# Impossible Time

Past and Future in the Philosophy of Religion

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Philipp Stoellger

## 1. God and Time?

The traditional question of the relationship between God and time has always been an intriguing one, perhaps because at first glance it is a relation of ontological difference, like God and world. God is not "in" time, but rather "above" or "outside" of it. If God is eternal (a classical predication of God), then God is not temporal.

This sharp distinction is mediated, usually by the relation of eternity and time. Eternity is not timeless: it is neither bound by time nor an infinite succession of time. Rather, eternity is a qualification, a relation, and a modalization of time: a qualification in the sense of "highest eminence," a relation in the sense of "relevant for me," and a modalization in the sense of "real" or even "more than real" (whatever that means).

But the relation of eternity to time always remains somewhat unsatisfactory, as though there were two relata, for example, God and world, which are secondarily interrelated. A Christological perspective puts forward a less extrinsically- and more intrinsically-characterized relation, not only in how time is qualified by eternity but also how eternity is qualified by time. Indeed, the model of *communicatio idiomatum* can be applied to time and eternity as well, insofar as it shows how the latter might be qualified by the former. Eternity is qualified *in*, *as* and *by* time when we consider that Christ's love, for example, as well as his suffering and death, are topics regarding which eternity is qualified in, as and by time. Christ's "eternal love" (whatever it may be), only makes sense when viewed in and as time. The same may be said of his suffering: it is the dark consequence of critical love learning what it means to be expelled and driven to death. And his death is the paradox of eternity in and as time: God's coming to an end.

Thus, the question is whether time can be attributed to eternity, and what it would mean to speak in this way. The (neo-)Platonic *chorismos* of eternity and time, still alive and well in theology today (and not only

in Rome), is challenged by a Christological revision: Whatever it means, eternity can only be understood in and as the time of Christ. Just as the Trinity may be reinterpreted economically (for example, the view of the Trinity as an interpretation of the Cross), eternity is the intrinsic qualification of time, revealed in Christ's life, suffering, and death. In other words, the divine attribute called "eternity" takes part in time and is qualified by this special time-event. "Eternal" thus comes to refer to a temporal event (something "in time") – but what does all this mean? I would suggest that eternity refers to a special sense of the meaning and significance of "time," what one might call its "conciseness" or "succinctness" (or what German philosopher Ernst Cassirer called *Prägnanz*). Therefore, God becomes "concise," insofar as God is "in becoming," not in general (as with an ontological qualification), but by "becoming" present. When God becomes really present, then the event of "real presence" is the temporal eternity.

This, however, would constitute a cataphatic concept of "temporal eternity" and God's presence as "being given" in creation would be dominant. Yet the Christological conciseness is always different. His being-in-becoming is a being-in-passing, that is, in passing away (compare God on Mount Sinai).

God's being-in-passing-away is not so much an event of real presence as it is of real withdrawal, insofar as Christ has to "disappear" to make the disclosure possible. The consequence is more or less clear: the temporal eternity is being-in-becoming as well as being-in-passing-away. And that is not the condition of possibility for "real presence" but for "presence in withdrawal."

In this view, the Church is not the real presence of the body of Christ but rather a mode of his disappearance. (This is somewhat worrisome because it is ambiguous: is there still a disappearing presence or mostly a self-preservation and self-presentation of the Church?) Images and icons are similarly not objects of real presence but of "real absence." They are in their Christological sense not means of presentation and fabrication of evidence but of hiding, complication, and the interplay of presence and withdrawal. Similarly, religious speech is largely apophatic, but at the same time it always shows, hints at, and points to the becoming and passing. This is the diachronic distension of speech (its *distentio linguae et litterarum et scripturae*), which may also provide meaning to the dissemination and supplementation of eternity by Christ's time.

Further consequences can be identified rather easily. The idea of theology behind this view of eternity and time is not a foundation of techniques and institutions of "presentification," of making present the absent, or of compensation. Rather, it is the indirect communication of the withdrawal with the hermeneutical bet that if there is an indirect presence, it may appear in disappearing, that is, it may come as it is in the process of passing



away. Consider the story of the disciples on their way to Emmaus. In the presence of Christ there is a type of withdrawal. The narration shows his appearance in disappearing. But the narration is not a compensation or a technique of presentification. It is showing what was passing – and what may pass in presence as well.

Philosophy of religion then represents a paradoxical mode of the description and interpretation of certain cultural modes of saying and showing. Perhaps philosophy of religion is thereby showing itself its own perspective, its "whence" and "what for," because it cannot remain neutral or merely observe a higher order.

## 2. Response in Advance to Arne Grøn's "Time and Transcendence"

I wondered in advance about what ideas Arne Grøn would express in his essay in this collection. Would he suggest that time is the dissemination of transcendence, that it is a space of transcendence, or that there is a transcendence of time? The model to which we are accustomed is that of the transcendence of time (as with the event of transcendence in revelation, for example). The less Platonic and more Christological model would be something like "transcendence in time" (i.e., not a punctual transcendence). But the everyday experience, the so-called life-world model, would be "transcendence as time," meaning a transcendence of transcendence, as time goes by.

The opposition of transcendence and time (as in philosophy since Plato) and the close identification of both transcendence and time (as in life-world experience) are themselves opposed to each other. Yet they are intertwined and interwoven in the Christological idea of transcendence in time or by time – but not against or beyond time. In this way, a triple possibility of time-experience appears:

- *sub specie aeternitatis*,
- *sub specie temporis*,
- *sub specie Christi*.

One may consider Luhmann's (perhaps trivial) idea that religious communication is coded by the distinction between immanence and transcendence. Here, the transcendence of immanence is religious desire. The more Christian view, however, might be closer to the immanence of transcendence.

But Christian communication is a little more subtle: it is coded – not by the difference, but by the non-indifference of immanence and transcendence. At first, by the indifference of immanence and transcendence

in Christ – as coincidence of both in him. But that does not mean indifference toward the difference. It is a Christological transformation of this difference into the "non-in-difference." The idea that transcendence and eternity are not merely different, they are also not indifferent to immanence and time. But neither are they identical. Their interwovenness and interrelation is "non-indifference." In an ethical sense, they are both engaged in and challenged by time and immanence, while in a more passive or "pathetic" mode, they are affected by them, and what they are is their affection toward death and by love. Otherwise, we would not speak *sub specie Christi*.

Of course, someone might object to putting forward a Christian perspective for philosophy of religion. And the objection is appropriate. Such a perspective as I have just sketched is not necessary, but it is possible, even if some may think differently. I would argue that philosophy of religion has the impossible freedom of switching between perspectives, between the inner and the outer and the in-between. Theology, on the other hand, is bound to its perspective of whence and where from. But philosophy of religion is strangely free to speak "as if." This is similar to literature, and it means that philosophy of religion may be so free as to speak even from a Christian perspective, but it does not have to do so.

An important hermeneutical remark is warranted here. Usually, the point of view will appear or will become concrete through speech. Would it be better to exclude such points of view as reflecting an un- or pre-scientific commitment or as a violation of scientific neutrality? Think, for example, of a lawyer who is arguing from the position of German law or of human rights. Must one exclude his "local commitments" (and thereby his idea of human dignity) as unscientific? Like law and literature, philosophy of religion is "embedded" within a culture and therefore does not need to make claims to universality and neutrality, even if some areas of religious studies may pretend to do so (as with a strictly non-private "science of religion"). A proposition or proposal is not untrue merely because it is not necessarily true for everyone. Contingent truths are not untrue solely because they are dependent on contingent factors.

This hermeneutical remark seems necessary to me, because the exclusion of certain "impossibilities" is grounded in the idea that only necessary truths are true, and only a discipline dealing with these truths can legitimately be called well-founded or reasonable. A scientific philosophy of religion would then be obliged to skip all contingent (e.g., cultural, local or idiomatic) positions and problems. That would be too restrictive in the name of the ideal of really pure reason, which deals with strictly universal propositions and eternal, timeless arguments. (An aside: there is a history behind this logic or analytical idea, which may perhaps be called "the contingent conditions of necessary truth," although this may sound impossible for "Necessitarians" (the apostles of universal necessity).



## 3. What About Impossibilities?

Logic (in the Aristotelian tradition), pure reason (in the Kantian tradition), or the analytical approach (of the 1970s and 1980s) are all strong positions whose methods and results are accepted in the academic community. Beyond their semantics, they reveal a structural and methodological commitment that one can and ought to challenge.

The logical, epistemic or analytical conditions of the possibility of scientific cognition always imply conditions of impossibility. Thus, the foundations of possible cognition strictly exclude the so-called impossible ones. These exclusions are a problem because not only theology but also philosophy of religion are sometimes concerned with non-propositional communication, which is not approachable by propositional analysis; non-intentionality, which is not approachable by intentional analysis; externality and alterity, which are not approachable by pure reason in the sphere of transcendental analysis; passivities, which are not approachable by ethical or epistemic analyses; modes of experience which are not "made" but "happen" and are thus not approachable by the philosophy of action; and even with pictures and images, which are not approachable by text-analyses or text-oriented hermeneutics.

So the field of problems and phenomena has been widened and the horizon is still open – as opposed to the strict and rather narrow sphere of the approaches above, which exclude such modes of speaking and ways of paying attention to diverse phenomena.

### *License to deal with impossibilities*

But what would be the response if these impossibilities were excluded and one could not address them in philosophy of religion?

The return of metaphysics, called "radical orthodoxy," is generally given as the sole answer to this problem. If one rejects the critical conditions (*pars pro toto* here), one is free to read and speak and claim truths, as if nothing had happened in modernity. On the one hand, the metaphysical questions are still open. (As in Kant, these are the issues of hope, humanity, cognition, and what one should do.) On the other hand, work on them becomes neo-metaphysical. This sounds impossible (as well as anachronistic, uncritical, unscientific, etc.), but this philosophical "impossibility" is not only possible, it is also actual.

It shows that the conditions of possibility not only are questionable – rather than being necessary, everlasting, and eternal conditions – but it also shows that under postmodern conditions, premodern options can become revitalized.

This new, self-made orthodoxy seems to bypass not only the Reformed traditions, but historical-critical ones as well, jumping into a kind of "happy presence of the past" without any scruples or historical complications. The reality of this possibility cannot be denied in principle. Postmodern revitalisations of premodern options are as possible as they are real. However, it is not what one says but rather how one says it that counts. And the claim is exaggerated that Christianity will be recovered by the essentialism of orthodoxy.

I would prefer not to ... That would mean losing all contact with the fundamental conditions of philosophical and theological communication in modern contexts as what Luhmann called *Anschlussfähigkeit* (connectivity) would be lost.

## 4. The Mask of the Historian

These "neo-metaphysicians" would be cleverer were they to put on the mask of the historian, for with the "scientific" neutrality and academic distance of a historian they would be free to read, interpret and at least to speak however they wished. It is quite strange that the historian – the guardian of diachronicity, the ruler of chronology, and the keeper of historical difference – is free in a way to slip into the past, as though she knew Scotty could beam her to wherever she wanted. History is the paradoxical license to leap across great historical distances by holding fast to them.

There is one further paradox which emerges. The longer a historian studies the past – say, a dead author from an earlier time – the more he comes to resemble it (or him). An example in point are researchers studying Paul or Aristotle: as time goes by the historian or exegete speaks in tongues, that is, in the tongue of the dead person he is interpreting. When the interpreter is interpreting Paul, for example, ambiguities arise and we are unsure who is speaking. This interference becomes even more visible in current debates in which the expert on Paul is engaged when she claims to represent the "voice of Paul" or the apostolic tradition in general. There is a strange shift that results from playing with masks and representing dead persons as still alive. The riddles and paradoxes of "historical speech" are manifold: Who is speaking here?

Nevertheless, in the name of historical difference, there is a subtle move to in-difference, meaning a move towards identification with the dead author, when one claims to represent the latter's voice or to say what he really meant. This shift to in-difference comes with a claim of non-indifference (i.e., the claim not to be indifferent toward the interpreted author or text). At this point historians may meet phenomenologists. In the name of non-in-difference against others, especially dead others, it can be said: the more you are engaged, involved, and entangled in another's texts, the more you become responsible for her and her voice. (One may argue that we are responsible even before any engagement, but this intuition in the sense of Lévinas is a generalization *ex post facto*).



What I want to show is that the historian's game of masks becomes somehow serious and crosses the line of pure historical reason. In light of academic restrictions, it is impossible – but it is not only real, perhaps it is even the ground of reality, a basic movement to deal with others, dead or alive.

## 5. The Mask of Literature

Let us not forget another license to read and speak beyond the limits of possibility: while wearing the mask of literature. Think of Kierkegaard or similarly Blumenberg, or in a different sense perhaps Borges or Eco, Derrida or Blanchot. Literature has the license to create a distance, to act and write "as if," in the wide field of the imaginary. Here we might think of Lukian (or Valéry) and the dialogue between dead philosophers or even Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. There we find a "great awakening" of the dead, speaking as if they were alive – and discussing the "big" (read: metaphysical) questions. This seems to be a *heterotopos*, another location, beyond both the real and symbolic orders, an extraordinary space where the strict conditions of possibility and the pureness of reason is suspended. It may be called the space of suspended exclusions, an imaginary space, impossible for academic science and a scientific philosophy of religion. Nevertheless, a mode of indirect communication takes place, which includes the reader in a hypothetical realm where he becomes concerned about the subject matter. There is a sort of "eerie" request by the dead living in the space of literature. They are awoken by the reader who is suddenly in communication with these strangers.

Who is speaking here? Again we must ask: what has happened to the reader?

Such modes of masked communication, of course, violate the limits of pure reason, and even more so the limits of theological realism or propositional analyses. Such modes of speaking might thus be excluded as nonsense or meaningless. But then most religious speech, literature, and textual traditions would be lost.

## 6. Without Any Mask? – The Rationalist

The alternative clearly seems to be purity (if not Puritan purity) of reason, along the lines of neo-rationalism (vs. neo-orthodoxy). Consider the words of our colleague, Nicholas Wolterstorff:

> And this passion for the impossible. I don't know what to make of this either, though in this case it sounds to me not so much coy as cryptic. Is the passion in question a religious passion to say what one's philosophical self cannot tell? If so, that sounds to me like a re-run of Immanuel Kant, with this interesting variation: what's behind the passion this time round is nothing so "heady" as an Ideal of Reason fleshed out with a moral argument for a *Summum Bonum*, but the compulsion to say "Yes, Yes" and the compulsion to keep on beseeching Elijah to come."[1] And further:
>
> religion now turns up in the academy without grounding. It writes its confession, acclaims the goodness deep down in things, calls for Elijah to come and undo all that must not be, and proceeds to discourse philosophically. This is something new,[2]

This really is something new: an analytical rationalist sounding almost poetic. But listen to how dark he sounds. "He is calling for Elijah" were the words of those who stood apart from the Crucified One, yet under the cross. To mock Christ by saying that he may be calling for Elijah reveals a habit of untouched distance, a jeering, a severe misunderstanding. To hear only "Elijah" whenever someone is naming (his) God ("Eli, Eli lamah ...") or whenever a philosopher dares to speak in a messianic idiom – this seems to me a bit too easy. It looks too much like pure reason – or rather "poor" reason, without any sense for the impossible. The world of the rationalist is a small world, without any "grounding" of possibility, recognizing its limits and when they have been exceeded.

## 7. Without any Foundation: Some Relevant Impossibilities

If one is concerned about the hermeneutics of religion, some things from the special perspective of modalities are called into question: contingency, reality and possibility, and last but not least, the strange modality named "impossibility." Superficially, "impossibility" is the negative mode of religion, i.e., religion in its critique: cognition of God is epistemically impossible, religious life is morally impossible, public religious life is politically or

[1] N. Wolterstorff, "The religious turn in philosophy and art," in L. Nagl (ed.), *Religion nach der Religionskritik* (Wien/Berlin: Oldenbourg Akademieverlag, 2003), 273–282, 278.

[2] Wolterstorff, "The religious turn," 280.



legally impossible, and theology is scientifically impossible. "Impossibility" is the predicate of exclusion – of what cannot be, cannot exist, cannot be real.

But this exclusion always depends on preconditions, the so-called conditions of possibility, be they epistemic, ethical, scientific or technical. These conditions exclude certain impossibilities (for example, the immediate knowledge of God, or the claim to be able to say anything about "the external" or to speak about "the other" other than via analogy to one's own self). These exclusions are "symptoms" of the narrowness of the horizon of the relevant preconditions. Following these rules encourages a lack of sensitivity for the excluded impossibilities.

What happens to the rationalist's verdict of "impossible" if it is amicably taken over by those philosophers of religion who are not afraid of exceeding the limits of possibility? That is a messianic gesture, perhaps even an eschatological one. Here, one might remember the adoption of the title of Christ as *Rex Iudaeorum*, which initially represented the mocking *titulus crucis*.

The challenge (to which one must respond) is how to speak about those things that cannot be spoken of from the perspective of "pure reason." The challenge is "how *not* to avoid speaking." The idiom of philosophy of religion is in question. Not only the topics of speech seem relevant, but also the voice, the sound, and the mode of speech.

Some topics can already be called "classical," such as forgiving and likewise forgetting. (Claudia Welz, another contributor in this volume, will remember this). As forgiving sins was seen to be the privilege of God alone, to forgive represented a straightforward instance of blasphemy by Christ. But if "we" forgive – well, this seems to be even more impossible. I have been looking for instructions on "how to forgive" for years and even now, I do not know how to do so. Could it be that forgiving is simply not "possible" for us? Is it more than we "can" do?

Forgiveness's "dark relative" is forgetting. It can happen but can never be "done"; it is impossible to do intentionally, but it is permanently real. This is similar to another pair of concepts: giving and its dark "match" stealing – actions we cannot do but yet which sometimes really do happen. Likewise, we can consider the notions of trust and suspicion. Even if psychologists call trust a duty or task to work on, it cannot be directly "constructed" or "worked out,' so just like its dark twin, mistrust or suspicion, it cannot simply be prevented.

It seems the problems and paradoxes are the same in a more religious semantics; for example, we might consider hope and despair, faith and sin, or love and hate. They all exceed the limits of possibility because they are not "at our immediate disposal." The human is not a *homo capax* for humanity is *non capax* in these situations.

The variations of impossibilities in theory, especially in theology, should also not be forgotten: subjects such as "incarnation" or "resurrection," or the "two natures" or "Trinity," are no less impossible, but they are impossible in another way. They are not "practical" impossibilities, but theoretical ones. One should expect that there are also pathical impossibilities like loving your neighbor.

These concepts are relevant and significant, but beyond that they are symptoms of a "sense for excluded impossibilities." (If they are not excluded, they may be rationalized in a one-dimensional way: they are made possible, either for an agent or a theory. But that would be a symptomatic loss.) Not the respective topic itself, but how to speak about it or "how not to avoid speaking" is the challenge.

So which mask should philosophy of religion prefer? Which idiom for finding a fitting (or appropriate) voice for these topics?

## 8. Between Possibility and Impossibility: The Shifting Borderline

It sounds good to view the philosophy of religion as focused on the reality of possibilities. But I imagine that this might sound a little "too" possible in Copenhagen, as a motto for an aesthetic existence: looking for freedom in the realm of possibilities and suggesting they are "compossible," even if one was not aware of it. God thereby becomes not just the *omnitudo realitatis*, but the *omnitudo possibilitatis*. Because nothing is impossible for God, God is the ground, condition and origin of all possibilities – though not of the possibility of *malum*. Or could he be?

This exploration of real possibilities (that is, compossible ones) has to operate with an expanded concept of "reality." It is the first step Leibniz takes to discover the possibilities surrounding us, to distinguish *bonum et malum*, to choose the good things as real possibilities for us (given by God, discovered by theology?).

It is not out of place to insist that the concept of real possibility operates strictly eschatologically: the possibilities are, insofar as they are "in becoming" or "in turning," real. Therefore, one has to operate with a huge "possibility-maker" (like truth-makers in truth-theory): God's "own self" is making possible, really possible, what is in becoming. Because for God "nothing is impossible," there are no impossibilities left.

But, of course, even this concept of God as "possibility-maker," and the expanded concept of reality that results, has its tacit dimension: the invisible limit of possibilities. For God, sin and *malum* remain impossible, not only theoretically, but practically as well. And the eschatologically brightly shining possibilities contradict the dark hamartiological ones. There is a battle of bright and dark possibilities.



The latent or hidden dimensions of possibilities are the impossibilities. This dimension is concealed when one focuses only on the possibilities and their reality. But if this boundary is a question of construal and construction, one would much too easily accept a supposedly self-evident truth by simply accepting a factual border between possibility and impossibility. Moreover, history represents the shifting and changing of this border. Time puts impossibilities in motion. What has been impossible (or unimaginable or unthinkable) at one time, becomes possible and real as time goes by.

The border between both is the "hot spot," not only technologically but also eschatologically. The shifting or moving of this borderline is effected by the changing world we live in (which changes both us and God as well). So I would suppose that the really real things are not the possibilities, but the impossibilities.

Philosophy of religion should be a little more concerned about the reality of impossibilities and about impossible realities. Naturally, this sounds somewhat strange and highly paradoxical. But in Copenhagen (I imagine) no one is afraid of paradoxes. They are ways to not avoid speaking: they are a way out of the fly-bottle, like their relatives metaphors and narrations.

We might consider, for example, the days when sailors did not have the possibility of navigating by longitudes because they did not know how to measure them. Only through the development of exact chronometers by John Harrison did they become able to ascertain the local time of the point of departure. Then they could compare the time of high noon at their ship with the time at the point of departure – and thereby calculate the longitude. What was impossible became possible.

If this example from the history of time (measurement and calculation time) is plausible, then it is also clear that the expansion of possibilities by impossibilities becoming possible (or compossible) is an expansion of reality and a broadening of the horizon of perception. Could this be similar not only in relation to time but to God as well?

If Christ's kind of relation to God and his speech was impossible for his contemporaries, if he realized this impossibility and made it real and possible for us, then his life and death exceeded the limits of possibility and were thus groundbreaking and revolutionary in making the impossible real. That is the modal conception of realized eschatology.

But two more aspects ought to be considered: what about the unrealized? And what about the impossible reality named "sin"? Regarding the latter we can say that sin is not only an impossible possibility, as Karl Barth thought. It is – whatever else it may be – a realized impossibility with consequences for impossible realities that are nevertheless real.

Is Christ's work a destruction of old impossibilities as well? Then sin has to become impossible in another sense: it remains real, but with a "reduplication" of impossibility. The real impossibility becomes an impossible impossibility.

Perhaps that is the deep existential change that Paul or Luther had in mind when they puzzled over the remaining presence of sin. They racked their brains (and their speech) over the real presence of this impossibility. So the really confusing question is not just about *unde malum*, but also why this reduplicated impossibility remains real. If sin is the lack of communion (with God and one's neighbor), how can it be said to remain if God is present? That would be a self-contradiction, but a real one. (Or does that prove that God is not really present?).

The second aspect referred to the question of the unrealized: the "bright" impossibilities. Are they still not compossible? Would this mean that they are not real? I would suggest that they are still not possible although already real as the coming fulfillment. Even the future or unrealized eschatology is about impossibilities, but contrary to the still-present one, which may be called sin. And it is even more than the final passing away of sin, insofar as it is about "fulfillment." But this ideal of a fulfillment of creation and not its annihilation is not quite enough, because it would only be the completion of expectation, which means that our imagination and hope would be determinate of the final outcome. That cannot be right if what we presently imagine is itself determined by our time and tradition. So the unrealized eschaton has to exceed our possible expectations. It is in this way "unimaginable" but not in a shallow sense. It is beyond the horizon, not the continuation of the landscape already present. This difference implies a rupture between imagination (or hope) and the unimaginable as really-impossible-now. But the paradox appears again: this outstanding impossibility, the final exceeding, is held to be real – really coming – and in this certainty it is already realized. These real impossibilities are indeed strange modalities. But this reality is, though real, still impossible. Augustine once noted: "si comprehendis, non est Deus." That may be a hint as to the impossibility in and by which we live and hope.

As a hermeneutical remark, the meaning could also be that if one understands, then God is not. Or does understanding itself reject God's existence? Then it would be an idea for a strictly negativistic, apophatic hermeneutics: *comprehensio non capax Dei,* or to go further: God becomes incomprehensible – or unimaginable. God's strangeness exceeds any comprehension. That would be the theological complement of the critiques of hermeneutics by the phenomenology of strangeness, as we find in Lévinas's or Waldenfels's so-called xenology.



## 9. One step back: some revisions

If one asks about the past and the future of philosophy of religion, what might be the answer? One may ask about its past, the realities of that past and what they leave open and unrealized. Does one have to imagine what philosophy of religion could be? What is possible now? What is impossible now? What might or should become possible or even real?

As far as I can imagine here and now, one of the most intriguing possibilities of philosophy of religion is its sense for the impossible – and how to make sense of this. To be sure, it sounds like nonsense to try to make sense out of impossibilities. However, if one puts it rhetorically, it does not sound quite as strange. Think of Gilbert Ryle's nominal definition of metaphors as calculated category mistakes or, as Christian Strub understood it, as calculated absurdities. Metaphors are thus modes of impossibilities in semantics, as in the example: "The Pope is a fox." Ryle's and Strub's definitions are only one half of the truth; the calculated trivialities are the second half. "The Pope is not a donkey." This is trivial but also absurd or nonsense.

My main concern is with the narrow boundary line between the impossible and the possible. Therefore, I would not support the idea of philosophy of religion as being about "real possibilities" but rather about possible impossibilities (and impossible ones as well), or even about "real impossibilities" (like sin and grace, or gift and theft).

I would prefer not to speak of "tears and prayers," but rather about impossibilities as objects of reflection and/or modes of speech – as meditation and speech in the philosophy of religion. Finally, I would prefer to speak about the question of the impossibility of philosophy of religion itself.

The objects, questions, or topics of philosophy of religion are usually quite banal: texts, cultural phenomena as practice, and certain conflicts in interpretation. All these are *de dicto* problems of speaking about what has already been said.

But sometimes philosophy of religion is more ambitious: when it urges one to speak about what has been spoken about, not only *de dicto*, but also *de re* about the topics and themes of the texts that we are normally interpreting. Already this shift from *de dicto* to *de re* is as strange as it is uncertain, and it is highly risky. Studies in literature, for example, may interpret Goethe's *Faust* in various ways. A feminist reading may discover phallic metaphors in the scene in Faust called *Walpurgis Night* and may seek to draw conclusions about Goethe "himself." In consequence, Faust becomes a document of patriarchal fantasies, and the reader is in danger of being sexually harassed. The quest, however, is about the history behind and after the piece of literature, about the author, his culture, and the cultural differences in the readers' perspectives.

I have nothing against this – but can one imagine a critical reader crossing over from merely reading Faust to engaging actively with the topics of the text, discussing the pros and cons of the devil's existence? Or asking questions about "humanity" from an anthropological perspective? The study in literature would become anthropology or mephistology. Such a shift from the text to its topics and theses is impossible – usually. Within the limits of interpretation that are sometimes reached by ideologically burdened interpretations, the engagement extends far beyond the limits of criticism. Interpretations become "unscientific" by their grave ideological commitments and begin to criticize the very ideas and propositions of literary text. That is a shift from reading *de dicto* to *de re*.

The shift from *de dicto* to *de re* (often held to be a metaphysical shift or an unscientific one) may well be an indirect communication *de se*, that is, showing one's own perspective by saying something *de re*. It is a mode of risky exposition, where the idiomatic dimensions of speech become relevant. That is why I argued above that the whence, wherefore, and how of speech is decisive. To state it more generally: the future of philosophy of religion is not a repetition of what has already been said, so it is clearly not the orthodox or neometaphysical turn. Rather, it arises by daring to speak *de re* and *de se*. The unrealized impossibilities are a step in this direction. But you cannot avoid working at the exciting boundary between possibilities and impossibilities.

That means that the future of philosophy of religion is also a question of imagination and impossibility. The longer one works on the impossibilities, the more you wonder how to imagine what was (or is and will be) unimaginable. That is what it means to work on the expansion of one's horizon, an expansion of the world.

Leibniz's idea was that there are not only compossible possibilities, named "real possibilities," but incompossible ones too, namely, the incompossible possibilities that are "impossibilities." There, the compossibility is in question. And focusing a philosophy of religion only on the real possibilities, the compossible ones, makes factual reality the determination for the coming, the hoped-for future. But is it not theologically appropriate to make future impossibilities determine the reality we live in? It is quite simple: we distinguish the present in light of what is coming. That is what we do with law, with morality and with eschatology alike. Our orientation in the present is made via distinctions of the coming, for example, by the never quite realized "justice." If one dares to hope for even more, for more than justice, to hope for the so-called gospel, one may worry about the question of compossibility. The gospel is not simply a "real possibility": it is impossible and unrealized. It does not "fit" like an answer to a question. Rather, it is a challenge and a response – not simply possible, not compossible – to the grammar of our life-worlds. The responses to Jesus's parables are quite



clear in this regard. The sound and performance of the parables are held to be absurd impossibilities. That this absurdity is calculated and effective is nevertheless obvious.

## 10. More and Less – The Modal Paradoxes of Impossibilities

The mode of speech – that is, speech about coming and passing away – is decisive, as I have argued. One remarkable mode even in theory, whether in theology or philosophy of religion, is exceeding logic and grammar in an impossible manner. As a nominal definition of this excess one might say:

*a) Impossibilities are more than real – but less than possible*

Consider the symptomatic and idiomatic formulation of Eberhard Jüngel: God is "more than necessary." His idea was not to follow Hegel's logic of necessity and perhaps to avoid the Necessitarians (like Leibniz against Spinoza), because God would thereby be conceptualized in the logic of immanent necessity. That is why the *ens necessarium* does not apply, but neither do the *omnitudo realitatis* or the *omnitudo possibilitatis* even of *possibilitas realis*. The absurd formulation of "more than necessary" is an oxymoron or hyperbolic speech exceeding the limits of logic and pure reason.

It is similar to Lévinas's idea of a "more passive passivity." This "more" as well exceeds the grammatical correlation of active and passive. When Schleiermacher noticed that we always live in this correlation of relative activity and relative passivity in a dynamic polarity, then faith or feeling is different from this correlation. The "feeling of absolute dependence" crosses this relation – just as Luther's "mere (passive) was an absurdity used to demarcate a different relationship, crossing the correlations of activity and passivity.

Lévinas now does not seem to cross it but intensifies the passivity not by using the operator "mere (passive)," but by speaking of more passive. The rhetoric of philosophy would be another chapter, but it is a rhetorical gesture, pointing at a passivity of which we are not capable. It is neither in our capacity nor is it a "real possibility." It sounds impossible and it is impossible – for the *homo capax*. Nevertheless, it does occur and challenges humanity beyond our capacities.

I would add that the impossibilities by which we live (and die) are more than real. Reality may be what is, but the reality of that exercise of imagination by which we live is more than what is. At first glance, imagination and impossibilities, of course, should be considered unreal, even unrealizable. But at least in one's imagination they are not unreal but quite effec-

tive. For those who live by them (justice, gospel, gift, and grace) they are more than real.

The excess of logic and grammar, exceeding the limits of possibility, is the marker of such speech. Similarly, grammatical mistakes can function as what Gilbert Ryle called "category mistakes," as expression and exemplification of a view (perspective and horizon), and as a request not only to share attention but to share the same view. This game of communication is not without risks, because one might be considered an idiot or even worse (as Wolterstorff showed). That has already happened to the holy idiot (as Nietzsche wrote) named Jesus.

More than real but less than possible is marking the space of impossibilities – unrealized but real, impossible but possible in becoming. Such tentative modes of showing and "pointing at" appear to be nonsense but they are not without sense, sense for the impossible. In a destructive disposition one remains skeptical; in a more constructive disposition, one dares to speak emphatically and hyperbolically, and in-between one sounds ambivalent in one's ambiguities.

*b) Less than necessary – but more than contingent*

The "more" is the excellence, the true center of excellence, beyond all our centers of excellence. It is a mode of speaking which seems to speak nonsense on the semantic level. But the pragmatics are relevant, for it is a way of "pointing at" – in this case at the limits of immanence.

"More" is the deictic indicator for excess. But there is a need for an antagonist: the "less than." That is why I added that impossibilities are less than possible and therefore less than necessary. That is what I would respond to Jüngel's "more than necessary," for this formulation remains in competition with Hegel, going beyond his immanent necessity. But I suspect that if you compete with Hegel, you will surely lose.

Kierkegaard's way is more subtle. God is neither necessary nor more than necessary. I suppose he is less than necessary, weaker and somewhat powerless, if not impotent. That is inspired by the potential *passiva* of the crucified: his impotence is not only evident, but crucial for him to see God.

"Less than necessary" may mean simply contingent. Some clarifications would be necessary: the ordinary meaning of contingency would be insufficient, because it requests indifference as there is probably no God – or is there? A stronger sense of contingency is what seems to be contingent for an observer but if it "happened" and if "we lived by this happening," it was contingent but it became crucial for us. German mystics spoke of the *Zufallen Gottes,* of God's falling *to* us. A fallen God ... that is an understanding of contingency that might be appropriate for a speech *sub specie Christi*.

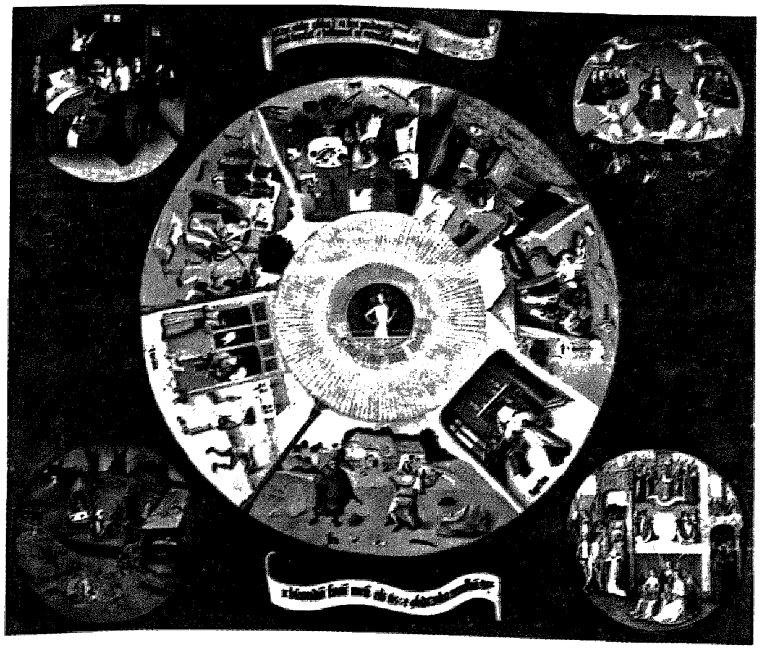


## 11. What may follow: how to deal with dangerous things like impossibilities?

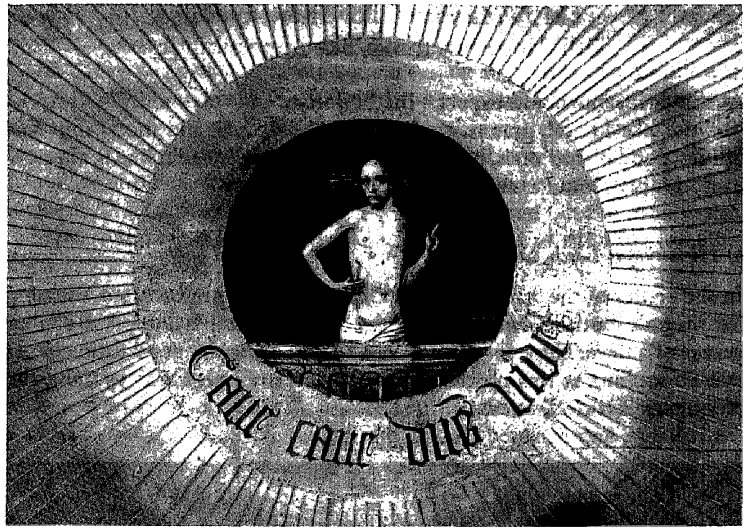
At this point one could expect a methodology and "taxonomy" of impossibilities like logical, grammatical, semantic, practical, and moral impossibilities, good or bad ones, bright or dark. But what I would like to do now instead is give some examples, to show and "point at."

*a) Hieronymus Bosch, Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things*

In the center of the "table" there is Christ, just being resurrected, showing his wounds. But the *tondo* – the center with Christ – is a pupil, the inner center of an eye. The iris with 128 rays surrounding the pupil forms God's eye. So looking at this picture is looking directly into God's eye, and the picture itself is God's view.



Hieronymus Bosch
*Die sieben Todsünden und Die vier letzten Dinge*, 1475–1480?
(The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things)
Museo del Prado, Madrid



Ausschnitt (Zentrum): Hieronymus Bosch
*Die sieben Todsünden und Die vier letzten Dinge*, 1475–1480?

"What we see is looking at us" was George Didi-Huberman's concise title. One may admit that it is looking at us (perhaps even watching us) – but does it see us? The perspective of the image looking back at the viewer is embodied in this artifact, in this image.

The first strange discovery is that you are looking at a table which is a picture of the deadly sins and the four last things, and in the center there is a remembrance of Christ. But suddenly you yourself are being watched and supervised or at last "seen" by God's eye.

The second strange thing is that, in the pupil of God's eye, Christ is being resurrected. What in the world might that mean? The resurrection is mirrored in God's eye. But the pupil is mirroring only what is actually seen by it. So God's eye is seeing us, but the resurrecting Christ is the image being reflected.

Could that mean that the eye seeing us is seeing us as resurrecting (or as resurrected)? That might be one challenge of the image: that we are seen by God, in God's eyes, as resurrected, i.e., as being "resurrected in Christ" and as a "new creation," as part of Christ himself. If that is the case, then we are seen as "justified in Christ." We are new in God's eyes, free from sin and death. The "imputative justification" is shown in this image (as an image). That "makes sense," for when we are seen by God as a new creation then



we are reminded of what we really are and the confrontation with sins is enacted. How is that still possible (and even real) if we are already sinless in Christ? The contradiction of being (in) Christ and being sinners is on display in an image and shown as an image confronting us with the double nature of our existence. There are impossibilities on every level:

- in the "semantics" of the image: between salvation in Christ and existence of sins;
- in the "pragmatics" of the image: showing "God's view" or even becoming that which God is seeing, watching us while being watched, showing us where and who we are (in Christ), but remembering at the same time what we live and how;
- and not least in our very existence.

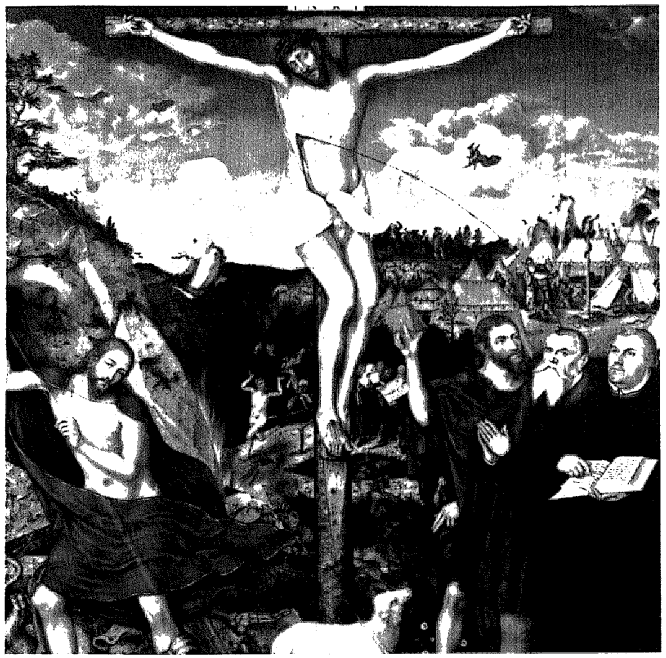
"God's eye," God's very pupil, the reflection of a resurrecting Christ, an image that watches the viewer, the contradiction of existence – the image seems overcrowded with impossibilities. Nevertheless, this example exists as an impossibility, for it is simply real, showing impossibilities while being one in itself. And this is only a painted table top. So philosophy's sense for impossibilities is not only to be concerned with "prayers and tears" but also with a simple table top.

To return now to the topic of time: the surface of the table says that one shall live in light of the four last things, that one shall be especially aware of the difference between heaven and hell. Avoid sin – look at Christ. But beneath the surface, God's view becomes real presence through the presence of Christ in God's eye and our sudden confrontation with God's perspective. That is the transcendence of time through the presence of the transcendent and through transcending into our presence so that we transcend our presence in sin. It is an encapsulated time-event, showing what happens to the "observer" who is suddenly involved in the picture.

### *b) Cranach, Pictures as communion sanctorum – as Holy Communion*

The second example is similar: it is from Cranach again but now in Weimar, in the so-called Herder-Church (because Herder was pastor there). At first glance, the image shows an impossibility: the co-presence of Moses, Christ, Luther and Cranach. That means that the event of salvation or justification is crossing chronological time, because salvation is co-present to every time. The claim is clear as well: Reformation is the real presence of Christ.

What is possible in a systematic synchronicity (the lack of time and history), but which sounds impossible for history and perhaps for hermeneutics, is possible in the "all-at-once" of an image. It does not reflect ignorance of historicity but expresses an economy of salvation.



Cranach the Elder, completed by Cranach the Younger
Altar of the Peter- and Paul Church in Weimar, 1552–55
Middle Panel

But there is even more happening here:

(1) Cranach the Elder is catching the blood from Christ's wound. That is normally the role of "ecclesia," the symbolic figure that represents the Church. Could this mean that the painter is receiving the gift of grace (or what Friedrich Ohly called the stream of grace)?

(2) A serpent is originating from this stream above Cranach's head. Does that mean that his signature (the winged serpent) emerges out of the blood by virtue of Christ's grace? Then one might think that his painting is a medium of grace and this painting was a real communication of grace.

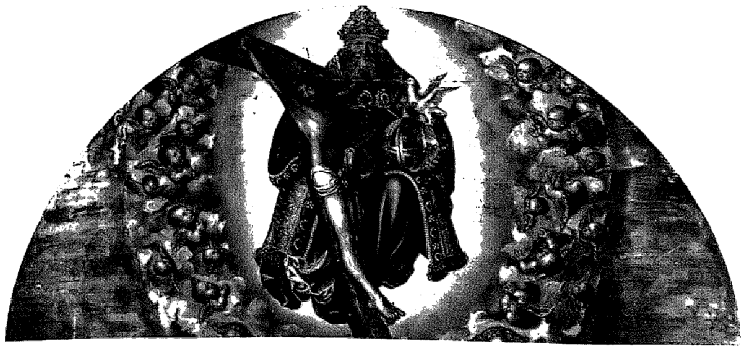
(3) Finally, when Cranach is looking at the observer, is he communicating with him or her and passing on what he has received? Does that mean that this painting is nothing less than a communication and communion of grace given by showing and seeing? Then this would be an event of emancipation proclaiming the equality of sacramental Communion and images. Of course, that would be impossible for Reformation theology, but



it is real – if one dares to express a sense for the impossible. And it is already real in the reality in which we live. (And it embodies what was usual in pre-Reformation times).

*c) Cranach, Erection in the Moment of Death – as Resurrection?*

Remember my remarks on the fallen God, the impotent Christ, powerless and weak. This view is challenged by Cranach the Elder. We have two versions of his *Gnadenstuhl*, the so-called "mercy seat," his view of the Trinity. One may call these images the "phallic Trinity"[3]:



Cranach the Elder
Die heilige Dreifaltigkeit, ca. 1515–18
Kunsthalle Bremen

What is (intentionally) shown here is rather obvious and yet still somehow incomprehensible. It is probably no coincidence that this version of the "mercy seat" is not well-known, but it remains a vexing piece[4] whose meaning remains obscure. Despite the prolific scholarship on Cranach, most efforts to understand this particular piece of art leave one perplexed and baffled.

[3] All images from Rainer Stamm, ed., *Lucas Cranach der Schnellste: Kunstsammlungen Böttcherstraße* (Bremen: Hachmann Edition, 2009).

[4] Cf. Terence Koh, "Gone, Yet Still." The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, England exhibited objects of Koh that portrayed Mickey Mouse, ET, and Jesus Christ with an erection.

Cranach the Elder
*Trinity*, ca. 1516–18
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Leo Steinberg tried to display the painting as a sensation. He tried to use paintings like Cranach's *Trinity* to establish his thesis that the sexuality of Christ has been continuously suppressed by theologians and art historians alike.[5] Hans Belting[6] responded that the point was rather "that the Bible

[5] See Leo Steinberg, ed., *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1996).

[6] Hans Belting, *Das echte Bild: Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen*, 2nd ed. (München: Beck, 2006), 109–113.



ascribes to the Son of God all the properties of the male body, including the genitals, but without suggesting any sexual practices. Instead, one more time a contrast is formed between the *corpus Christi* and the body of man which is not even mentioned by Steinberg."[7]

But this does not resolve our vexation and bewilderment. Whatever may be shown here, it remains strange and disconcerting, especially when we ask why it is shown and why it is shown that way. To understand it as a didactical illustration (*Lehrbild*) of Protestant theology is simply absurd.

The painting exceeds its own limits: it shows much more than what is said. That is the reason for the lack of authoritative iconological sources. The relevant official exhibition catalog[8] has nothing to say about this confusion; in fact, it does not even mention it. What shall we say, then, about these things, about such a painting? It certainly cannot be said that the doctrine is merely illustrated or that the letter of theology dominates the picture. Rather, by its "showing," the painting has its own original place beyond any kind of theological discourse. The painting emancipates itself from the expectations of theologians and believers because the way the perichoresis and the in-itself-differentiated Trinitarian unity are depicted is deeply deranged. Should the human nature of Christ and its attributes be illustrated in just such a way?

In search of sources that might deliver some helpful background information or at least some "crutches" for our understanding, we might first turn to Paul: "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want" (Gal 5:16, 17; New International Version).

Could this be the background of Cranach's "mercy seat"? To say what sin is – what it feels like and how life "under the law" is affected by it – Paul used the familiar metaphors of desire (*epithymia/concupiscentia*). The relation is one of *concretum pro abstracto*, of cause and effect, of a part and its whole. In any case, it is a form of figurative language used to speak about sin – whatever it may be (disbelief, distance from God or even hostility towards God). Whether this metaphor of desire or lust is (in a broader sense) an instance of synecdoche or metonymy (the substitution of species for the genus or a part for the whole), whether there is contiguity between (sexual) desire (or lust) and sin (metonymy) or a continuity ("metaphor" in the narrow sense of the word), is certainly a question of interpretation and

[7] Belting, *Das echte Bild*, 111.

[8] Cf. Stamm, *Lucas Cranach der Schnellste*.

is a hermeneutical matter that has implications for the way we understand the inner relations and differentiations among the tropes. Talking about a metaphor in the narrow sense of the word could point to the "unruliness" of desire, of its antagonism towards reason and the will, despite all dissimilarities between the relation to oneself, on the one hand, and the relation to God on the other. If one takes it to be a metonymy, we would only be talking about one relation, either the relation of cause and effect or (in the case of synecdoche) the relation of a part to the whole. But to draw a clear distinction between the realm of self-relation and the relation to God and to prevent confusion, it seems most appropriate and discrete to simply call it metaphor.

When desire (*epithymia/concupiscentia*) becomes the central metaphor for sin (and the sexual connotations become clearer and clearer historically until we ultimately reach Augustine), we might understand Romans 7:8: "But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead." When *epithymia* and *concupiscentia* are stimulated, sin makes itself noticeable in the provoking force of the law. Paul puts it even more clearly in Romans 7:5: "While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death."

So if the Christ in Cranach's "mercy seat" illustrates sin by his erect phallus, is it meant to show the effects of sin as Paul understood it? Sin shows itself in a metonymic or metaphorical way by desire (*epithymia/concupiscentia*), and this is shown by the erect phallus. But how can that be if Christ was without any sin and therefore could not be acquainted with this desire that runs counter to the law?[9] Is the figure of Christ with an erection then an illustration of a sinner? That he is illustrated here as a human being is only one aspect of the painting. Insofar as he is shown entering into the Trinitarian relationship, however, it implies that he is also being illustrated as the true God, which should have the consequence that he appears without any hint of sin or its manifestation in sinful desire. In short: the erect phallus runs counter to Protestant Christology and is deeply disconcerting, largely because Christ is the epitome of non-sinfulness.

But perhaps we might consider a formulation of Paul's that is somewhat more confusing and difficult to understand. It is the *locus classicus* of Pauline soteriology and Christology in 2 Cor 5:14–21 with the strange formulation in verse 21 that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That God made him "to be sin (for us)" is the *crux interpretandum* and has provoked numerous attempts to arrive at an adequate understanding of the text. Otfried

[9] Even if one rejects the thesis of Jesus's sinlessness, the thesis is a theological and iconological prerequisite in this context.



Hofius explains: "What we have here ... is a metonymy in which the abstract expression 'sin' stands for the concreter expression 'sinner' ... the metonymy 'sin' instead of 'sinner' articulates in the sharpest possible way what qualifies the very being of sinful man."[10] Christ-made-sinner then would represent the "dissolution" of this metonymy. This does not immediately simplify our interpretation, however. One must take a further Christological step: When Christ "sacrifices himself" or "is sacrificed" and the metaphors of atonement constitute the background of our verses, then the point in being "made a sinner" is the identification of Christ with the "sin of the world" or, to be more exact, with the sin of all humanity. It is the lowest point of the Incarnation and its soteriological meaning: to become one with all humans in order to reconcile them by inclusive substitution. Although there still remains a need for clarification, we can now understand the erect Christ as a radical figuration of the one that is "made sin (for us)" as it is manifested in a final coveting.[11]

So the hermeneutical thesis regarding this strange Cranach painting sounds quite simple: it is the illustration of 2 Cor 5:21 in a picture whose semantic implications run much deeper and thicker than those of the text, insofar as it is not a mere "illustration" that only renders or portrays something which can already be found by interpreting the text.

[10] Otfried Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung: Zum paulinischen Verständnis des Kreuzestodes Jesu," in Hofius, *Paulusstudien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 33–49, 47.

[11] At this point, medical background information might be helpful. Since the chest of a crucified person usually collapses, he suffocates the moment he cannot hold himself upright any longer. Therefore, breaking the legs was a common means to hasten death. As in other cases of death by suffocation (asphyxia), one must expect the usual phenomena of dyspnea, and erection is one of them. But it would probably be anachronistic to ascribe such medical knowledge to Cranach himself (despite the high medical standards of the Renaissance). And it would not be very promising in a hermeneutical respect either, because then it would only illustrate a medical *aperçu*. The Cyclops episodes in James Joyce's *Ulysses* might provide a clue why public executions were so popular: the hanged man had a final erection, the so-called death erection. Crucifixion, then, involved a final display of the criminal's sexuality, especially when the crucified person was naked. Cf. Hanskarl Kölsch, *James Joyce: Ulysses* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2008), 237; James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2004), 999 among other passages. For more historical and exegetical background, cf. Martin Hengel, "Mors turpissima crucis: Die Kreuzigung in der antiken Welt und die 'Torheit' des 'Wortes vom Kreuz,'" in Johannes Friedrich et al, eds., *Rechtfertigung: Festschrift Ernst Käsemann* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1976), 125–184. English translation available as Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989).

A clue to this interpretation can be found in a concise phrase of Luther: "Christus ... factus est peccatum metaphorice."[12] Here, the delegation of sin onto Christ becomes his most basic attribute; it is not only a delegation of sin in a merely "figurative" sense but *sin qua sin*. Luther continues: "Et vt ad institutum veniamus, Christus offerretur pro nobis, factus est peccatum metaphorice, cum peccator ita fuerit per omnia similis, damnatus, derelictus, confusus, vt nulla re differret a vero peccatore, quam quod reatum et peccatum, quod tulit, ipse non fecerat."[13] That sin which he did not commit himself, he suffered on the cross. That is, this manifestation of desire was not something "intended" by Christ but rather something he suffered in death. Of course, this can be understood altogether differently, as we will see in the case of Augustine.

So what was formulated in an abstract, metonymical way in the text becomes concrete in the image. The indirect message becomes a direct picture and thus tends to conceal the Christological and soteriological meanings in a sensual cloak. To claim that the painting is only an otherwise-suppressed exposition of the "sexuality of Christ" (as Steinberg maintains) is a less-than-adequately complex interpretation (though not without some merits) that simply falls short. If that were all there were to this picture, it would merely serve to document the allegedly sensational discovery of the fact that Christ was human, with all its corporeal implications.

The concrete image and rendering of metonymy in the metaphorical imagery of a picture always risks missing the sense of the sensuality. Its benefit in this case is that it becomes very obvious that Christ dies "as a sinner," but the question remains whether he can do so without *being* a sinner. Rendered in this way, the painting becomes ambiguous again. Add to this the fact that the erect phallus as a concrete thing is a rather unfavorable metaphor for sin.

Another ambiguity in Cranach's painting lies in the question whether Christ in his death is meant to display the overcoming of sin, death and desire. Is the erect phallus a manifestation of the sin he took on, or is it a manifestation of the power of his life, a power over death at the moment of death? The erection can thus be understood in two opposing ways: either as the sin he suffered and took on himself or as the overcoming of that very sin. And this leads to a question that might sound merely speculative or overly scholastic: Is this erection to be understood as intentional or

[12] Martin Luther, *Rationis Latomianae pro incendiariis Lovaniensis scholae sophistis redditae Lutheriana confutatio* (1521), vol. 2, *Studienausgabe*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1992), 467, 16–17. Cf. Stephan Schaede, *Stellvertretung: Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur Soteriologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 329ff.

[13] Ibid., 467, 16–19.



unintentional? It might sound absurd, but this is exactly the point where Augustine saw the decisive hamartiological difference.

Augustine claimed that to desire the world or even to desire oneself represented the perversion of (true) desire. After the Fall, Adam and Eve "sensed the new impulse of their disobedient flesh."[14] The Fall is the reason desire became sin (Contra Jul V, 8[15]) that everyone is born with, such that all unbaptized children are "children of wrath" (I 29, 57[16]). This is why he could argue that sin was reproduced by the corrupted human semen,[17] which spreads by substantial infection (Contra Jul V, 3, 8).[18]

The consequences are well-known: sexual desire[19] became viewed as the epitome of sin, and in so-called "Puritanical" settings it still is.[20] Viewed anthropologically, this is obviously nonsense, but it is also theologically problematic because it conceals rather than elucidates what sin actually is (that is, estrangement and separation from God). The identification of sin with (sexual) desire introduced a metaphysics of desire in which the desires of body and soul became a chaotic power opposing the regulative faculty of reason. The seven deadly sins are a catalog and index of human desires, a bestiary of human failure: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Sexuality becomes the hoard of evil and wrongful desire.[21] Where metaphors are understood literally, we get bad metaphysics.

By reading Augustine closely, it becomes clear that desire as concupiscence was originally a metaphor for sin no longer understood as metaphor. Desire is not in itself sin or guilt, but the latter emerge from the former.

[14] De civ. XIII, 13; HDG 211 "Senserunt ergo novum motum inobedientis carnis suae, tamquam reciprocam poenam inobedientiae suae ... secutumest ... ex debit ajustapoena tale vitium."

[15] Then the desire itself is "the evil of sin" (De pecc. mer. et rem. I 39, 70).

[16] "Idem ambitus peccati originalis et concupiscentiae carnalis. Bonum ergo coniugii non est fervor concupiscentiae, sed quidam licitus et honestus illo fervore utendi modus propagandae proli, non explendae libidini accommodatus. Voluntas ista, non voluptas illa nuptialis est. Quod igitur in membris corporis mortis huius inoboedienter movetur totumque animum in se deiectum conatur adtrahere et neque cum mens voluerit exsurgit neque cum mens voluerit conquiescit, hoc est malum peccati, cum quo nascitur omnis homo."

[17] Cf. Op. imp. II, 12 ("Natura bona sunt semina, sed vitiantur et semina eisque vitiatis propagantur et vitia").

[18] Of course, the virgin birth preserved Christ from being "infected," and so he was also free from lust (cf. Contra Jul.V 15, 54).

[19] ontrary: De nupt. et conc. I ("Concupiscentia carnis non est appetitus naturalis").

[20] When Augustine talked of sin "in a proper sense he meant the unreasonable and disorderly emotions of sensual desire, especially sexual desire." Heinrich Köster, *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte* II/3b (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1979), 141.

[21] Cf. De civ. Dei XIV, 24–26; cf. M. Luther, "Readings on Genesis 1535/38," *WA* 42, 89f.

The presence of concupiscence was meant to clarify the loss of the relationship to God in a "sensible" way: the loss results in anarchistic and uncontrollable desires. The invisible is made visible, the inexpressible expressible and the loss sensible.

At this point, much depends on accurately understanding the term "desire" itself. Augustine himself was still aware of its metaphorical character. Therefore, he states that Paul only called it sin in the sense that sin was its cause and its result.[22] Did he then consider desire as a metonymy, in which the effect was mistaken for the cause?[23] Or did he consider it a synecdoche (*pars pro toto*) and mistake it for the essence of sin? In all hermeneutical fairness, I should point out that Augustine considered concupiscence as a sign[24] of sin because he denotes sin by its effects. The spiritual remoteness of God, for example, becomes apparent in the physical realm as in the disobedience of the body.[25]

(How easily the metaphorical "is and is not" is often reduced to a simple "is" can be seen in the case of Melanchthon. Here, the desire called "concupiscence" is a "bad" desire or inclination and becomes the reason why we, despite being granted the light of reason, struggle against God, as he writes in the Apologia of the Augsburg Confession.[26] The archetype and essence of this "fleshly" disobedience is (not very surprisingly) the very non-intentionality of the erection: an unruliness of the flesh that first bothered Adam after the Fall.)

Augustine reflects on the problem hamartiologically in *The City of God* with a rather strange theory of erection: "Sometimes this lust importunes them in spite of themselves, and sometimes fails them when they desire to feel it, so that though lust rages in the mind, it stirs not in the body."[27] But why is this the case? "Justly is shame very specially connected with this lust; justly, too, these members themselves, being moved and restrained not at our will, but by a certain independent autocracy, so to speak, are called shameful. Their condition was different before sin."[28] Thus the (secondary) paraphrasing title of chapter XIV 24 summarizes: "That If Men Had Remained Innocent and Obedient in Paradise, the Generative Organs Should

[22] Cf. De nupt. et conc. I 23, 25.

[23] This is the view of L. Scheffczyk in *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte* II/3a (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Verlag Herder, 1981), 219.

[24] Cf. L. Scheffczyk, 221; Cf. William of Ockham, Qdl. III, 10: "Signum est, cum non sit in Christo et in beatis" (HDG II/3b, 142).

[25] Then it is not the desire which is evil in itself but the evil desire. The former is wrong, the latter trivial.

[26] Cf. BSELK 152: "Neque vero concupiscentia tantum corruptio qualitatum corporis est, sed etiam prava conversio ad carnalia in superioribus viribus".

[27] De civ. XIV 16.

[28] De civ. XIV 17. Cf. De Genesi ad litteram IX, 10.



Have Been in Subjection to the Will as the Other Members are." In Augustine's own words:

> The man, then, would have sown the seed, and the woman received it, as need required, the generative organs being moved by the will, not excited by lust. For we move at will not only those members which are furnished with joints of solid bone, as the hands, feet, and fingers, but we move also at will those which are composed of slack and soft nerves: we can put them in motion, or stretch them out, or bend and twist them, or contract and stiffen them, as we do with the muscles of the mouth and face. The lungs, which are the very tenderest of the viscera except the brain, and are therefore carefully sheltered in the cavity of the chest, yet for all purposes of inhaling and exhaling the breath, and of uttering and modulating the voice, are obedient to the will when we breathe, exhale, speak, shout, or sing, just as the bellows obey the smith or the organist ... And therefore man himself also might very well have enjoyed absolute power over his members had he not forfeited it by his disobedience; for it was not difficult for God to form him so that what is now moved in his body only by lust should have been moved only at will. ... Seeing, then, that even in this mortal and miserable life the body serves some men by many remarkable movements and moods beyond the ordinary course of nature, what reason is there for doubting that, before man was involved by his sin in this weak and corruptible condition, his members might have served his will for the propagation of offspring without lust? Man has been given over to himself because he abandoned God, while he sought to be self-satisfying; and disobeying God, he could not obey even himself. Hence it is that he is involved in the obvious misery of being unable to live as he wishes. For if he lived as he wished, he would think himself blessed; but he could not be so if he lived wickedly.[29]

This strange reflection speculates about the difference between the intentional regulation of erection in the prelapsarian state and its non-intentionality in the postlapsarian state. With this in mind, for the person of Christ we have to assume a voluntary and intentional freedom of choice. The ambiguity we mentioned before becomes especially apparent here: is the erect phallus of the crucified Christ not only a manifestation of the sin he suffered but also (at the same time?) a demonstration of his divinity at the very moment of death? If so, it might represent the overcoming of sin by the sinless Christ in the act of suffering from sin.

In this case, Cranach would be enacting a theological paradox: he shows the power that manifests its power in its powerlessness. One might also note a slight whiff of heresy here: does Cranach present Christ as someone who is alive and in control of his limbs even in his death? If so, it might seem as if Christ were not "really" dead.

The strange ambiguity that arises from Augustine's considerations can certainly not be presumed to be known by Cranach nor by most spectators. In this respect, the question does not have to be settled. As a response

[29] Cf. De civ. Dei XIV, 24.

to Hans Belting's critique, it is sufficient to point out the inferences one can draw between 2 Cor 5:21 and Cranach's "mercy seat" to illustrate merely that the relation between the power of images and the power of words, the power of the painter and the power of the theologian, was by no means as hierarchically structured as Belting supposes. The image was and still is much more powerful than most people think or say. The seen image (as well as the read text) is more powerful than either word or text is willing to concede. The iconic dynamic and energy disproves both the semantics of theological theories as well as their critiques on the part of image theory. But this does not yet resolve the question of how this dynamic and energy in the relationship of word and image ought to be understood in the case of the example above.

### *d) "Mensch Käßmann: Vom Umgang mit der Schuld" (Der Spiegel, September 2010)*[30]

Last year there was an interesting incident in Germany concerning the Protestant church. A drunk bishop ran a red light with an alcohol level significantly above the legal limit in Germany and subsequently revealed to the public that she was an alcoholic. She resigned from her positions in the church and – as time went by – became the newest saint of German Protestantism, "Saint Margot." What she did (drinking and driving) is not exemplary, of course. But contrary to some convictions, it is not a "sin" in the theological sense. It is merely stupid and irresponsible, but not a violation of one's relationship to God. Nevertheless, Käßmann was first crucified by the mass media and then she became their darling: the resurrection after crucifixion.

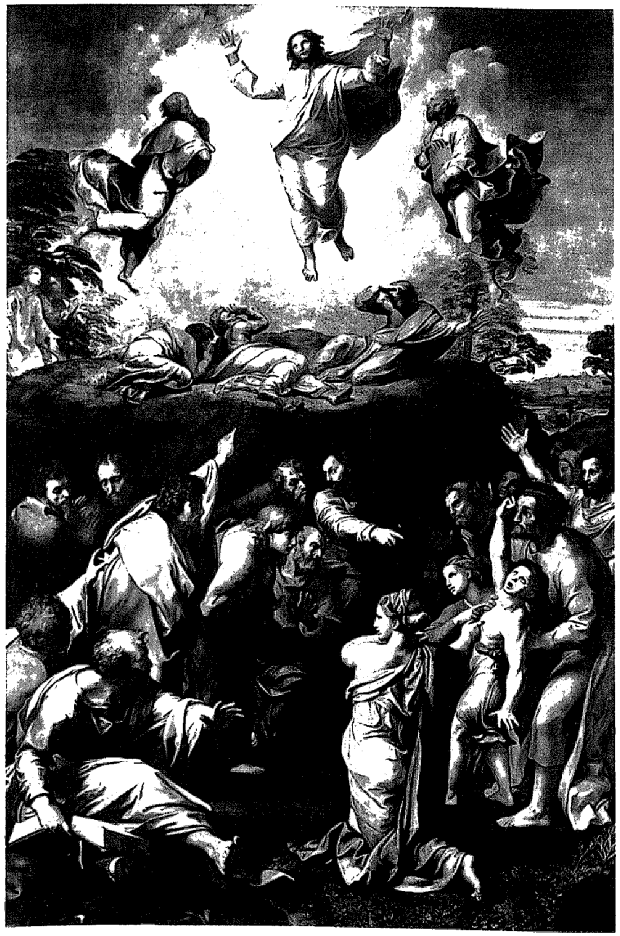
"Can images kill?" was the question raised by the image-theorist Marie-Jose Mondzain.[31] As we know, sometimes they can. But the next question is: are they able to transfigure and resurrect as well? Yes, they can! Consider, for example the burial scene painted by Raphael, when his most famous painting, the transfiguration of Christ, was presented above his coffin.

The image not only displays the greatness of the painter and his real presence in his work, but also the transfiguration of Raphael himself. It is a strange exceeding of finitude. The image seems to become *capax infiniti*, the transfigured body of resurrection.

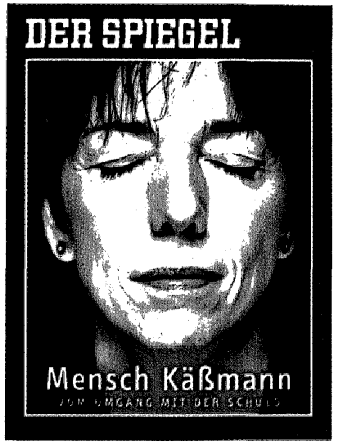
[30] The title can be roughly translated as: "Käßmann, a (Fallible) Human Being?: Dealing with Guilt".

[31] Cf. Marie-Jose Mondzain, *L'image peut-elle tuer?* (Montrouge: Bayard Jeunesse, 2010).





Raphael
The Transfiguration of Christ
ca. 1516–1520
Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome




*Der Spiegel*, September 2010

Another intriguing example of this was a photo of the aforementioned Bishop Käßmann, just after her resignation from her position, which appeared on the cover of the German magazine *Der Spiegel*.

The iconic performance is clear at first glance: it is a death mask. It shows the bishop as dead. She has been symbolically killed. It is an old idea that someone is executed "in effigy" if he or she is not bodily present. But at second glance even more is happening here because the face is not only in the iconographic tradition of death masks but also reflects a kind of transfiguration. The face is already shining blissfully as if she is not totally dead, but already resurrecting a little. This iconic ambivalence is expressed with a particular conciseness as if one has an icon of a dead person in the moment of resurrection or transfiguration.

It is impossible but real – and therefore really puzzling.