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The Spirit of Hope

Theology for a World in Peril

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Contents

Preface

We live in troubled times, one can affirm without exaggeration. Yet what are the roots of our troubles, and what might be the realistic basis for hoping that we can surmount them? How can we, as Christians, frame an honest and theologically tenable worldview to guide our lives and work in this perilous context?

In this volume, I attempt to answer these questions by offering a set of recent reflections on such topics as the ecological challenge, interfaith relations, solidarity and compassion, and terrorism in the name of religion. I focus on the upcoming ecological reformation of Christian theology and spirituality. The path goes from the earth into the city, from the soul into the senses, in order to encourage new experiences of God and new human self-experiences in earth's community.

I also explore, in a second part, some of the underlying theological issues raised by these concerns and the roots of our difficulties and dilemmas in modernity itself. "Thinking hope" requires but also enables a reassessment and reappropriation of these legacies, in both their promising and problematic elements.

So Part One focuses on renewing theology and reasserting hope today, while Part Two explores the historical and theological sources of our situation and our future.Though drawing on my recent volume *Hoffen und Denken* for this volume, I have also added essays and selected chapters that most directly address our contemporary situation and its roots in the Christian tradition and, most particularly, in

the ambiguities of modernity. Sources are listed following the notes in this volume. I am grateful to the late Mrs. Margaret Kohl, with whom I worked for many years, for many of the English-language drafts of these chapters, as well as to the Rev. Dr Brian McNeil, for revisions of some translations and new translations of others.

Christian hope draws the promised future of God into the present day, and prepares the present day for this future. As Immanuel Kant rightly said, thinking in the power of hope is not the train-bearer of reality: instead, it goes ahead of reality and lights its way with a torch. The historical-eschatological category is the category of the *novum*, that which is new: the new spirit, the new heart, the new human being, the new covenant, the new song, and ultimately, the promise: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

I hope that readers will agree: in light of our faith, as Christians we can honestly assess and face the full force of humanity's contemporary challenges yet also experience and instil a realistic hope of transcending them.

PART ONE

Facing the Future

Chapter 1

A Culture of Life in the Dangers of This Time

In this chapter I grapple with what have been my most urgent concerns for some time: a culture of life that is stronger than the terror of death, a love for life that overcomes the destructive forces in our world today, and a confidence in the future that overcomes doubt and fatalism.[1] These issues are for me most urgent because with the poet Friedrich Hölderlin I believe strongly:

> *Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst*
> *Das Rettende auch.*
> [But where there is danger
> Salvation also grows.][2]

We should inquire whether and to what extent this hope bears weight as we explore the possibilities of a culture of life in the face of the real annihilations with which our world is threatened. I will begin by addressing some of the dangers of our time in the first section, and in the second section offer some answers by considering dimensions of a world capable of supporting life and in a quite literal sense a world that is worthy of love. At the end I return to the first verse of the poem by Hölderlin: "Near is God, but difficult to grasp."[3]

The Terror of Universal Death

The unloved life

Human life today is in danger. It is not in danger because it is mortal. Our life has always been mortal. It is in danger because it is no longer loved, affirmed, and accepted. The French author Albert Camus wrote after the Second World War, "This is the mystery of Europe: life is no longer loved."

I can attest to this. I remember the experiences of the war with continuing horror. My generation was destined for a murderous war in which it was no longer a matter of victory or peace, but only of death. Those who suffered in that monstrous war knew what Camus meant: a life no longer loved is ready to kill and is liable to be killed. The survivors experienced the end of terror in 1945, but we had become so used to death that life took on a "take it or leave it" atmosphere because it had become meaningless.

The 20th century was a century of mass exterminations and mass executions. The beginning of the 21st century saw the private terrors of senseless killings by suicidal assassins. In the terrorists of the 21st century, a new religion of death is confronting us. I do not mean the religion of lslam, but rather the ideology of terror. "Your young people love life," said the Mullah Omar of the Taliban in Afghanistan, "our young people love death." After the mass murder in Madrid on 11 March 2004, there were acknowledgments by the terrorists with the same message: "You love life, we love death." A German who joined the Taliban in Afghanistan declared, "We don't want to win; we want to kill and be killed." Why? I think because they view killing as power and they experience themselves as God over life and death. This seems to be the modern terrorist ideology of the suicidal assassins. It is also the mystery of crazed students who in the United States and Germany suddenly shoot their fellow students and teachers and end up taking their own lives.

I remember that we had this love of death in Europe some 60 years ago. "Viva la muerte," cried an old fascist general in the Spanish Civil War. Long live death! The German SS troops in the Second World War had the saying "Death gives, and death takes away" and

wore the symbol of the skull and bones. It is not possible to deter suicidal assassins, for they have broken the fear of death. They do not love life anymore, and they want to die with their victims.

Behind this terrorist ideological surface a greater danger is hidden: Peace, disarmament, and nonproliferation treaties between nations share an obvious assumption, namely, that on both sides there is the will to survive and the will to live. Yet what happens if one partner does not want to survive but is willing to die, if through death that partner can destroy this whole "wicked" or "godless" world? Until now we have had to deal only with an international network of suicidal assassins and individual students overcome by a death wish. What happens when a nation possessing nuclear weapons becomes obsessed with this "religion of death" and turns into a collective suicidal assassin against the rest of the human world because it is driven into a corner and gives up all hope? Deterrence works only so long as all partners have the will to live and want to survive. When it is of no matter whether one lives or dies, one has lost the fear that is necessary for deterrence. Those who are convinced for religious reasons that they must become a sacrifice in order to save the world can no longer be threatened with death. Those who clamor for the "great war" even if it means their own destruction are beyond deterrence.

The attraction of destroying a world that is considered "rotten," disordered, or godless can obviously grow into a universal death wish to which one sacrifices one's own life. "Death" then, becomes a fascinating divinity inflaming a desire for destruction. This apocalyptic "religion of death" is the real enemy of the will to live, the love of life, and the affirmation of being.

The nuclear suicide programme

Behind this present political danger endangering the common life of the nations there also lurks an older threat: the nuclear threat. The first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in August 1945 brought the Second World War to an end. At the same time, it marked the beginning of the end time for the whole of humankind. The end time is the age in which the end of humankind is possible at any moment.

No human being could survive the "nuclear winter" that would follow a great atomic war. Remember that humankind was on the cusp of such a great atomic war for more than 40 years during the Cold War. It is true that since the end of the Cold War in 1990 a great atomic war is not as likely. We live in relative peace. Yet there are still so many atomic and hydrogen bombs stored up in the arsenals of the great nations (and some smaller ones as well) that the self-annihilation of humankind remains a distinct possibility. Sakharov called it "collective suicide": "Whoever fires first, dies second." For those 40 years we depended for our security on "mutually assured destruction."

Most people had forgotten this atomic threat until President Barack Obama, in a speech delivered in Prague in 2009, revived the old dream of a world free of atomic bombs and started new disarmament negotiations with Russia.[4] Then, many of us became aware again of this destiny hanging like a dark cloud over the nations. Strangely enough, we feel the presence of the nuclear threat publicly in what American psychologists call "nuclear numbing." We repress our anxiety, try to forget this threat, and live as if this danger were not there. Yet it is gnawing at our subconscious and impairing our love of life.

The social conditions of misery

A general impairment of life also exists in miserable social conditions. For more than 40 years, we have heard repeatedly and everywhere the charge that, despite all political efforts, the social gap between rich and poor is widening. It is not just in the poorer countries of the two-thirds world that a small, rich sector of the population rules over the masses of the poor. In the democracies of the developed world, the financial asset gap between financiers, on the one hand, and low-income workers, welfare recipients, the unemployed, and those not able to work, on the other hand, takes on obscene proportions. Yet democracy is grounded not only in the freedom of citizens but also in their equality. Without social justice in life opportunities and the comparability of life circumstances, the commonweal dies and with it what holds society together falls apart. Trust is lost.

Since the democratic revolutions in England, the United States, and France, the political task in the European states has been the balancing of individual freedom and social equity. The deregulation of the economy and fiscal institutions wrought by American politics, with all its destructive consequences, has led to an imbalance between freedom and equality that has become life-threatening for many people. It has led to their disempowerment and poverty. A capitalism that is no longer politically controllable through the commonwealth becomes an enemy of democracy because it destroys the common meaning of the society. We find ourselves on a social slippery slope. Climbing on the social ladder brings anxiety. In the modern competitive society, the losers fall off, the winners ascend, and "the winner takes all." The anxiety of life creates nothing but the anxiety of existence for modern human beings. Yet is anxiety a good incentive for life, for work, and for happiness?

The ecological conditions of world destruction

Unlike the nuclear threat, climate change is not only a threat but already an emerging reality everywhere. It is not only a latent problem but also very much a matter of public consciousness. People know it because they can see it, feel it, and sometimes smell it. The biosphere of the planet earth is the only space we have for life. The globalization of human civilization has reached its limits and is beginning to alter the conditions of life on Earth.

The destruction of the environment that we are causing through our present global economic system will undoubtedly seriously jeopardize the survival of humanity in the 21st century. Modern industrial society has thrown out of balance the equilibrium of the earth's organism and is on the way to universal ecological death, unless we can change the way things are developing. Year after year, vulnerable species of animals and plants die out. Scientists have shown that certain chemical emissions are destroying the ozone layer, while the use of chemical fertilizers and a multitude of pesticides is polluting our drinking water and making the soil infertile. They have shown that the global climate is already changing, so that we now are experiencing

an increasing number of "natural" catastrophes, such as droughts and floods, expanding deserts, and intense storms – catastrophes that are not simply natural but are also caused by human activity. The ice in the Arctic and the Antarctic is melting. In the coming century, scientists predict that coastal cities such as my hometown, Hamburg, and coastal regions such as Bangladesh and many South Sea islands will be flooded. All in all, life on this earth is under threat. Why is this so? With some irony one may say: Some do not know what they are doing, while others do not act on what they know.

This ecological crisis is fundamentally a crisis wrought by Western scientific and technological civilization. Yet it is a mistake to think that environmental problems are problems for the industrialized countries of the West alone. On the contrary, ecological catastrophes are intensifying even more in the midst of already existing economic and social problems of countries in the developing world. Indira Gandhi was right when she said, "Poverty is the worst pollution." Despite the well-documented "limits to growth," the ideology of permanent "growth" continues unabated with its specious promise of solving social problems. We know all this, but we are paralyzed and do not change our economy or our lifestyle: We do not do what we know is necessary to prevent the worst consequences. This paralysis may be called "ecological numbing." Nothing accelerates an imminent catastrophe so much as the paralysis of doing nothing.

We do not know whether humanity will survive this self-made destiny. This is actually a good thing. If we knew with certainty that we would not survive, we would do nothing; if we knew with certainty that we would survive, we would also do nothing. Only if the future is open for both possibilities are we forced to do today what is necessary to survive tomorrow. We cannot know whether humankind will survive, so we must act today as if the future of life depends on us and trust at the same time that our children and we will survive and thrive.

Must a human race exist or survive, or are we just an accident of nature? We can ask cynically: Didn't the dinosaurs come and go?

The question of existence: Whether humanity should be or not be

More than seven billion human beings already live on earth today. This number likely will grow rapidly. An alternative future is that the earth could be uninhabited. The earth existed without human beings for millions of years and may survive perhaps for millions of years after the human race disappears. This raises an even deeper question: Are we human beings on earth only by chance, or are we human beings a "necessary" result of evolution? If nature showed a "strong anthropic principle," we could feel "at home in the universe" (Stuart Kauffman). But if a strong anthropic principle of this kind cannot be demonstrated, the universe gives no answer to this existential question of humankind. Looking to the universe for an answer to the question of our reason for being, we encounter the sad conjecture of Nobel–Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg: "The more the Universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."[5] The silence of the world's expanses and the coldness of the universe can lead to despondence. In any case, neither the stars nor our genes say whether human beings should be or not be.

How can we love life and affirm our being as humans if humanity is only an accident of nature, superfluous and without relevance for the universe, perhaps only a mistake of nature? Is there a "duty to be," as Hans Jonas claimed? Is there any reason to love life and affirm the human being? If we find no answer, every culture of life is uncertain in its fundamentals and built on shaky ground.

A Culture of Life Must Be a Culture of Common Life in the Human and the Natural World

Can we live with the bomb?

Are the dangers growing faster than what can save us? I think we can grow in wisdom, but how? President Obama's dream of a "world without atomic weapons" is an honourable one, but only a dream. Human beings will never again become incapable of what they can do now.

Whoever has learned the formula of atomic fission will never forget it. Since Hiroshima in 1945, humankind has lost its "atomic innocence."

Yet the atomic end time is also the first common age of the nations. All the nations are sitting in the same boat. We all share the same threat. Everyone can become the victim. In this new situation, humankind must organize itself as the subject of common survival. The foundation of the United Nations in 1945 was a first step. International security partnerships can serve peace and give us time to live, and someday perhaps a transnational unification of humankind will keep the means of nuclear destruction under control. Through science we learn to gain power over nature. Through wisdom we learn to gain control of our power. The development of public and political wisdom is as important as scientific progress.

The first lesson we learn is this: Deterrence does not secure peace any more. Only justice serves peace between the nations. There is no way to peace in the world except through just actions and the harmonious balance of interests. Peace is not the absence of violence, but the presence of justice. Peace is a process, not a property. Peace is a common way of reducing violence and constructing justice in the social and global relationships of humankind.

Social justice creates social peace

The gap between the poor and the rich widens, but the alternative to poverty is not property. The alternative to poverty and property is community. One can live in poverty when it is borne in common with others, as was the case in Europe in the years of hunger after the Second World War. It is injustice that makes poverty insufferable. The spirit of communal solidarity and mutual help was demolished by the flight from taxes, which in turn aroused the anger of the people. If everyone is in the same situation, then all give mutual help. If we remove equality, because one wins and the other loses, then mutual help also vanishes. By "community" here I mean the visible community of solidarity as well as the inner togetherness of society in social balance and social freedom. It is not football games that unite a society; it is social justice that creates lasting social peace.

The individualism that says "Everyone is his or her own neighbour, looking out for himself or herself" makes human beings powerless. The fragmenting of work by making it temporary, insecure, and without benefits harms the life planning of those at the mercy of the system and destroys their future. In communities of solidarity, human beings are strong and wealthy, that is, wealthy in relationships with neighbours and friends, companions and colleagues on which they can depend. They are thus made strong by being recognized and by being esteemed as worthy. Many helpful actions emerge in such communities, such as child care, the care of the sick and aged, associations of the disabled, and the hospice movement.

"Market position" and "competition" are certainly strong incentives for work, but they remain humane only in the framework of a common life, and that means only within the bounds of social and ecological justice. There are dimensions of life that may not be determined by the market logic because they follow other laws. Patients are not "customers" of doctors and nurses, and students are not "consumers" of the science and research of the university.

Reverence for life

Because human society and the natural environment compose the total life-system, when there is a crisis of dying in nature, there emerges a crisis of the whole life-system as well. What we call today the "ecological crisis" is not only a crisis in our environment but also a total crisis of our life-system, and it cannot be solved by technological means only. It also demands a change in our lifestyle and a change in the basic values and convictions of our society. Modern industrial societies are no longer in harmony with the cycles and rhythms of the earth, as was the case in pre-modern agrarian societies. Modern societies are predicated on progress and expansion of the projects of humanity. We reduce the nature of the earth to "our environment" and destroy the life-space of other forms of life. Nothing works so much destruction as reducing nature to no more than an environment for humans.

We need a change from the modern domination of nature to a "reverence for life," as Albert Schweitzer teaches us. "Reverence for

life" is respect for every single form of life and for our common life in the human and the natural world and for the great community of all the living. A postmodern biocentrism will have to replace the Western and modern anthropocentrism. Of course, we cannot return to the cosmos-orientation of the ancient and pre-modern agrarian world, but we can begin the necessary ecological transformation of the industrial society. To achieve this, we must change our concept of time. The linear concept of progress in production, consumption, and waste must give way to the concept of the cyclical time of "renewable energy" and a "recycling economy." Only the cycles of life can give stability to our world of progress. Yet as long as the children of Ghana bear the burden of recycling our electronic scrap, we must say the recycling economy is still the economy of poor people. The Earth Charter of the United Nations from 2000 points in the right direction: "Humanity is part of nature. All other life forms of nature have their worth independent of their worth for human beings." We are "part of nature," and can therefore survive only by preserving nature's integrity.

The love of life in times of danger

Human life is not only a gift of life but also a task of being human. To accept this task of humanity in times of terror requires the strength and courage to live. Life must be affirmed against terror and threat. To put this in simple terms: Life must be lived, and then the beloved life, which is the common life in the human and the natural world, will be stronger than the threat of universal annihilation. I see three major factors for this courage to be and the courage to live.

First, human life must be affirmed, because it can also be denied. As we know, a child can grow and live only in an atmosphere of affirmation. In an atmosphere of rejection, the child will fade away in soul and body. Experiencing affirmation allows children to affirm themselves. What is true for the child is true for human beings throughout their lives. Where we are accepted, appreciated, and affirmed, we are motivated to live; where we feel a hostile world of contempt and rejection, we retire into ourselves and become defensive. We need a strong affirmation of life that can deal with such negations of life. Each yes to

life is stronger than every negation of life, because it can create something new against the negations.

Second, human life is participation. We become alive where we feel the sympathy of others, and we stay alive where we share our life with others. As long as we are interested, we are alive. The counterproof is obvious: indifference leads to apathy, and apathy is a sickness unto death. Complete lack of participation is a completely unlived life; it is the dying of the soul before physical death.

Third, human life is alive in the pursuit of fulfilment. Human life gains its dynamic from this inborn striving. "The pursuit of happiness" is, since the writing of the Declaration of Independence, one essential human right. To pursue one's happiness is not only a private human right but also a public human right. We speak of the "good life" or the "meaningful life," meaning a life that lives out its best potential in the public life of a good and harmonious society. When we take this "pursuit of happiness" seriously, we encounter the misfortune of the masses of poor people and begin to suffer with the unfortunate. The compassion by which we are drawn into their passion for life is the reverse side of the pursuit of happiness. The more we become capable of the happiness of life, the more we become also capable of sorrow and compassion. This is the great dialectic of human life. "But where there is danger, salvation also grows." How is salvation growing? I have tried to show how being can take in nonbeing, how life can overcome death through love, and how deadly contradictions can be changed into productive differences and higher forms of living and community. I am reminded of a famous affirmation by the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel, a friend of Hölderlin since their student days at Tübingen University. Hegel wrote in his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), "Not a life that shrinks away from death or remains untouched by devastations, but a life that endures death and bears death in itself is the life of the Spirit." Consciously lived life is a beloved life that endures the contradictions of death and finds the courage to live through its dangers.

"Near Is God, and Difficult to Grasp"

I conclude by allowing the theologian in me to speak and declare the Christian faith:

- Should humanity be superfluous? Or are we superfluous?
- Is there a duty to survive, or are life and death simply a "take it or leave it" matter?
- In the evolution of life, are we an accident of life?

The existential questions of humankind are answered not only by rational arguments, but first of all by a prerational assurance or lack of assurance that guides the interests of our reason.

"Difficult to grasp is God," wrote Hölderlin, not because God is so distant from us human beings, but rather because God is "near." What is "near," indeed nearer to us than we are to ourselves, is "not to be grasped" by us, for we would need distance for that. If, however, we were "grasped" by the nearness of God, we would know the answers to our existential questions:

- In the eternal yes of the living God, we affirm our fragile and vulnerable humanity in spite of death.
- In the eternal love of God, we love life and resist its devastations.
- In the ungraspable nearness of God, we trust in what is saving, even if the dangers are growing.