Theodicy or cosmodicy: a false dilemma?

Abstract

The central question in this article is whether the transcendent and immanent symbols employed to deal with suffering mutually exclude each other. With that question in mind, an investigation was conducted, among slightly more than one hundred and fifty core members of the church, into the presence of theodicy and cosmodicy symbols, as well as into their internal coherence and causal connections. To this, the question was connected whether and to what degree traditional theodicy symbols are combined with a bourgeois social and political position, and modern theodicy symbols, such as those offered by political theology, with a bourgeois-critical position.

Introduction

One of the most important questions posed by the contemporary church and pastoral theology is whether Christianity still has a future. Religions are finite, history teaches us. They rise and fall again. The most important reason for the question regarding the survival of Christianity concerns the process of secularization in which the Western world at least now finds itself. Two main lines, which seem to supplement each other, are apparent in socio-religious research. According to the first, Christianity only exercises an ideological or rhetorical function. It reinforces, venerates and legitimizes 'the civil way of life' and the social status quo of the middle class. It contains an authentic religious power. According to the second, Christianity does indeed form an individual, independent factor, inasmuch as it hinders the modernization of Western society, and lends it a conservative outlook (cf. Felling et al., 1987). According to the first, the transcendent inspiration of Christianity dissipates and is replaced by pure immanence. According to the second, there is hardly any future for conservative Christianity (cf. Goddijn 1981).
Over against these two lines of socio-religious research can be set political theology. It subjects the trend toward bourgeois Christianity to critical analysis and tries by means of this critique to clarify the relevance of the transcendent character of Christianity. The transcendence of Christian belief exists in the promise, the hope, and the actual realization of the universality of God's redeeming power, especially for those who live in situations of suffering, oppression and alienation. Herein lies the religious root of solidarity with the suffering, the poor and the powerless. And with it, political theology attempts to rescue Christianity from the two dangers which threaten it: the loss of transcendence, and the loss of the prophetic power of criticism (cf. Moltmann 1964; Metz 1977; Schillebeeckx 1988).

In this article I would like to focus the question concerning the relation between transcendence and immanence on the theme of suffering. The question which I pose is: Which symbols do people use in order to discover for themselves the meaning of suffering? Are these symbols transcendent, or purely immanent in nature? Are they found in people's consciousness simultaneously, or are they mutually exclusive? This focus on the meaning of suffering can be accounted for by the central position that this theme has assumed in all of theology. Theologians such as Metz (1981), Peukert (1978), and Siebert (1985; 1989) point to theodicy, which traditionally relates to the religious significance of suffering, as the central problem of fundamental theology. In connection with the question formulated above, I am concentrating on the relationship between theodicy and cosmodicy. By theodicy I mean, in a general sense, the understanding of suffering from the transcendent perspective of belief in God. The term 'cosmodicy' here refers, in a general sense, to the understanding of suffering from an immanent perspective, which is included in the relationship between man and nature.

Yet another question, derived from political theology, must be added to this. Not only is the difference between the symbols of theodicy and cosmodicy important, but also the variation among theodicy symbols themselves. There are traditional theodicy symbols, but also tradition-critical theodicy symbols. The second group is distinguished from the first in that it expresses God's solidarity with the suffering and human solidarity with one another — the solidarity which arises from compassion, which is directed toward vicarious suffering, and which has its roots in religious solidarity with God. At least in the view of political theology these tradition-critical theodicy symbols break down the narrow confines of the bourgeois societal position. They form an important source of inspiration for the bourgeois-critical position. Thus, from the perspective of political theology, the question of this article should not only be directed toward the relationship between cosmodicy and theodicy symbols, but also within theodicy, toward the relationship between traditional and tradition-critical symbols.

For the empirical theological investigation on which I am reporting in this article, I am limiting myself to a specific group of core members of the church. If a mixture of transcendent and immanent symbols relating to suffering were to be