hermeneutical study "Vom Verstehen des Alten Testaments" ATD Suppl 5, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1977, tells the amazing story how Christians copied almost anything from Old Testament sources, even the despised "sacral law" (loc. cit. 92 – 99 etc.).

congregation were welcomed (with certain exceptions, and with constant debate about the right course to follow, cf. Deut 23:2-9; Isa 56:1-8) and often treated as equals (Lev 19:33-34). However, other social institutions beyond the communitarian organisations at the time were viewed with distrust. Political and economic powers, a burning experience from the Judean's own past, tended to overestimate their significance and potentialities and become oppressive, brutal, or demonic (cf. Gen 11:1-9; Isa 14:1-22; Ezek 27-28). This is the reason why we find a good deal of harsh indictments of violent, unjust rulers and nations, but no master plans of how good and just governance can be achieved. It is worth noting that Karl Marx and his followers were strongly inspired by Old Testament ideas of justice, oppression and estrangement but failed to develop a humane solidary society. What are we to make of these ancient theological concepts and life-practices? The Bible does not yield a homogeneous theology or ethos. On the contrary, we are confronted with layers of theological conceptualizations oriented by and towards diverse social structures. In the end there is a new monotheistic faith which emerged from the specific situation of a minority group entrenched in a global empire. Even this very important vision of One-God-for-One-World was contextually conditioned. The question is how we can relate to all of these models of God.

2. Parameters of the Modern World

Obviously, a scrutiny of present-day forms of social organisation is necessary to enable us to correlate analogous theological conceptions in antiquity and modern times. There is no doubt: Human history through countless millennia has been a continuous stream of social and mental developments. However, many of the main patterns of social organisation remain; we may surmise that some "anthropological constants" (love, hate, memory, fear etc.) have been more or less the same for human beings in the Old Stone Age and in the 21st century CE. And that once again, cultural and social parameters at least in part have changed considerably, as has knowledge as well as technology – affecting the interpretation of mankind, world, and God. In order to be able to enter a necessary and fruitful debate with Biblical witnesses, on different lines of social organisation, we need to clarify our present ways hermeneutically. To do this properly would be a very lengthy task; at this point we will limit ourselves to pinpointing a few crucial issues. Our goal is to stimulate a dialogue between theologies old and new in their proper social settings.

Our focus has been on the social structures of ancient Israel, the particular images of God they presented and the emerging theological concepts of one God for one World. What about our different social conditions today and their receptiveness to the Divine? Clearly, human beings still live in various societal conglomerations. To some extent, particular social entities still foster the same kind of life and similar patterns of thought they did thousands of years ago. The behaviour of villagers or neighbours is sometimes exactly the same as it used to be in ancient times. National states in their competition between each other as well as in violent wars do not reflect human progress; sometimes the contrary seems to be true. Yet we have to acknowledge deep ruptures chiefly along the fringes of human organisation at large. Although right down to the industrial age the family unit came first, today humanity definitely begins (in theory! and in the so-called "Western Industrial Tradition") with the individual person. And today a whole system of tightly knit global networks looms large. In fact, this is a reality emerging rapidly and forcefully, even cruelly, thanks to previously unheard of revolutions in the means of communication, transportation, production, and marketing. Modern individualism and globalized humanity therefore deserve special attention, as we pursue our quest for adequate theological concepts in our

time. Modern individualism, enshrined in so many declarations of human rights, in theory should have abolished once and for all discriminations among people because of race, creed, gender, social class, state of health, age, intellect, culture etc. Global free market doctrines and practices, on the other hand, have conquered the whole world at breath-taking speed without regard for the dignity of human beings, or that of nature as a whole.

The causes of deep reaching shifts in social patterns may be identified as unlimited human cravings for knowledge and power, the snake's promise to humans: "You shall be godlike, knowing everything" (Gen 3:5). Indeed, human history among other things is a huge stream of scientific and technological innovations and transformations, which have changed ways of life and resulted in adaptations in social structures. We never know for sure, whether the restless human mind or technical alterations by themselves were the primary causes of social changes. Presumably it was both: Searching, inventing, discovering as well as executing new plans have all had a role in modulating human relations. Thus the discovery of the New Worlds in the 15th through to the 17th century emanated from the vision of seafaring adventurers. The realization of their dreams strongly affected thinking, believing, and the ways of life both in European and the Southern plus Northern American spheres, as well along the African coasts, which were the trading routes towards Asia.

The consequences of all the transmutations in human history since Biblical times have been far-reaching. Although in our mental and political worlds we all experience a good deal of continuity in archaic ways of thinking and behaviour (cf. actual wars on all continents), modern ideals of enlightened human existence are quite different. Humans by and large (always speaking about our own realms of life, that is modern Western ideology) have scrapped all divine authority over the world. God has been sent into retirement. Human power and creativity is the highest accountable reality. Autonomy of humankind and indeed for each individual occupies the first rank in western world-views.⁸ Social systems in our modern world no longer have a religious overlord (did they ever have one?), even if called upon explicitly in national symbols, constitutions or political declarations. I carry in me the deep suspicion, from experiences in Germany and the study of ancient history, that all claims of dominion over others, raised in the name of some Deity, in reality are nothing but camouflages of human aspirations for power. Our technical world really does not permit any more old concepts of God such as of one Lord over heaven and earth. This world, as a rule, functions mechanically under the dictate of human engineers. There is no longer an awe of nature; everything has become material for humans to construct the world and pursue their own happiness and profit. On the surface of it our world has become a large assortment of toy elements to provide us, the consumers, with pleasure.

In spite of this rather bleak assessment we also have to maintain the notion, that hardly any human being can be content with such a mechanistic interpretation of reality. On all levels of society there are discernable overt and covert longings for depth and meaning beyond mere mechanical causality – for cohesion and finality of things and relations. Therefore, our theological task today is, not only to consult Scriptures for the experience of Biblical witnesses with the Divine, but also to search for the religious dimensions on the different levels of existence. This, indeed, has to be done, in my opinion, in terms of the strata of social organisation we are living in. We should study each of the present day social layers to understand them in their own rights and their interconnection with each other. We

⁸ Horst Eberhard Richter, a German psychiatrist of my home-town Giessen, depicted modern individualism as a type of autistic isolation, resulting from the banishment of God and the subsequent tentative to substitute divine authority by individual self-determination: *idem*, "Der Gotteskomplex", Hamburg: Rowohlt 1979.

have to find their hidden relation to the religious witnesses of ancient Israelites, culminating, for the time being, in the concept of the one and all-encompassing God, who has been discovered and proclaimed in our own current of tradition by that early community of Jews during the 6th to the 4th centuries BC. Why this particular tie with the Jewish-Christian heritage? Why not a general recourse to all human experiences of God? Because our own heritage has to tell us first of all who we are and what we should be doing. We desperately need advice and critique by our spiritual ancestors, whose heritage – just like an etheric genome in our minds and souls – is determining our thinking and believing. We should never forget that theology can never be only strict adherence to the ways of the fathers, but must be an encounter with the living God in our midst.

Following this line of reasoning, then, modern individualistic existence at this point deserves full theological attention. The ideals of human rights and dignity are of invaluable importance (to us). God himself, in person (and he or she can be thought of only personally in this intimate relationship) has a stake in the welfare of all human beings regardless of race, creed, gender, age etc. Individuals are holy! (I wonder, how far we have to extend this notion to non-human beings). Superior layers of society have to respect such basic assumptions. On the other hand, individuals have to learn that they are not alone in this world; they are not selfsubsistent monads. Biblical witness has much to say in regard to individual decision and responsibility; we have to review critically the balance between person and intimate group in the light of modern ideals and errors. The emerging picture will strengthen individuals, especially women and minorities and greatly modify the nature of family and small primary groups. The old agrarian households in fact have been superseded by a variety of elementary social organisms of comparable functions. These new forms of micro-organisation within our societies do deserve protection, even if formerly considered illegitimate, as long as they shelter and promote their members. New definitions of gender-roles and relations are obviously a religious and ethical imperative. The living and personal God is the guardian of today's human beings in their wholesome settings of small friendly social units. In sum: The deepest questions about nature and destiny of humans and their intimate relations are still embedded in this first segment of social array, and they still correspond to fundamental theological issues. (Buddhism, in contradistinction, seems to place all emphasis on the opposite end of existence, the no-longer-individualized generality of being).

The face-to-face association of people in our time remains the next level of organisation, only the diversification of this layer has increased immensely. We are dealing today not only with villages, small neighbourhoods, townships etc. tied together by common labour or trade, but with a whole range of clubs, associations, unions, caucuses, conventions, leagues, clusters, congregations etc. as long as the number of members permits personal contact and recognition among each other. Modern life has enormously differentiated professions, interests, education, and personal goals. What could be the theological significance and the notion of God in this larger-than-family context? Larger-than-family conglomerations pose the enigmas of otherness and integration, competition and deviation, education and punishment. God who acts in this field of medium-size groupings pleads for impartiality, tolerance, structural solidarity, which is different from the solidarity among family members, and for fairness as well as responsibility. Since today's associations have lost their autonomy of old, they depend on superior regulations and in many cases they need strengthening. But they also are challenged to open up to the wider dimension of human society and God's grace.

Tribal structures are relatively rare in the modern industrial world. But they are in full force in many non-industrialized regions of our globe. And tribal aggressiveness seems to have been bequeathed to our dominant yet terribly antiquated form of society at large, the national state. Even globalizing companies, have retained some tribal belligerence; while techniques of peacekeeping, customary in tribal “democratic” procedures possibly have been lost in transitional developments. Thus, today in the industrialized societies we deal principally with national organizations at this point. These sprang up after the imperial ideas of the Middle Ages had waned and new means of production and commerce had developed. Their internal legacy quite often has been the discovery and consolidation of personal rights, social security, freedom of speech, democratic institutions as well as the terrible opposites of all these achievements. Externally the strongest of these statehoods for the most part have pursued the extension of their power, subjugation of neighbours, acquisition of colonies, leaving a bloody path of destruction in history, not to speak of civil wars waged for the dominance of national systems. Modern national states, like their ancient predecessors, have always used religion to sanctify their national ends. Christian theologies have closely followed suit declaring national and cultural boundaries the limits of alleged universal actions of God. This is all the more deplorable because monotheism at its best does not allow restriction to particular nations. In our time, national dimensions of the divine – because they take the prerogative – hamper allegiance to the one and all-inclusive God. Theologically, we have to go beyond nationalisms and look for international confederations and their aims, most of all the United Nations.

Global humanity was already envisioned in ancient times in connection with imperial conquests, international trade, encounter of mutually alien philosophies and theologies. Modern networking and intertwining of various fields of life around the globe is unprecedented with regard to intensity, inclusiveness, and ideological force. We will return to this new phenomenon later. The only biblical social organism left to mention is the parochial structure, invented by ancient Judeans and transmitted through the ages until today, the nucleus of present Jewish and Christian communities. Changes in structures and outlook are not as rampant as bygone centuries would suggest. That is the reason that we have relatively easy access to the teachings of exilic-post-exilic Jewish communities. Christian congregations, like their Jewish predecessors of old and all purely religious agremiations at present are still operating like little boats on wide stretches of water; they move with greater or lesser ease within the other types of social organisations seeking the polar star or the southern cross of their God’s counsel.

3. Christian Proposals of Faith and Ethics

Pointing out various levels of social stratifications with their potential for specific religious concepts both in Biblical times and in our present situation should not and, in fact, must not lead us to accept all and every theological proposition as legitimate or true. On the contrary: The contextuality and consequent impermanence of all faiths gives us a real chance to find the right spiritual answers for our own situations in this real world of ours. Acknowledging the temporality of concepts and creeds sets us free to take a definite stand *hic et nunc*, here and now, in full responsibility to God, that is, respecting the ancient traditions we have been brought up in and equally the modern plights and promises of our present world, which still is not of our own but of God’s making. We live in a pluralistic world, within diverse social contexts: There can be no doubt about this fact. But within this world there are noticeable tendencies towards Oneness, obliging us to search for the right direction to achieve Oneness. We know, however, that Oneness and Goodness are present, at this point,

but only in fragments. They are like shards of a huge pot we have not been able to reconstruct yet.

Having explored Old Testament theological designs (for pragmatic reasons only), we next have to clarify the role of Jesus Christ and the New Testament in this theological endeavour. We call ourselves Christians, because we adhere to this unique person's teaching and example, suffering and death as the climax of the foregoing history of salvation. Jesus himself was a Jew and lived completely within the matrix of Jewish, i.e. Old Testament, traditions. In our understanding he was the zenith of old Israelite faiths. Early Christians wanted to highlight this understanding of Christ as the finalizer of Jewish tradition. Therefore they developed all kinds of christological schemes, making him the ultimate sacrifice, the last prophet, the messianic king, the son of God, the second person in God, the final judge of the world. These christological doctrines do not add substance to the Old Testament message of God, the creator, sustainer, redeemer, and judge of his handiwork. Nuances of Christian teachings are different from Jewish origins, most of all concerning the person of the Messiah, the range of the people called by God, the validity of these or those precepts. The basis of faith is just the same, and there are no serious or absolute antagonisms. The notion of an ultimate revelation, which has already been attributed to the Mosaic Torah and, of course, to Jesus Christ (cf. II Cor 5:16-21; Hebr 1:2; John 8:12; 14:6) alerts us to the special, basic significance of an event, but does not preclude the ongoing history of salvation. We may say, therefore, that Christian faith is one of the variants of Jewish beliefs, which cannot be made the only and absolute confession as opposed to its mother creed.

With Old Testament and Christian teachings in mind we may venture some theological and ethical lines of argument for our complicated and greatly endangered world in this still fairly new century. Our survey of different layers of faith with various concepts of the Divine was to emphasize the plurality and brokenness of all theological undertakings at all times. We, as human beings, are permanently unable to deal with the fullness of "God". We now "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12) nothing more, nothing less. But many theologians, and many lay people, of various confessions, creeds, and religions know that we are on our ways to final truths. This very knowledge of a common goal and a distant One-ness has been inherent already in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as many writings of New Testament witnesses. The Johanne Christ promises that the Spirit will lead his disciples "into all the truth" (Joh 16:13), so that "they may all be one" (17:21). The ideal of One-ness already was present in the ancient world, when imperial conquerors established their rule over immense territories. And when Israel dreamed of the foundation of Yahweh's benign and just kingdom on earth. In our days, those old dreams of a real humanized humanity and a blessed coexistence of all nations (by now comprising more than six billion people) on a just beautiful planet abundantly endowed with God's life-protecting gifts are receiving a new impetus. For the first time the undeniable reality of one world functioning in unison is coming to the fore. Faith in the one God now seems to be literally within reach! It was never as real as it is now. One World – for everyone to see and experience. One God – for everyone to believe. The fragmentariness of Biblical and all Christian witness now, in our crazy age of competition and conflicts, is gaining a new overarching direction – the One-ness of World and of God. To begin the long journey to One-ness will mean that not only the concurring confessions within Christianity, but people from all religions, will have to listen to each other and talk to each other.

Christian theology today, in consequence, must surrender their traditional exclusivism.⁹ All claims of any group to be sole proprietors of eternal truth need to be set aside. They have probably never been legitimate since the one-world and one-God concept was visualized, however dimly. But in our own period of history, exclusivism has become a deadly fallacy. Whoever declares his own truths to be universally obligatory – and divinely sanctioned – is in principle ready to ignore other truths and exterminate those who might cling to them. This has happened too often in the history of Christianity. Massacres for the sake of slightly variant religious confessions demonstrate the abuse and terrible distortion of faith in the supreme deity. I do not believe that the God of the Israelites ordered the slaughter of native Canaanites (cf. Deut 7:1-6; 20:10-18). I also refuse to accept the idea that the God of the Christians ordered crusaders to conquer Palestine or the Americas by fire and sword. In our present world fundamentalisms are growing fast in quite a few religious or ideological groupings inclusive of those within the Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious groupings. In my opinion, our God, who is active in the midst of all peoples and cultures on this planet, does not endorse fundamentalist violence against deviant believers. We are dealing with the problem of human survival on this planet. And the God I know from the Bible and experience clearly opts for his or her creation to be sustained by human beings.

To take up one example from our own context: South-Africa with its own, very complicated history and its troubled and promising past in which God's presence so often manifested itself as a liberating force has become a special area for Christian witness. In spite of all human shortcomings this nation has succeeded – watching the developments between, let us say, 1984 and 1994 from the outside, one could not help considering the years that followed in which political and theological thinking did an unheard-of and miraculous 180° turn. At no time in human history, to my knowledge, has a population of forty and more million people adopted a line of action which consciously put reconciliation first on the agenda, trying to let recognition and open discussion of the bitter truth by perpetrators and victims initiate a healing process in society. Hate and mere revenge were banned from decision-making. Just punishment was integrated into reconciliation. The extraordinary platform thus created for the construction of a new and democratic society at this juncture has yet to prove its solidity. The task of really engendering mutual respect between ethnic, social, and religious groups and especially of improving the deplorable fate of poverty stricken segments of population lies ahead.

Biblical and modern witnesses for justice, peace and preservation of nature, and for truth and reconciliation among peoples on our blue planet are basic and essential for Christian theology today. Clear minded God-seekers or God-speakers have always defined the divine will for their particular time and situation. They were adamant in their denunciations of injustice, oppression, and hate especially within larger social organisations. Their goal was to secure humane living conditions for all people concerned. The same should hold true for every single person on earth. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Am 5:24). "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Mt 5:9). The state of the world may be precarious; our theological knowledge and articulation may be fragmentary, provisional, conditioned by short sighted interests: Christian orientation for all who care to listen must be clear and unwavering through all layers of society: God loves this whole world with everything and everyone in it, its plenitude and diversity, and wants it to be wholesome and good. This

⁹ Cf. Paul F Knitter, "Theologies of Religions", Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2002.

insight has to go into all deliberations about the right faith on whatever level of social organisation we approach theologically – on our journeys to the One-ness of God. The final goal is not within our direct reach. It may be located in an eschatological future. But there are millions of signs all around us of the fullness of God's gracious intention.

Everything is impressed with your mystery;
everything comes out of your own hands,
or from the hands of your co-creators:
the paper, I write on, the pen I use;
the table, I am sitting at, the books surrounding me;
clothes which cover me, air which I take in;
light, that illuminates me, soil that carries my feet.
My heart leaps with joy.
I happily realize
your all-embracing unity.¹⁰

¹⁰ Translated from "Helder Camara, mach aus mir einen Regenbogen", Zürich: pendo Verlag, 4th ed. 1982, 76.