

KASPER, MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

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In this essay I wish to consider the relationship between Christian theology, and modernity and postmodernity, not in terms of disputes about what theology should or should not borrow from what is new in these periods, but in terms of what modernity and postmodernity can teach Christianity *about itself*, as it stands already, and, on this basis, about its relation to thought in recent centuries. In making a case to this effect, I will draw extensively from Walter Kasper's thought.

Among the many characteristics of modernity, its foundational aspirations, both philosophical and scientific, and its turn to the subject, are deserving of particular note. Postmodernity, for its part, has extended the turn to the subject, amplifying the contingently linguistic, cultural and communitarian character of the person. It has also brought more clearly to light the complexity of the subject's intellectual life, including the involvement in it not only of diverse forms of conceptualization, but of purposes, intentions, social conventions and political interests, as well. In this light, postmodernity has forsworn modernity's foundational aspirations, with their pretensions to objectivity, and has forsworn as well the pursuit of all-encompassing metanarratives, whether scientific, political,

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philosophical, or religious, whose overarching generalizations are said to eclipse the individual and the anomalous. Undergirding such recent developments, in Kasper's judgement, has been the emergence of the experience of historically situated human autonomy and freedom as "the starting point, measure and medium of . . . [humanity's] whole understanding of reality,"¹ and the secular form in which the fulfilment of such autonomy and freedom is being sought.

These modern and postmodern developments have created a wide range of challenges for theology. They have challenged correspondence theories of truth, referential theories of language, and particularly metaphysical accounts of the world and of the human person which have played central roles in much traditional theology. They have repeatedly exposed the deeply historical character of scripture, church history, and dogmatic as well as ethical thought, and have challenged the very possibility of perennially meaningful and authoritative texts, much less dogmatic traditions.²

There has been a wide range of responses among believers to such challenges. Some constituencies have reacted by turning inward, looking to certain distinctive subjective states for theological foundations. Others have been aggressively defensive on both academic and ecclesiastical fronts. Yet others have been conciliatory, seeking intellectually and pastorally to navigate a way between positive and negative aspects of modernity and postmodernity, sometimes even acknowledging

1. Walter Kasper, *Jesus The Christ*, tr. V. Green (London: Burns and Oates, 1976), 181.

2. Walter Kasper, *An Introduction to Christian Faith*, tr. V. Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 158.

ecclesiastical complicity in the development of secularism and atheism.³

None of the foregoing responses has carried the day, so far. The turn inward has avoided metaphysical challenges, only to run headlong into profoundly unsettling questions about human interiority, including religious interiority, in the spirit of Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Freud. Metaphysical and conciliar retrenchment has sometimes been accompanied by a reactionary authoritarianism and intellectual rigidity, while conciliatory efforts have been received by some as the surrender on the part of the church of "what until [Vatican II] . . . was its strength."⁴ Between reactionaries and those seeking accommodation there remain wide divisions, as there are even within these different constituencies themselves.

Kasper is well aware of this range of reactions, and of the challenges to which they are responding. The contemporary emphasis upon the historical subject, he admits, "does seem today to be attacking Christian faith; it seems to be emptying it of content and making it relative. Christianity seems to be abolishing itself in modern

3. While Christianity has much to say about esteem for the freedom and dignity of the individual human being, for instance, what it has given with one hand in this respect, Kasper points out, it has sometimes taken back with the other. The freedom and dignity of the individual has been compromised repeatedly by the church itself, in the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, and in many other well-known instances (Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell [New York: Crossroad, 1984], 9). The movement by modernity and postmodernity towards pursuing the freedom and dignity of the individual independently of the church has been in no small part a response to these failures. It has also been a response to the church's tendency to depict God, argues Kasper, not as an active partner in the pursuit of true freedom and autonomy, but as a transcendent, self-sufficient Artificer, standing aloof from, and often impeding that pursuit.

4. Kasper, *Introduction to Christian Faith*, 10.

historical thinking."⁵ He rightly counsels circumspection, however, in the formation of a response.

We must . . . ask very seriously how this radically historical outlook is to be judged theologically. Does it destroy any security in faith and lead to a theological relativism in which anything is valid and so nothing is valid any more? Or does it mean a new opportunity for a deeper understanding of the faith? One's theological attitude to modern thought largely depends on the answers given to these questions.⁶

On the face of it, Kasper's answers to these questions appear to support a wide-scale accommodation of the new radically historical outlook. "Reality does not have a history," he concurs; "it is itself history through and through."⁷ History does not transpire against the backdrop of an immutable metaphysical order; such order, rather, is "a moment within a history."⁸ Historical events

are theologically not mere stirrings on the surface of an eternal ground of being, not a fleeting shadow of the eternal, but the real 'nature' of things themselves. There is no metaphysical structure of order to be disentangled from all the detail of history and salvation history.⁹

Moreover, the individual person is inextricably enmeshed in all this. "Human freedom is *situated* freedom and therefore is subject to physiological, biological, sociological, economic and psychological conditions, so that the person does not unqualifiedly 'possess' freedom and the ability use it" (emphasis mine).¹⁰

5. *Ibid.*, 166.

6. *Ibid.*, 158-59.

7. *Ibid.*, 156.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 165.

10. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 160. See also *Theology and Church*, tr. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 9.

Today, Kasper concludes, therefore, "we have reached the end of metaphysics in its classical form."¹¹ We have also reached the end of the serviceability of a concept of God, and of God's relation to the world, which was constructed on the basis of such metaphysics. Philosophically, "the ultimate and highest reality is not substance but relation,"¹² he asserts, or, as it is put elsewhere, relation is "the primordial category of reality."¹³ The traditional ontology of substance, therefore, "must . . . be replaced by relational thinking,"¹⁴ something demanded not only by a proper reading of the history of theology, as will be seen below, but by scripture and revelation as well, for which "relation takes priority over substance."

While the foregoing position appears to reflect an extensive accommodation, by Kasper, of modernity and postmodernity, it is not so much an accommodation, as it is the result of Kasper's finding, in these periods, a "new opportunity for a deeper understanding *of the faith*" (emphasis mine).¹⁵ Modernity and postmodernity, that is, can be seen as providing an opportunity for Christianity to recognize *in itself* elements which it has long possessed, but has forgotten or neglected.

More specifically, it is Kasper's contention that the emerging centrality of the subject and of history is not a uniquely recent development at all; it is an ancient one, albeit one overlain in subsequent centuries with forms of classical metaphysics which have obscured it. What is more, it is *Christian* in origin, and Christians are better equipped to understand the world in these terms than is the secular culture which only recently has laid claim to the

11. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 184

12. *Ibid.*, 156. See also Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church*, 29.

13. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 290.

14. *Ibid.*, 63.

15. Kasper, *Introduction to Christian Faith*, 159.

primacy of such categories. For Kasper, therefore, the modern and postmodern decline of classical metaphysics, and the emerging centrality of the subject and of history, are not necessarily developments which are destructive of Christianity. Such metaphysics has not been the actual bedrock of theology, and the centrality of the subject and of history has long informed Christian thought.

On the relationship between classical metaphysics and Christianity, Kasper's position is detailed and complex, much of it involving close analyses of particular developments in the history of theology. Such analyses collectively support the contention that classical metaphysics was never truly integral to Christianity, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Such metaphysics, rather, was embraced by the Church only provisionally in order to respond as effectively as possible to certain metaphysically-minded cultures; it was adopted, in other words, as a form of *aggiornamento*.¹⁶

If, on a case-by-case basis, moreover, one closely examines the way in which hellenistic metaphysical thought was actually appropriated by Christianity, it becomes apparent that even when the church did adopt such categories, it often subtly changed their meanings. Such change, moreover, consistently reveals a pattern of preserving the intellectual primacy of the subject and of history. If one examines closely, for instance, the patristic theological development of *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *apatheia* terminology, it emerges that the adoption of such vocabulary was deeply influenced by a desire on the part of the Fathers to secure, theologically, God's *personal* involvement in a pervasively *historical* creation. The use of hellenistic terminology in these and many other instances "represent[s] not a Hellenization but a de-Hellenization of

16. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 180-182.

Christianity."¹⁷ Nicaea, in using *homoousios* terminology, "had no intention of 'Hellenizing' the concept of God that is found in revelation,"¹⁸ and the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* "meant breaking through Greek ontological thinking towards a personal way of thinking. Not nature, but person was the final and supreme reality." The same follows in the case of many other theological developments as well.

Kasper's extensive analyses of such developments lead repeatedly to the conclusion that while the church accommodated the intellectual propensities of many deeply metaphysical generations, it did so in a way which subtly resisted the conventionally impersonal and ahistorical import of such categories. As a result, the centrality of the subject and of history was preserved, albeit sometimes precariously, and it is now time to reclaim that ancient intellectual legacy vigorously and explicitly. From this point of view, modernity and postmodernity can be seen not just as sources of intellectual innovation from which theology may be able to borrow, but as reminders of what has for many centuries already informed theology in central ways.

If theology has in fact been perennially informed by a turn to the subject and to history, one might well anticipate that it is vulnerable to developing in the same relativistic direction that has characterized the postmodern form of that turn. This is certainly a concern for Cardinal Ratzinger, for example, who has declared recently that "relativism has . . . become the central problem for the faith at the present time."¹⁹ The form of turn to the subject and to history which Kasper commends, however, differs from its

17. *Ibid.*, 182.

18. *Ibid.*, 183.

19. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," *Origins* (Oct 31, 1996), 311.

relativistic counterparts in two important and related ways which obstruct relativism. The first of these has to do with a particular feature of the relationship between the subject and the world, and the second is a certain characteristic of the subject's awareness of itself. I will take these up in turn.

Kasper accepts the increasingly fallibilistic understanding of the relationship between subject and world in much contemporary epistemology. "The very development of modern physics, especially quantum physics," he concedes, "has shown that we never know reality in itself but always and only through human images, models and concepts."²⁰ The fluid nature of the genesis, development and ever-fluctuating interrelation among such images, models and concepts is inevitable, given that "objective experience and interpretation of experience can never be completely separated."²¹ All human attempts to come intellectually to terms with the world, in other words, will be approximations at best.

What is here asserted, however, is a *fallibilism*, and fallibilism is not necessarily relativistic. As Kasper and many pragmatists would argue, even if it is the case that our best approximations must always be characterized by a certain tentativeness, those approximations in a great many actual instances have concrete histories of use from which there is much to be learned concerning their aptness as depictions of the actual world itself. Alongside the history of human intellectual creativity, in other words, is a parallel history of the successes and failures of particular intellectual creations. There is, in other words, a history of recalcitrance within experience in certain important respects, albeit a recalcitrance which is inherently mediated; it is only ever experienced, that is, through the

20. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 81.

21. *Ibid.*

medium of currently prevailing linguistic and social practices. Such history of the use of concepts, as Kasper puts it, exhibits a

stubborn resistance of reality to the model of thought and action which we have cultivated up to now . . . something surprisingly new which alters our previous views, thwarts our plans, opens up new perspectives to us and forces us to advance in new directions.²²

What the actual, concrete experience of the living historical subject indicates about her intellectual relationship with the world, in other words, is not the domination of experience by either the subject or the world, in the long run and on the whole, but an enormously complex dialectic between the two in which both are deeply implicated, and both leave their mark. This seems to me to be the centrepiece of Kasper's epistemology.

Experience is not to be reduced to something purely objective or to something purely subjective. It includes both elements . . . Experience arises from the interplay of objective reality and subjective intercourse with the milieu of our times. Experience is inseparably a being affected by reality and an interpretation of this contact through words, images, symbols and concepts. It thus has a dialectical structure.²³

While the intellectual creativity involved in such a dialectic makes fallibilism inevitable, a demonstrable recalcitrance involved in the same dialectic over time impedes the slide of such fallibilism into relativism, and supports the contention that reality possesses a certain *given* character in important respects.

22. *Ibid.*, 84.

23. *Ibid.*, 82. See also, *Theology and Church*, 82. For ecclesiastical dimensions of this dialectic, see *Theology and Church*, 6.

It is possible, of course, particularly in a postmodern climate of thought, to give non-realist accounts of such recalcitrance which depict it as wholly a function of language, convention, subjectivity and so forth. Such accounts dissolve the foregoing dialectic into a relativistic subjectivism, a transformation which may be pressed into the service of purportedly advancing the freedom and autonomy of the individual by extending her ability to make of the world and of herself what she will.

There is no shortage of formidable obstacles, however, which lie in the path of coherently developing such a postmodern relativism, and its particular way of supporting the pursuit of human freedom and autonomy. One such obstacle, for example, involves the need to account for the nature of 'consensus' in consensus theories of truth which seek relativistically to circumvent traditional correspondence and representational theories. What is the nature and origin of the consensus which might emerge, for example, in response to Rortian cultural "stories," or to the liberal Enlightenment values which often stand behind those stories, or within the 'communication community' about which Habermas speaks? Many decades of epistemological debate has made plain how difficult it is to produce a viable account of consensus which expunges all correspondence elements; to produce a position, that is, which is able to show clearly why Kasper, with Simon, is wrong in contending that "an opposition between correspondence theory and consensus theory is untenable since the consensus theory is itself a covert correspondence theory."²⁴

Whether a coherent response to problems such as this can even in principle be produced from within the terms of reference of a rigorously postmodern position is far from

24. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 92.

clear, given postmodernity's antagonism towards metanarrative. This is particularly the case if there is no viable form of 'moderate' postmodernism; if Thomas Guarino, for example, is correct in arguing that "perhaps Christian theologians must join Derrida and Foucault when they claim that one must make a choice between radical incongruity or metaphysics. The *via media* of moderate postmodernism is inadequate from both points of view"²⁵ There is much to be said, if this is the case, for a realist interpretation of the recalcitrant element of the aforementioned dialectical nature of experience, an interpretation which impedes the slide of fallibilism into relativism, and restrains the turn to the subject from becoming a form of subjectivism,²⁶ although the details of argument to this effect surpass the scope of my essay.

One element of the foregoing dialectic which obstructs a subjectivistic and relativistic transformation of Kasper's fallibilism is the character of the human self's presence to itself. I say *presence-to-self* here in order to distinguish such awareness from the supposed *direct* self-acquaintance found in the work of early modern philosophers such as Descartes, and the supposed *postulated* manner in which the Kantian self is known to itself. Presence-to-self is meant to designate an awareness of self in which self is found to be neither reducible to an intelligible object, nor merely postulated.

Such presence-to-self involves an awareness not only of selfhood but also a recalcitrant awareness of the commonality of such selfhood with all 'being' in which it shares. This commonality necessarily leads self-awareness, and self-questioning, beyond the self. Such self-

25. Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is Phronêsis the *Via Media* for Theology?" *Theological Studies*, 54 (1993), 54.

26. Kasper, *Theology and Church*, 141.

transcendence has great significance, for Kasper, in relation to what he was seen earlier to have identified as the dominant feature of modernity and postmodernity: the secular pursuit of human autonomy and freedom arising out of the turn to the subject and its historicity. Can such autonomy and freedom be realized through a secular form of self-possession?

Can the concept of a radical human autonomy in the sense of a pure self-mediation ever succeed? Or must not a successful human identity rather be only a freedom that is given to man from another? Being from man's own resources—or being that is received? Can autonomy find an other than theonomous foundation?²⁷

The self-transcendence of the awareness of self, argues Kasper, leads unavoidably to metaphysical reflection, and such metaphysical reflection moves the pursuit of autonomous and free self-possession in a potentially religious direction.²⁸ More specifically, the centrepiece of the experience of self, and of the metaphysics to which it leads, on Kasper's account, is "*surprise*", or, as he puts it elsewhere, "radical astonishment."²⁹ The gist of his point here can be garnered from his analysis of Aquinas's Third Way: Aquinas, in this argument, sets everything that exists, in relation to its potential non-existence. In so doing, Kasper argues, he is setting over against the existence experienced by living historical individuals, the notion of nothingness: a "pure concept of the understanding."³⁰ The resulting juxtaposition of being and nothingness evokes a profound subjective response wherein "the wonder of being reveals itself to us precisely in the face of nothingness.

27. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 45.

28. On metaphysics and the postmodern period, see *Theology and Church*, 3, 10, 76.

29. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 55.

30. *Ibid.*, 102.

Precisely when confronted with the non-evidentiality of reality we experience its reliability, solidity and beauty."³¹

On such an interpretation, the Third Way is construed by Kasper as an act of reflection upon the wonder which is evoked by recognizing the "pure 'that,'" of existence³²--by recognizing the sheer gratuity of being which is present in the experience of the full import of the question: "why is there anything at all instead of nothing?"³³ It is not the behaviour of an impersonal natural order, then, which should be the point of departure for reflection about the world, and for natural theology, in Kasper's view, but this gratuity which reality exhibits to the living historical individual who is inherently part of that reality, and is aware of itself as such.

What are we to make of such gratuity?³⁴ There is much about it, of course, which suggests that reality is anonymously fortuitous in character, as Bertrand Russell asserted so clearly years ago in connection with charging the cosmological argument with the fallacy of composition. Such gratuity, however, also has an uncanny resemblance to a certain human phenomenon: the activity of gift-giving in the spirit of love. This kind of human behaviour is congruent, moreover, with what the revelatory tradition of Christianity has proposed as the most powerful hermeneutical key for grasping the meaning of the gratuity of being: the meaning of such gratuity is to be found in the *non-necessity* of divine, historical love; it is to be found in "an ungrounded and freely bestowed love."³⁵ In other

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 103.

33. *Ibid.*, 102. "The cosmological argument is in the final analysis simply . . . an explanation of the astonishment felt at the wonder of being" (*Ibid.*, 103. See also 55).

34. Kasper readily concedes its ambivalent nature (*Ibid.*, 54).

35. *Ibid.*, 55.

words, "being and love are coextensive. By its very non-necessity, love becomes the radically astonishing dimension of being, the meaning of being. It is the answer to the question of why there is a world instead of no world."³⁶

Here, Kasper's metaphysical position dovetails with his analysis of the history of theology described above. The revelatory tradition, he argues, has perennially directed us to understand the gratuity of being in terms of a pervasively historical outpouring of divine creative love, although this message has often been obscured by metaphysical speculation in the classical tradition. More specifically, Kasper would stipulate, the revelatory tradition has directed us to understand the world in such terms, not by *imposing upon* the world such meaning, but by learning to see that meaning *in* the world itself, in the recalcitrant experience of the foregoing gratuity. Revelation and natural theology, then, are inseparable and mutually supportive. Neither provides an antecedent foundation for the other; it is both *together* which constitute the foundations of Christianity, and impede a wholesale slide into relativism.

The only hope of conveying the foregoing character of Christianity to the postmodern period, Kasper argues, rests in making the effort, with Von Balthasar, "to break out of self-enclosed classical metaphysics into a metaphysics that is open."³⁷ Such a metaphysics will be historical to the core. Its development, however, will on that account be difficult, given classical Western philosophy's penchant for the abstract over the historical, and the depth to which such

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.* See Walter Kasper, "Postmodern Dogmatics: Towards a Renewed Discussion of Foundations in North America," *Communio* 17 (Summer, 1990), 190. See also *Theology and Church*, 92.

philosophy has informed traditional theology.³⁸ A major task, then, lies before Christian thought.

The survey of tradition shows that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan confession . . . presents theology with a task which has not been completed up to the present time. The idea and concept of God and his unchangeability need to be submitted to a new, basic Christological interpretation in order to make effective once more the biblical understanding of the God of history."³⁹

What Christianity has learned about itself from modernity and postmodernity requires vigorously undertaking this task with the purpose, above all, of fostering an understanding of God which "both grounds (human) autonomy and brings it to fulfilment."⁴⁰ Such an understanding of God will demand theological movement away from construing divinity in classical terms of God's ahistorical self-possession and *apatheia*.⁴¹ It will require

38. Such difficulty can be seen even in the work of such thinkers as Barth, Rahner, Schoonenberg and others who would be expected to take seriously the historicity of creation, God, and the relation between them. In Rahner's trinitarian "manners of subsisting," however, or Barth's "mode of being" (Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 287), or Schoonenberg's deferral from incarnation to the impenetrable mysteriousness of inner-divine life (Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 180-181), Kasper sees a continuing penchant to subordinate the personal and historical to the abstract. Such subordination occurs wherever historical events are construed principally as 'manifestations' of realities which transcend them. This is the case, for example, when the cross is understood "not [as] an underivable historical event of love, but the expression of a *principle* of love" (*Ibid.*, 183). On such a view the historical event becomes merely symbolic, a "cypher" of a larger supra-historical phenomenon. Such privileging of the supra-historical over the concrete event "misses the whole depth of human suffering" which is rooted in the pervasively historical working out of human and divine freedom. A genuinely historical understanding of the cross, then, is one which sees it as "a completely underivable event of freedom which cannot be made *speculatively* intelligible" (emphasis mine) by portraying it as a manifestation of some supra-historical, abstract reality.

39. Kasper, *Jesus The Christ*, 180.

40. Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 45.

41. *Ibid.*, 184.

instead an understanding of divinity which revolves around the historical, the personal, and the kenotic, including a divine vulnerability entailed by such characteristics. It must involve, as well, a renewed understanding of the notion of 'mystery'. The world's elusiveness to full comprehension need not make it 'mysterious', in the sense of alienatingly unintelligible, if the world is understood as originating in the fully revealed and intelligible, but unfathomable, divine love.⁴²

Only such theological developments, in Kasper's judgement, will bring to the fore the depth of Christianity's distinctive form of turn to the subject and to history, while still providing a stabilizing foothold for humanity in what it has come rightly to recognize as the pervasive historicity of its existence. Only such developments will eventually be able, without lapsing into a relativistic form of fallibilism, to supplant the heteronomous depictions of God-world relations, based upon classical metaphysics, which have fuelled modern atheism, and the wholesale secularization of the pursuit of human freedom and autonomy.⁴³

I have suggested in this essay that we consider the relationship between theology, and modernity and postmodernity, not just in terms of disputes about what theology should or should not borrow from what is new in recent thought, but in terms of what modernity and postmodernity can teach Christianity about itself. If modernity and postmodernity lead to a rediscovery by Christianity of its own ancient and distinctive form of turn to the subject and to history, it can lead also to a clearer and more articulate recognition of the distinctive ways in which Christian and modern/ postmodern thought are related. Such recognition will make possible a coherent, argued

42. *Ibid.*, 55.

43. Kasper, *Theology and Church*, 52.

response to the present period, rather than the dangerously fideistic, authoritarian, and fundamentalistic responses which are so plentiful nowadays.

Such an argued response cannot help but be negative on certain fundamental points, it seems to me. An epistemology grounded in the aforementioned dialectical account of experience, for example, and a metaphysic grounded in the self-transcending character of presence-to-self are clearly foundational. Moreover, they involve referential and correspondence elements which are at odds with the inherently antifoundationalist nature of postmodernity, and with the forms of pursuing human freedom and autonomy which accompany such relativistic antifoundationalism. Such an epistemology and metaphysic are worthy of vigorous defense, not only on their own merits, but also in relation to the many serious obstacles facing the development of a sustainable postmodern antifoundationalism. A position based upon such an epistemology and metaphysics, moreover, can provide significant support for arguing that the freedom from oppressively ideological metanarratives, the acute sense of the historicity of life, with its unceasing novelty and surprise, as well as other distinctive postmodern themes, can be realized more effectively in the long run by the Christian form of the turn to the subject and to history than by the relativistic postmodern form of that turn.