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A Plea for Inverting the Hermeneutical Relation

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Identity and Change in the Christian Tradition



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11. A Plea for Inverting the Hermeneutical Relation

Gijsbert van den Brink (Utrecht)

1 *Outline of Schwöbel's Argument*

After having explored at some length the concepts of theology, religion and tradition in an illuminative way, at the heart of his rich and stimulating article in the present volume Christoph Schwöbel comes to what I take to be his central thesis: 'The fundamental condition for the maintenance of tradition is ... the management of change.'¹ On the one hand, without change tradition is not possible. In fact, a tradition is an ongoing process of mediation, interpretation and personal appropriation of patterns of practice, which always involves change as a constitutive element. On the other hand, however, 'if the variations exceeded the invariant elements we would no longer have changes *within* a tradition, but a change from one tradition to another ...' (172).

Schwöbel then goes on (after having discussed three features that mould the specific shape of rationality in Christian theology, 174-178) to point out different ways in which the invariant elements in a tradition may be determined. In this connection, he distinguishes between the continuity-model, the consensus-model and the back-to-the-origin-model. He suggests that in order to present a viable model of tradition, the main emphases of each of these models should be integrated (181). Nevertheless, the models are based on different notions of normativity (*ibid.*), and Schwöbel passes over the obvious question which notion might be the right one and why (or how the three notions should be integrated). Instead, he observes that the model of (normative) tradition that one adopts has repercussions for the way in which theology is to be practised – and this seems clear enough.

So it is here that the role of theology comes in. As to Christianity, this role consists in "managing" the relationship between identity and change in the Christian tradition' (186). With 'managing' Schwöbel means in this connection: to oversee and make decisions about this relationship, and to treat the tradition with care so that it is used to its best advantage (182f.). Schwöbel ends up his paper with an outline of the distinctive contributions to these management tasks that may be

1 Christoph Schwöbel, 'Rationality, Tradition and Theology,' 172; subsequently, numbers between brackets in my text refer to page numbers of this article.

expected from the disciplines of systematic, historical and practical theology. Systematic theology has to keep the doctrinal tradition externally communicable and internally coherent, historical theology has to watch over its historical continuity, and practical theology should warrant the practical relevance of any change- (or, presumably, continuity-) proposals that are being made.

2 *Some Further Considerations on Change*

Now although I have one major problem with the way in which Schwöbel fleshes out his argument (I will come to this at the end of my contribution), it seems to me that his thesis as such stands, and that his use of the management-imagery in this connection is original and deserves to be explored and tested on its explanatory power. In a time which expects its salvation to a large extent from economic growth and efficiency, the choice of the management-imagery is in any case a fine instantiation of translating the message in the conceptualities of one's own cultural context. Thus, since I agree with most of Schwöbel's exposition, my response will not take the form of a counter-argument by means of which I try to refute him.

Instead, I will try to take up the ball at the place where Schwöbel has left it. Hopefully that is a fruitful approach, since Schwöbel's account is largely descriptive and of a fairly general level; it concludes not with some concrete illustrations of how his proposed management-strategy might work in practice, but with an encyclopedic survey of the tasks of different theological disciplines. So he does not put his own proposals to the test. As a result, the question arises whether these proposals do indeed enable us to make responsible decisions in the change/continuity issue in concrete instances. How should, e.g., the distinctive criteria which hang together with the three fields of theology be balanced and weighed in relation to one another? How do we know when a particular proposed change is to the advantage of the tradition, and when it is to its detriment, perhaps even to the extent that it 'would destroy the tradition' (172)?

Schwöbel gives us one clue when he notes that 'if the variations exceeded the invariant elements we would no longer have changes within a tradition, but ... a *metabasis eis allo genos*' (ibid.). This remark suggests a *numeric* criterion. It conjures up the image of a neat division of the doctrinal heritage of a tradition in separate units ('elements'), a majority of which should be left unaffected, and a minority of which may be changed. If I may caricature a bit: from every ten proposals to change the tradition, maximally four should be supported and at least six rejected, for otherwise the variant elements of a tradition will in due course exceed its invariant elements. But clearly, it is not as easy as that (and Schwöbel does not want to suggest it is). Further considerations are needed in order to see how changes in

religious traditions come about in practice, and to what extent they affect the future of the tradition.

First of all, one may wonder whether this picture of a doctrinal tradition consisting of separate *elements* is correct. Especially if we have to do (as we may expect) with a to some extent consistent and internally coherent tradition, we should reckon with the fact that many elements are closely bound up with each other. As a result, if we change one element (let us say: one doctrine), this may have far reaching implications for the whole body of doctrinal beliefs. In important respects, this whole body of doctrinal beliefs resembles a house or a wall, in which you cannot replace a limited number of bricks without risking the collapse of the entire structure. If we look at the way in which religious communities have in fact changed their theologies, we may find this picture confirmed. For example, when a Christian community changes its doctrine of Scripture (especially when this change leads to the suggestion that Scripture is no longer the normative source for regulating faith and life), in the course of time many subsequent doctrines and beliefs turn out to be affected and changed as a result. Or, more likely perhaps, some of those other doctrines and beliefs had already changed, and this process inspired in due course a modified view on the nature of Scriptural authority. In this way, the Dutch *Gereformeerde Kerken* (accepting a modified view on the nature of Scriptural authority in 1981) are said to have been the most rapidly changing churches in the world from the sixties onwards (Hendrikus Berkhof).²

Secondly, if we grant for a moment that a doctrinal tradition does consist of separate elements, it is clear that not all of these are equally important. Theologically, the dogma of papal infallibility seems more important than that of the assumption of Mary, since the former in contrast to the latter has many possible future implications for all segments of theology (from the point of view of popular piety, Mary's assumption may be more important). And the doctrine of justification by faith, though not distinctively Calvinist, is much more important to Calvinism than the *extra-calvinisticum* (the specifically Calvinist doctrine that Christ's divine nature is also outside his human nature). Nevertheless, even if the 'less important' dogma's and doctrines would be replaced by others, one wonders what would follow from that. If the dogma of Mary's assumption would be relinquished, that would at least be indicative of a much more encompassing change in the theology of the Roman-Catholic *magisterium* (including e.g. a changed view on the retractability of dogma's, and possibly on the importance of marial piety as such).

2 Cf. on the history of doctrinal changes in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Hendrik Vroom's contribution to the present volume.

Thirdly, it is clear that the extent to which a tradition is affected by the change of some of its elements, also depends upon the nature of the newly introduced elements which replace the ones that were given up. It is of course not necessarily the case that these new elements are straightforwardly *opposite* to the old ones. On the contrary, in most situations that will not be the case. Usually, views change gradually, and so do the formulations by means of which they are expressed. It may e.g. be the case that a particular change does not take the form of a denial of the existing article of faith, but of a decision to accept alternatives next to it. Presumably, even if a radical departure of a traditional point of view has taken place, this will seldom be explicitly stated. More often formulations will be sought that link up as closely as possible with the traditional ones, in order to make the changes more palatable to the community of believers. It is possible, however, that underneath such formulations which have only slightly been adapted, more drastic changes in spirituality are hidden. In that case, the influence and practical relevance of a particular change may be much higher than the new formulations suggest.

In sum, it is clear that the 'management of change and continuity' which a tradition requires is not simply a matter of appointing enough invariant elements. Proposals to change (or not to change) the tradition at a particular point should be weighed in relation to what lies behind them spiritually, and tested upon their foreseeable effects, both in theology and in practice. Non-theological factors which may play a role, such as social and psychological processes, should be taken into account as well. Now given this complexity, is it possible to decide in a particular case whether change or continuity is 'to the advantage of the tradition'? Or more precisely: is it possible to make such a decision in a way which does not purely depend on one's own stance, but on more or less objective criteria? Let us test the criteria that Schwöbel proposes and our subsequent considerations by means of a case-study.

3 A Case-Study: Atonement in the Contemporary Dutch Debate

The doctrine of atonement has been a source of much upheaval in Dutch protestantism ever since the sixties. Almost every decade has had its own champion-theologian who openly and sometimes crudely rejected the classical view that Christ died for our sins (most well-known among them have become P. Smits and H.A. Wiersinga). Each of them roused a lot of rumour in church circles, but ultimately all kept their rights. In 1997, a new commotion concerning the doctrine of atone-

ment was prompted by a publication of the New Testament scholar C.J. den Heyer on the topic.³

In this book Den Heyer argues that the New Testament contains many different and even incompatible interpretations of the death of Jesus. It is impossible to deduce a uniform doctrine of atonement from the fragmented and multifarious New Testament testimony, which sometimes strikes us as a 'cacophony of voices.' Paul's voice, articulating most clearly that Christ's death was a redemption from the consequences of sin, is only one among others. And even Paul employs such a surprising variety of metaphors that no well-defined doctrine of atonement can be derived from it. Jesus himself may perhaps have seen his death in line with the death of the suffering righteous, the martyrs for the noble cause of God. But he did not think of it in terms of substitutionary sacrifice or satisfaction. Nor, for that matter, did Paul or any of the Gospel writers have such interpretations in mind when they ascribed salvific meaning to the death of Christ. The clearest witness for the view that Christ's death should be interpreted as a sacrifice for the sins of the world is in the letter to the Hebrews and the (so-called) first letter of John – but their testimony should not be confused with that of Paul and John themselves.

Den Heyer concludes that, given this irreducible plurality in the New Testament, there is no need to stick to confessional apprehensions of the atoning character of Jesus' suffering and death, but there is room for other interpretations apart from the classical ones. In particular, it is enough to see Jesus' trust in God as an inspiring example, which stimulates us to strive after reconciliation in our own context. Those who find consolation in the traditional doctrine of atonement, however, should continue to believe just that. As to Den Heyer himself, he observes that the traditional doctrine can no longer move him, and he therefore opts for the alternative view.

4 *Den Heyer's Case Tested*

Let us now see what might happen if we try to evaluate Den Heyer's proposed conceptual innovation by means of Schwöbel's criteria. For the sake of brevity we shall just distinguish between Den Heyer's proposal (viz. to see Jesus' trust in God as an example which inspires us to strive after atonement ourselves), and what I will call the classical or traditional doctrine. We shall not take into account any further alternatives or nuances, and we shall use the designation 'classical' or 'traditional' doctrine as a catch label for all such theories that consider the Christ-event⁴ as in

3 C.J. den Heyer, *Verzoening: Bijbelse notities bij een omstreden thema* (Kampen 1997).

4 Following Schwöbel, I shall use the term 'Christ-event' as an umbrella term for the incarnation,

some way or another *constitutive* for bringing about atonement between God and humankind.

First of all, what about the primary criterion of systematic theology: the external communicability of the innovation? Does Den Heyer's proposal 'make the Christian message intelligible to those outside the Christian community in the context of the thought forms they employ' (183)? That depends, of course, both upon what kind of people one has in mind and upon what one considers to be 'the Christian message.' As to the former, it cannot be taken for granted that in our post-modern times everyone employs the same thought forms. As to the latter, it seems that we are in a circle here; for what we understand by 'the Christian message' depends at least in part upon which doctrines we take to be invariable (and therefore not open to innovation).

Despite these difficulties, perhaps a case can be made for a positive answer. There are at least two reasons for thinking that Den Heyer's innovative proposal does indeed make the Christian message more intelligible for our times. First, as Vernon White has put it, there is a 'crisis of credibility' concerning the claim that the Christ-event does have universal saving significance.⁵ The idea that the death of Christ was somehow *required* for making atonement between God and human beings does not square with the moral intuitions of many present-day people. 'We can't believe in a God who wants to see blood,' is the usual complaint. Apart from the fact that this crude rendering misrepresents the point of the traditional doctrine, it may be the case that the moral intuitions of those who utter the complaint are wrong. But if, as Schwöbel argues, the Christian message is in principle translatable in all different kinds of thought forms, it can only be welcomed if this message may be presented in a way which is not offensive to people who share these contemporary moral sensibilities.⁶ And Den Heyer seems to achieve just that. Second, the

life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, thus leaving aside the question where exactly the atoning significance is to be located.

5 Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation* (Cambridge 1991), 3.

6 There is, however, a strange incompatibility between the way in which contemporary moral sensibilities develop with regard to the presuppositions of atonement in human relationships and in the divine-human relationship. As to human relationships, we become increasingly aware of the fact that enormous *prices* have to be paid for realizing atonement, and that atonement should include rather than exclude *justice*. Look at Bosnia, or at the difficulties involved in atoning relationships which have been broken by incest. Usually, these difficulties are not at all the result of the fact that the victims are unduly revengeful; rather, forgiveness and atonement without justice being done is simply impossible. It is precisely this intuition which is captured by the traditional Anselmian idea of Christ paying the necessary price for atonement with his life, and doing justice to God in this way. Cf. on this point C. van der Kooi, 'Verzoening: De paradox rondom een thema,' *In de waagschaal* 25 (1997), 206-208.

fact that Den Heyer does not simply *replace* one doctrine by another but leaves us our own choice, fits neatly in the free market thinking which dominates our age. Den Heyer invites us to pick out for ourselves that interpretation of the death of Christ we feel best about, without bothering about the alternatives. Clearly, this way of treating the classical doctrine finely suits the thought forms of our liberalized postmodern society.

As to the second criterion of systematic theology, however, it is difficult to see how Den Heyer's proposal contributes to the internal coherence of the Christian message. On the contrary, it seems unavoidable that the element of choice and personal preference which he introduces into the debate on atonement theory, has a disintegrating effect on the Christian faith. In so far as we are interested in the *truth* of Christian doctrine, we cannot simultaneously accept divergent accounts⁷ of atonement – since not all of them can be true. Perhaps, however, we should interpret Den Heyer's tolerance towards the classical doctrine as a matter of prudence, and take him as judging in fact that this doctrine should be dispensed with. In that case the question is whether the view that Christ's life, suffering and death only inspires us to make atonement with one another, is coherent with the larger body of Christian beliefs. *Prima facie* it is not clear why this could not be the case. Neither is it clear, however, why this view should be *more* coherent than the classical one. So the result of confronting Den Heyer's proposal with the second criterion of systematic theology is at worst negative and at best inconclusive.

Secondly, we come to the criteria of historical theology. Can Den Heyer's views 'be seen as authentic expressions of the Christian message' from the point of view of biblical hermeneutics and confessional hermeneutics? As to biblical hermeneutics, Den Heyer spends a lot of energy in trying to support his case. It is not the place here for a meticulous examination of his arguments. Not being a biblical scholar, I am not in a position to probe them adequately. Nevertheless, I observe that Den Heyer's biblical hermeneutics is heavily criticized by some of his colleagues. For example, A. Noordegraaf argues that Den Heyer leaves some important texts out of consideration, and is highly selective in the way in which he applies historical criticism. As a result of his biased approach, says Noordegraaf, Den Heyer interprets different shades and accents in the New Testament testimony as sheer contradictions. In fact, the rich plurality in the biblical witness concerning

7 The accounts are indeed divergent, rather than mutually exclusive; for clearly, there is nothing in the traditional doctrine which denies that Jesus' way of life is an example for us today in striving after atonement. In this sense, the traditional doctrine squares with Den Heyer's proposal. It is not compatible, however, with Den Heyer's plea for *reducing* the doctrine of atonement to this single aspect.

atonement does not alter the fact that the salvific meaning of the cross and resurrection of Christ is absolutely central for all New Testament writers.⁸

So clearly there is room for discussion here. Given the fact that this discussion has been conducted in one way or another ever since the time of Anselm and Abelard, the prospects for a final and unanimous resolution seem rather dim. Let us, however, give Den Heyer the benefit of the doubt, and concede for the sake of argument that his views are warranted by the biblical texts as belonging to 'the authentic Christian message' (184). Then, according to Schwöbel's criteriology, this is not in itself decisive for seeing them as 'expressions of the foundational disclosure experience of the Christ-event' (ibid.). For before jumping to such a conclusion we should also take into account the *confessional traditions* of the Church; given the fact that the confessional writings are recognized by many churches as authentic and normative expressions of the faith, 'they are significant in the process of testing the viability of conceptual proposals of theology' (185). On a strong reading, this may be taken to mean that innovation-proposals should be *in accordance with* the church's confessional tradition. On a weaker reading, it means that our proposals should at the very least be *confronted with* and presented as somehow an *interpretation of* this confessional tradition. It is not entirely clear which reading Schwöbel has in mind: there are some expressions which suggest the strong one, but the weaker one seems more in line with the gist of his argument.

Now how is this confessional hermeneutics functioning in Den Heyer's argument? The answer is: not at all. Den Heyer simply rejects what the creeds say about atonement, without in any way trying to link his own proposal to the credal texts or even to the religious motives lying behind them. Apparently, he is quite aware of the fact that his proposal cannot find support in the confessions of the church. So at this point, we can neither give him the benefit of the doubt nor grant anything for the sake of argument. His innovative proposal does not pass even the most minimal confessional test. Thus, the result of confronting Den Heyer's proposal with the criteria of historical theology is at best inconclusive with regard to biblical hermeneutics, and negative with regard to confessional hermeneutics.

Thirdly, then, let us compare Den Heyer's proposal to the exigencies of practical theology. For 'the conceptual innovations ... are directly used to initiate and guide changes in the Christian tradition when they are applied in the practice of ecclesial life' (186). Now which changes might be initiated and guided by Den

8 A. Noordegraaf, review in *Wapenveld* 47 (1997), 163. For a more extensive examination of the New Testament testimony in response to Den Heyer's book, resulting in similar conclusions as those of Noordegraaf, see H. Baarlink, *Het evangelie van de verzoening* (Kampen 1998). Baarlink especially emphasizes the substitutionary character attributed to the death of Jesus in the New Testament (9, 133 etc.).

Heyer's innovative proposal in relation to the doctrine of atonement, and how should we evaluate them? I can think of three possible effects for the practice of ecclesial life in this connection.

The first possible effect is, that the community of faith is stimulated to foster *plurality* in belief patterns in its life. Any believer is entitled to think as s/he wants on the significance of the suffering and death of Christ, and there is no reason why we should not fully accept those who don't see any salvific meaning in it at all. We may evaluate this effect either negatively or positively. Negatively, because this plurality disintegrates the sense of unity and community in faith which may be experienced in church. The church is no longer the community of those who celebrate their salvation by the atoning power of the blood of the Lamb; the church may now also consist of people who experience these very formulations as utterly repugnant. That makes things pretty complicated. Positively, however, the plurality which is stimulated may give room to more diverse people in the church, and prompts us to share fellowship and to have communion not only with those who think and believe more or less like we do, but also with people of rather different inclinations. On the other hand, doesn't real communion presuppose that you share with each other at least the most precious and important feelings as to what constitutes the communion?

The second possible effect (and now we interpret Den Heyer's proposal not as a plea for plurality but as a plea for a purely subjective doctrine of atonement) is that church members feel more directly inspired by the example of Jesus to strive after atonement and reconciliation in their own relationships with other people. Of course, the classical doctrine does not deny the importance of striving after reconciliation in human relationships, but its primary focus is on Jesus reconciling us with God by means of his sacrifice. So it may be the case that the classical doctrine leads us to contemplating on Jesus' love and power rather than to acting ourselves in reconciling ways. If it is an effect of the subjective doctrine of atonement to remedy this or at least to restore the balance, then it seems that we cannot but welcome Den Heyer's proposal as a positive contribution to the future of the Christian tradition. Perhaps sociologists of religion can devise some creative experiments to check whether those who advocate the classical doctrine are less inclined to realize atonement in their own environment than those who adhere to a subjective doctrine of atonement. I would not dare to predict the outcome.

The third possible effect of Den Heyer's proposal, however, is that the church becomes empty. J. van der Graaf, a leader of the confessional wing in the *Netherlands Reformed Church*, has warned that two generations of theology students educated by professors like Den Heyer will be enough to empty the church of its last members. Perhaps he was exaggerating, but basically he may be quite right about the secularizing effect of Den Heyer's proposal. If the point of the doctrine of atone-

ment is that we develop a positive attitude towards striving after atonement and reconciliation in our own environment, and if the Christ-event is considered as just a psychological stimulus in his connection, then the Christ-event *itself* is no longer crucial. Commemorating it is purely instrumental to a higher goal, which presumably is not distinctively Christian, viz. the promotion of reconciliation, unselfish love, well-doing etc. in human relationships. It is not clear why other stimuli into this direction (e.g. the examples of Gandhi, Socrates, or Lady Diana) may not work as well or perhaps even better. But if our children discover that this is the way we think about it – i.e., that we foster religion only for the sake of human morality – they may easily (and for good reasons!) disconnect both domains, and stop going to church. Of course they may still consider themselves Christians, but *their* children possibly won't any longer.⁹

If this would be the effect of accepting Den Heyer's proposal,¹⁰ from the point of view of Schwöbel's *criteriology* we must certainly come to a radically negative evaluation. For, as Schwöbel says, managing the relationship of identity and change entails 'to treat the tradition with care so that it is used to its best advantage, that is in accordance with its task' (183). However one wants to specify this task (Schwöbel formulates: spreading the Christian message, 176), it seems improbable that the Christian tradition can fulfil it when this tradition has come to an end! The Christian tradition just does not understand itself as the kind of institution which may discontinue itself because it has reached its goals; rather, it is clearly not to its best advantage when it is marginalized still further in our society. So from this perspective, we should decisively reject Den Heyer's proposal and opt for continuing the traditional doctrine rather than for changing it. Den Heyer's proposal fails the test of showing 'orientational capacity' (186) for ecclesial practice.

But what if Den Heyer is simply right and the traditional doctrine wrong? Should we in church theology for practical reasons stick to a doctrine when we are convinced that it is false, and deny an alternative theory which strikes us as true? Of course not. But note that this is a wrong way of putting things. For whether or not a (proposed) doctrine is true depends, in our context, precisely upon whether or not it meets the criteria we employed in evaluating it. If Den Heyer's proposal is not externally communicable or internally coherent, or if it is not an authentic expression of the foundational disclosure experience, or if it lacks orientational capacity for

9 Cf. the point made by Vincent Brümmer in his contribution to the present volume, that to be a Christian means to connect the meaning of life with (an interpretation of) the Christ-event.

10 In general it must be said that those churches and communities which have brought about many doctrinal and ethical adjustments during the past decades, hardly have become more attractive to 'those outside' by doing that. On the contrary, much more than communities that remained true to their tradition they suffer from decline in membership, decreasing church attendance etc.

ecclesial practice, then it cannot possibly be true. Even if it would fulfil all these demands but for one (e.g. internal coherence), it could hardly be true.

5 *Do Theologians Resemble Managers?*

We are now in a position to weave the different partial evaluations together into an overall-evaluation of Den Heyer's proposed conceptual innovation on the basis of Schwöbel's criteria. We have seen that both from the perspective of systematic theology and from the perspective of historical theology and from the perspective of practical theology, reasons can be adduced for a positive as well as for a negative appraisal. In part this was the result of the fact that Den Heyer's proposal could be interpreted in either of two ways. But even when we weighed both interpretations separately, the results were equally inconclusive. What shall we conclude from this fact? Perhaps it shows that Schwöbel's criteriology is not refined enough to result in a decision, at least not in this particular case. Or perhaps it shows that Den Heyer's case should be improved and amended in a number of respects in order to become a candidate for replacing the classical doctrine. Or perhaps – and that would be the most striking conclusion – it shows that the issue of change and continuity in religious traditions just is not the kind of thing which can be adequately managed by theologians, because theologians cannot exclude their own subjective spirituality and theological preferences from playing a decisive role in their evaluation of concrete proposals.

Let us try to explore these things further by taking into account the considerations on change in practice which we put forward above. First of all, is the doctrine of atonement an 'element' on its own, or is it related to other important parts of the doctrinal heritage of the Christian tradition? Clearly the latter is the case. How we shape the doctrine of atonement not only depends upon our moral sensibilities, but also upon our image of God, our anthropology, and upon our estimation of the seriousness of sin. Usually it is not the case that when people change their doctrine of atonement, *as a result* their thinking about God, human nature and sin is altered. It is rather the other way round: the pressures which are exerted on the classical doctrine of atonement betray that below the surface our thinking about God, human nature and sin has changed. Therefore, if we accept Den Heyer's proposal to change the doctrine of atonement, this has much more far-reaching consequences for the future of the Christian tradition than may be thought at first sight.

Secondly, is the doctrine of atonement relatively important or unimportant in the Christian tradition? Again, the answer is not difficult. To many Christian believers of all ages the belief that Jesus has reconciled us with God by his sacrificial suffering and death belongs to the very heart of their spirituality. As to the

Roman Catholic tradition, the fact that Christ's sacrifice is daily represented in the eucharist is indicative in this respect. But also in the protestant tradition the salvific significance of the Christ-event for our relationship to God is absolutely central; one only has to read the texts of the most popular hymns in order to check this. Songs like 'What a friend we have in Jesus' belong to the most well-known hymns all over the earth; they have an ecumenical potency and range which exceeds the appeal of many official institutions for the advancement of ecumenism. One may indeed wonder if, when this salvific significance of the Christ-event is denied, we are still continuing the same Christian tradition – or whether a *metabasis eis allo genos* has taken place.

Of course that depends in part, thirdly, upon what the proposed successor of the classical doctrine looks like. We have seen that this need not be a doctrine which squarely opposes or denies the classical doctrine. It may be that partial adaptations are being proposed, or a novel interpretation which highlights some interesting aspect that thus far was not spelled out explicitly, but that may be crucial in a new cultural context. Can Den Heyer's proposal be conceived in this way as a new interpretation or a partial adaptation of the old doctrine? At first sight this may seem so. Den Heyer does not argue that the church should dispense with the classical doctrine. He only pleads for tolerance and understanding towards those who don't see their own belief reflected in the formulations of the old creeds and doctrines concerning atonement. Upon further consideration, however, it is clear that he advocates a radical departure from the classical doctrine. His emphasis on the plurality of voices on atonement in the New Testament leads him to the rejection of the classical doctrine as a legitimate interpretation or expansion of the biblical texts. Rather, he sees no positive relation at all between the two, and he considers the classical doctrine to be irreparably wrongheaded.

In sum, if we evaluate Den Heyer's proposal from the perspective of our further considerations, the result is much more unambiguous. All three considerations point into the same direction: the proposed innovation involves a taking leave of many beliefs, including important ones, in a way which is as radical as to threaten the identity of the tradition. So we should reject it. The question is, however, whether we can manage this. One limitation of depicting theologians as the managers of change and continuity is in any case, that this metaphor obscures the extent to which theologians are *themselves* involved in processes of change. Usually they do not stand over against the proposals which come up in order to judge them from a safe distance. Nor do they create their own innovative proposals out of nothing. Rather, like other people, they *find themselves* believing or not believing or no longer believing particular things and doctrines. In this way, Den Heyer has found himself no longer believing the classical doctrine of atonement – and his theological work on atonement seems little more than an attempt to justify this situation.

Now why do people find themselves believing or not believing or no longer believing particular things? This is perhaps one of the most difficult questions of all. But it seems that the role of theology is a modest one in this respect. In any case, it is not an *independent* role. If people sometimes find themselves believing other things than before because their theologians say so, these theologians usually say so not because they are 'treating the tradition to its best advantage,' but because they themselves are influenced by a changing cultural and spiritual climate. Therefore, the question is whether verbs like 'to manage' and 'to decide upon' (viz. the change/identity issue) are not in the end too active to be of much use in illuminating the role of theology in religious traditions. Even if in a religious community theologians have the power and the authority to enforce changes in doctrinal beliefs and so to manage the tradition – like some theologians in the Roman Catholic Church – doctrinal development is hardly due to the innovative work of these theologians. For example, it was the religious life of monastic communities and not the decision of theologians which gave rise to the Mariology encapsulated in the term 'theotokos'; and it was the pressure of popular piety which, still in 1950, led to the dogma of the assumption of Mary.¹¹ It is we who are subject to changes in belief patterns, rather than these changes being subject to our will or decision.¹²

If this is how it is, what implications follow for our evaluation of the phenomenon of change in the Christian tradition as such? At this point, I part company with Schwöbel. Schwöbel tries to give a theological underpinning of the necessity of ongoing change in the Christian tradition, by arguing that this change is entailed by the very character of the Christian religion as a missionary religion. Expanding on some insights of Carl Heinz Ratschow, Schwöbel says: 'The rationality of Christian theology is therefore [i.e. because of the missionary character of Christianity, GvdB] always a form of contextual rationality. If Christian theology is to remain true to the identity of Christian faith as rooted in the Christ-event it must change when it moves from one cultural context with its particular forms of rationality to another' (175; but throughout the paper, there is much emphasis on this point). Certainly this is an attractive view. For on this view changes in our patterns of belief are no longer the kind of things which we should accept grudgingly because they imply a confession that what we believed in the past was wrong. Nor should we opt for changing the tradition only if all attempts to maintain the tradition have been found wanting. Rather, we should welcome such changes as new possibilities for

11 Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven/London 1969), 95-119; Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford 1990), 11.

12 Cf. Vincent Brümmer's observation in an analysis of the nature of religious belief, in his *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry* (London 1981), 157: 'Becoming convinced is something that happens to us, not something we can decide to do.'

spreading the Christian message. Far from feeling guilty about our changed beliefs (or about our short-sightedness in the past), we should rejoice in the fact that precisely these changes show that we are good Christians!

However, this picture presupposes what is at best a very one-sided picture of the missionary character of Christianity. When Jesus says: 'Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples' (Matth. 28:19), the suggestion is not that the disciples should adapt their message to the particularities of all peoples, but rather that they should try to change these particularities in such a way that they become subordinate to the Gospel. And as to Paul, his becoming a Greek to the Greeks was not an exercise in changing his beliefs, but was meant to 'take every thought captive and make it obey Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5).¹³ Of course there is a two-way traffic here. In order to attain commensurability the Christian message must be translated in the specific conceptualities of different cultures. But it is important to see that in this process the Christian message has its specific forms of plausibility and rationality in itself, and that the best way of witnessing to it is to enact these forms of plausibility and rationality. It is a well-known fact that all *Vermittlungstheologie* from Schleiermacher onwards has perhaps made the Christian message less offensive to cultured man, but has hardly yielded any new disciples. Rather, the line of influence went the other way round, and the thought forms of many a theologian became more and more secularized. To extend the sports-metaphor that Schwöbel uses in this connection: away-matches are more easily and frequently lost than home-matches!

6 Intratextuality and the Inversion of the Hermeneutical Relation

George Lindbeck concludes his influential study on the nature of doctrine with some intriguing observations that can also be endorsed by those who (like the present writer) are not completely convinced by the cultural-linguistic theory of religion which he expounds in the bulk of the book. In the final chapter Lindbeck argues that if systematic theologians want to fulfil their tasks in a way which is faithful to their own tradition, they should use what he calls an 'intratextual' as opposed to an 'extratextual' method. He especially relates this terminology to the role of holy scriptures in theology, stipulating that the extratextual method locates religious meaning outside the scriptural text, whereas the intratextual method locates it inside the

13 See for an interpretation of the confrontation between Christianity and non-Christian philosophies from this perspective, J. Klapwijk e.a. (ed.), *Bringing into Captivity Every Thought* (Lanham 1991).

religion's basic text. Instead of the 'text' we can also read, for our purposes, the basic *message*. Both theological methods are aimed at continuing the religious tradition by interpreting the message and bringing it in relation to contemporary culture, but 'It is important to note the direction of interpretation.' The intratextual method does not want

... believers to find their stories in the Bible, but rather that they make the story of the Bible their story. The cross is not to be viewed as a figurative representation of suffering nor the messianic kingdom as a symbol for hope in the future; rather, suffering should be cruciform, and hopes for the future messianic. More generally stated, it is the religion instantiated in Scripture which defines being, truth, goodness and beauty ... Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.¹⁴

To me it seems crucially important to see the distinction which Lindbeck draws here. In contemporary theology, the hermeneutic task of theology is often without much reflection conceived of in the extratextual way: the direction is *from* the text (or the message) *towards* the world. It appears from Schwöbel's paper, that he is in line with this fairly common view. Following Lindbeck, however, I would advocate a reversal of this hermeneutical direction. The problem with the externally directed hermeneutics is that the conceptual categories of a specific culture or philosophy easily become the basic framework of interpretation. In this way, in the case of Gnosticism Hellenism became the interpreter rather than the interpreted – and the same happened in parts of mainstream Christianity (e.g. when, despite the credal formulations, Jesus became depicted as a semipagan demi-god). Seeking to christianize a foreign culture presupposes an integrally Christian framework into which the foreign categories are to be drawn (rather than the other way round).

Lindbeck's reminder is especially acute in a time and culture that rapidly alienates itself from its Christian heritage. For especially when a religion becomes a foreign text it is tempting to translate this text into currently popular categories rather than reading it in terms of its intrinsic sense. Churches, and perhaps especially theologians, fearing to marginalize themselves, tend to accommodate to the prevailing culture rather than to shape it from a distinctively Christian perspective. Instead, they should see to it that they become or remain intensively socialized into

14 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Towards a Post-Liberal Theology* (Philadelphia 1984), 118.

coherent religious languages and communal practices. For the primary way of transmitting the faith down through the centuries and of fulfilling the missionary task of the church was not to accommodate the Christian message to contemporary sensibilities or to redescribe it in new concepts, but to teach the alien language and practices of the faith to potential adherents, and of course to enact these language and practices both in one's own personal life as well as in the communal life. Still, only an intimate and vivid familiarity with the world of faith makes it possible to experience the whole of life in religious terms.¹⁵

From this perspective, the phenomenon of *changes* in the belief contents of the Christian tradition – the possible necessity of which I do not deny – should be assessed more critically than Schwöbel does. The inversion of the hermeneutical relation implies a priority of continuity in the Christian tradition over change. To quote Lindbeck one final time: 'Theology should ... resist the clamor of the religiously interested public for what is currently fashionable and immediately intelligible. It should instead prepare for a future when continuing dechristianization will make greater Christian authenticity communally possible.'¹⁶ Pointing as a theologian into this direction, it seems to me, is treating the tradition to its best advantage.

15 Cf. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 133.

16 Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 134.