

From Polycrisis to Christology

📖 Die gegenwärtige Zeit der Polykrise wirkt als Brandbeschleuniger eines emotionalen Ethos der Überforderung durch Angst und Sorge. Der Aufsatz befasst sich mit der Polykrise als theologischem Thema und entwirft eine kritisch-theoretische Perspektive auf „Transzendenz“, die produktive Wege des Hoffens, Handelns und Denkens eröffnet. Das konstruktive theologische Argument lehnt sich an Howard Thurmans Formulierung „Religion of the Disinherited“ („Religion der Enterbten“) an.

🔗 Polykrise, Kritische Theorie, Unfreiheit, Polycrisis, Critical Theory,

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Polycrisis has been a global buzzword in 2023. The term denotes the intersecting, overlapping, and reciprocal crises that plague our contemporary planet. Each crisis, whether political, cultural, or economic, is interrelated with other crises that mutually exacerbate each other's effects. Anti-Black racism compounds with the militarization of the local police force: Derek Chauvin used his knee to murder George Floyd in just over nine minutes on May 25, 2020. When misogyny intersects with both class and conservative Christianity, then poor women are forced to give birth to infants with few options for social assistance. Tackling one crisis, like an oil spill, means also addressing another crisis, for example the inordinate power of the corporate political lobby, and another, the neo-colonial geopolitical forces that exploit people and the natural world. Destruction caused by the Anthropocene travels interconnected chains “all the way down.”

Interconnected Horrors

Polycrisis in all its interconnected horrors calls into question the possibility of the good life (except for the ultra-rich who will always claim space for personal flourishing). Everyone and everything else – the over eight billion inhabitants of this planet, in addition to all of planetary life from amoebas to sequoias – are endangered by polycrisis. What was once the object of aspiration – the good life –



has become increasingly elusive. The summer of 2023 is evidence of this consensus. Climate change is a real threat to life. The warming planet is connected to out-of-control wildfires and inordinate flooding of coastal homes and regions. Death and devastation are the tangible consequences. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, too, is human-caused. The Anthropocene also has its dictators. War's horrific wreckage includes bombed-out schools and maternity wards; bodies tortured, raped, and killed; orphaned children abducted to the invading country. The summer of 2023 has disenchanting the desire for a good life that, in the western world, is measured by upward mobility, a decent living wage, loving personal lives, and self-actualization through education, meaningful work, and leisure. Economic metrics show that upward mobility is increasingly unrealistic among the middle class, while wealth inequality between the ultra-rich and the working poor is at its most extreme since just prior to World War I, as economist Thomas Piketty has claimed.¹ Geopolitics, late modern capitalism (still reliant on fossil fuels) and multinational corporations affect local communities through the effects of climate change, wealth discrepancies, and webs of exploitation. What is the good life when contemporary polycrisis denies its possibility?

What is the Good Life?

In this brief essay, I reflect on the topic of capitalism and the good life from a theological perspective. For my theological method, I appropriate the insights of critical theory, which is common in the humanities today. Diagnosis is the first step. Critical theory takes up diagnostics of contemporary society through the use of reason that is embedded within modernity's structures that reason adjudicates. Reason is embodied in thinking persons; their biases and socio-cultural positionalities are reflected in their judgments. Yet contemporary reason, as Max Horkheimer put it, is restricted to what he calls "subjective reason."² This type of reason is immanent to modernity. It has lost any referral to transcendence, or in Horkheimer's terms, objective values that can be used to evaluate subjective reason for its truth. Subjective reason cannot measure its own truth because it has lost access to the objective standards by which truth can be ascertained. Subjective reason elevates its values, personal and random, that are immanent to the system; their "truth" is contingent upon the values structuring the system in the first place.

Critical theorists today operate in a number of disciplines in the humanities: Black studies, literary-linguistic studies, performance theory, and constructive

1 TH. PIKETTY, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2014.

2 This paragraph is based on sections of Max Horkheimer's essay *Means and Ends* (in: M. HORKHEIMER, *Eclipse of Reason*, 1947, 3–57).



22 theology. In general, they invoke capitalism as a structural feature of the modern world. Capitalism has had different iterations, such as early modern mercantilism, nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism, and now, neo-liberal capitalism tied to the global reach of technology, logistics, and corporations. Yet this form of economic exchange is identified as the defining feature of the modern world system, shaping values associated with its hegemony. Humanists correlate capitalism with the rise of the nation state; this rise explains why particular subjective cultural values are endemic to modernity: anti-Black and anti-indigenous racism, the domination of women, and persecution of persons who do not conform to the gender binary and to heterosexist intimacy. These pejorative values are immanent to the system of modernity because their opposites determine the default: white supremacy, the patriarchy, heterosexuality. Political identities that deviate from modernity's imposed norms are diminished through violence. In fact, the hierarchies of race and gender affirm an order that is reinforced by violence. Weber could not have imagined the grip of the "iron cage" of capitalism as one that includes the genocides of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the rise of authoritarianisms, and the degradation of planetary life to the point of the sixth extinction and insect apocalypse.

Can Philosophy Make Room for Theology?

Reason's diagnosis of society's problems is a task within its capacity. It is, however, reason's facility to prescribe the way forward for social transformation that poses the epistemological problem. This challenge is one that confronts humanists working today within the purview of critical theory. Can reason think beyond its conditions in order to imagine an "otherwise" that cannot be contaminated by the defaults coded into the system? Can reason reach beyond subjectivity to objectivity and thereby reconfigure the entire system from the perspective of new defaults supplied by transcendence? Can philosophy make room for theology, as Horkheimer asked in an interview from January 1970 and later published with a commentary, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*?³

While Horkheimer was opposed to philosophy transcending its limits of reason in order to reach the "wholly other," he was open to theology as possible conveyer of this reality. Theologians, admittedly, have for the most part insisted that their discipline is one that deploys reason for finding fitting human words to point to divine realities. Furthermore, theologians have used reason to point out ways to fulfill this task. Thinking about the Trinity has required theologians to stretch reason in innovative ways. Late medieval theologians, like Martin Luther,

3 M. HORKHEIMER, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*. Ein Interview mit Kommentar von Helmut Gumnior, 1970.



made specific logical distinctions – such as the relative and the absolute – in order to think through how the divine essence constitutes each of the three persons of God without adding a fourth dimension to God. They also claimed that the divine essence is not shared among the three trinitarian persons as pieces of a pie but that the entire divine essence characterizes each of the three persons.⁴ Reason, for theologians, is not constrained by what philosophers think reason can do, but is to be used and enjoyed (*uti et frui!*) to make sense of divine revelation.

This theological openness to transcendence is significant in a contemporary context in which the quest for social transformation must be determined by those marginalized and exploited by empire. Theologians have become accustomed to thinking about the world as it “ought to be” from the perspectives of the theological elite. Yet theologians must be challenged to align their thinking with the lives of those on the other side of empire’s power. Take the concept of freedom as an example. The concept has been theorized by the theologians and philosophers privileged in the “empire” of knowledge production. Yet these same scholars have regarded freedom as one of the constitutive features of the modern world without recognizing that the “other side” of freedom characterizes the lives of both women and colonized persons. The freedom of the modern man presupposes that the “not free” live under the conditions of anti-Black racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.

Religion of the Disinherited

Theologians must thus attend to what African American theologian Howard Thurman calls the “religion of the disinherited.” In his work, Thurman asks the bold question – what if theology were framed from the experience of those who have been marginalized by social-political and racialized systems?⁵ What if theologians wrote about religion from the positionality of the persons disinherited by systems of power? Thurman points to Christianity and identifies its very origins in the disenfranchisement of Jews under Roman rule. Empire determines the thoughts and actions of Jesus and his followers. Jesus stood up for the dignity of personhood under the conditions in which the personhood of the conquered was denied. The origins of Christianity offer the promise of an interpretive key that has been forgotten after Constantine, but recapitulated by persons through the generations who have been disinherited from successions of imperial rule.

What the positionality of the disinherited affirms is that there is no linear historical progress towards the good life. Rather there are dispositions that affirm

4 For more on this topic, see G. WHITE, *Luther as Nominalist*, 2024.

5 See H. THURMAN, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, foreword by Vincent Harding, (1949) 21996.



dignity under empire, survival through oppression, and resistance to oppressive power. The question Thurman asks concerns the type of religion that is practiced and believed when one has visceral knowledge that fears police brutality; that surrenders zest for life to reckoning with dying during a nighttime raid; that is constantly aware of the rejection of one's expertise because of the wrong gender or skin color; that tries to make oneself invisible to constant threats against bodily autonomy. The knowledge that is embodied by the disinherited is one that notices another side to empire. Here life is noticed in the ruins of capitalism, to quote anthropologist Anna Tsing.⁶ Here dimensions to life, experience, practice, disposition, and felt existence offer different perceptions on what it means to be human in this world as it is.

When theologians write from this other side of the modern system – the disinherited – they gain a distinct positionality from which to reach towards transcendence. Not the good life imagined by empire, but different content about the world as it ought to be. The thought of sociologist Orlando Patterson is relevant here. Patterson's work on freedom presupposes persons who are "not free".⁷ The question of freedom as the object of hope requires the positionality of those who are not free. What is freedom to the person held captive by empire (cf. Luke 4:18)? Theological approaches to transcendence must be imagined from the experiences of those who long to be resurrected in a body that is not already pejoratively determined by culture and politics: What does it mean to be free from the prejudices imposed upon bodily existence; how can one imagine enjoying the body one has been given; what would the world look like if one perceives the joy of others in one's presence to them? Theologians have as their *métier* the task of imagining an otherwise to this worldly existence in the flesh. Thinking with transcendence reaches beyond what is to what can be, a worldly existence in the flesh! It is an imagining together with the economic terms that philosopher Kohei Saito uses to announce "the radical abundance of 'communal/common wealth'" that "signifies a non-consumerist way of life in a post-scarcity economy which realizes a safe and just society in the face of global ecological crisis in the Anthropocene".⁸ Can theologians think through the beloved community in analogous terms?

6 A. LOWENHAUPT TSING, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, 2015.

7 O. PATTERSON, *Freedom*, vol. 1: *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, rev. ed. 1992.

8 K. SAITO, *Marx in the Anthropocene. Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, 2022, 8.



Is this a Revolution?

Is this a “revolution”? Indeed theologians must think with the input of divine realities. In this regard there is a distinctive shape to the revolution that divinity precipitates – a revolution from the human immanence system to the transcendent things of God. The shape of this revolution is discernible, based on the particular features of Christianity’s origin. Jesus’ first advent embodied features that were recorded in the gospels. Individuals were freed from captivity to demons, sin, illness, and even death. Other individuals feared that these acts took away from their own power. And other individuals, his friends, seemed not to recognize that Jesus’ presence meant a new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

Theological thinking about the world as it can be takes up the theme of Jesus’ signs and wonders among the disinherited and his call to the protagonists of empire to relinquish their worldly power. The vision of a beloved community elicits theological content for the “good life”. Its foundation is Christological – the evidence of divinity’s love that offers justice in this world and establishes righteousness at the center of the next. In Christ there is revolution – a power that willingly gives up death-dealing power in order that abundant life becomes real. “For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom 1:17).⁹

⁹ Christine Helmers jüngste Veröffentlichung (gemeinsam mit Amy Carr) trägt den Titel *Ordinary Faith in Polarized Times: Justification and Justice* (Baylor University Press, 2023).