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THEOLOGY AND RHETORIC: REDEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *RES* AND *VERBA*

ABSTRACT

After discussing three models defining the relationship between rhetoric (linguistic form, *verba*) and theology (content, *res*) in scholarship's history (part I), a theoretical discussion attempts to further undergird the third model according to which *verba* produce *res* (part II). As a first step, the inseparable intertwinement of *res* and *verba* is shown by empirical studies. The linguistic form always carries unspoken semantic content. Altering this form changes the content, even if a phrase's logical meaning remains the same. As a farther-reaching second step, constructivist philosophy of language is used, holding that language creates reality. "Reality" is defined as constructed by the brain and language and differentiated from ontic reality. Four sources of evidence are identified that make such reality constructs plausible to groups. Part III discusses the theological concept of "new creation" in light of the second part's findings. Part IV shows a way to overcome postmodern indifference with regard to "truth."

In one of his dinner speeches, Martin Luther once teasingly commented on the writings of his friends, his opponents, and his own books: Philipp Melanchton has both, *res* and *verba*; Erasmus only *verba*; Luther only *res*; and Karlstadt, his adversary, neither nor (*Res et verba Philippus, verba sine re Erasmus, res sine verbis Lutherus, nec res nec verba Corolostadius*) (Luther 1914:460, No. 3619). The concept underlying this humorous remark is the classical dichotomy between *res* and *verba*, which Quintilian summed up as "Each speech comprises that which is denoted (*significantur*), and that which denotes (*significant*), that is, it comprises both content and

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words, *res* and *verba*" (*Inst*. 3.5.1; cf. 3.3.1). *Res* is dressed up in words. But, like with all dresses, a person can change their clothes or take them off and walk around naked, and still remain the same. Or not?

The German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once joked, "Mathematicians are like Frenchmen: whatever you say to them, they translate it into their own language, and quickly it means something entirely different."(Goethe 1984:662 [my translation]). Change the linguistic form, and the content will too. Oscar Wilde would have nodded in consent. For him, the artistic form was highly charged with content; he considered the form a metaphor for the human struggle against the disorder of nature and life. If one took it away from his work by altering it, the work would collapse. Similarly, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, contends that the unassuming form of his preaching during his first visit in Corinth was the only *aptum* – the only adequate form – for the proclamation of a dreadful cross. If he had replaced this rhetorical form, the very content would have suffered. In the meta-reflexion of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul is aware that the form itself conveys content.

If this is true, it is surprising how little attention scholars of Pauline theology have paid to the rhetorical analysis of the Pauline letters. Were they influenced by Luther's nonchalance? The monumental "Theologies" of Paul the Apostle by James Dunn (1998), Ferdinand Hahn (2002) and others do not consider this kind of analysis useful for their purposes, following Luther's lightheartedness. There are some exceptions though in the history of research that Johan S. Vos (2010:161-179) recently catalogued in a helpful typology. I modify Vos' typology by reducing it to a set of three basic models that define the relationship between rhetoric and theology.

1. THREE MODELS

1.1 First model

The traditional model is rooted in the classical division between content and form, between *res* and *verba,* as two more or less separate entities; the *verba* are just the external form of expression that Paul gave his theological thinking. Eduard Lohse (1996:108-115) and previously Johannes Weiss, for example, represented this type, stating that one should discern between rhetorical devices in a text and the "doctrine that is already fixed and pronounced."[1] This concept seems to imply that the form of a content

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1   Translation by Vos (2010:162) from Johannes Weiss (1897:4). In his conception of rhetoric, Weiss understands rhetoric primarily as *elocutio*, not considering

is interchangeable; if you alter the form, the content remains the same. Again, changing the clothes does not change the person.

1.2   Second model

Representatives of the second model also look for a coherent bedrock *beyond* the rhetoric of the text, but they admit that there is an intrinsic interweaving of rhetoric and theological argumentation – at least in some text portions. There, rhetoric and theology are intertwined, rubbing off on each other.

In his book, *Paulus: Der Apostel der Völker*, Jürgen Becker (1989:170-179, 288-294, 320-321) seems to assume that the relationship between theology and rhetoric is only relevant in polemical texts such as Galatians where, according to him, apologetic partiality prevents a dogmatically well-balanced treatment about faith and law and even leads to contradictions. Therefore, the exegete needs to discern between Paul's subject matter, his *Sachanliegen*, and his theological argumentations presented as polemical attacks.

Similarly, J. Christiaan Beker (1980; 1988:364-377) holds that there is a coherent and consistent core of Paul's theological message, and rhetoric expresses this core contingently. According to him, Paul's rhetoric "interweaves thought with praxis," intertwining "a convictional basis of *logos* with the rhetoric of *ethos* and *pathos*" (1988:370).[2] The contingent contexts of Paul's diverse letters – with multiple social issues and different rhetorical situations – lead to various rhetorical devices, which, according to Beker, could eclipse the "truth of the gospel" (1988:365). By insisting on a coherent convictional core – the "truth of the gospel" – Beker tries to prevent Paul's image from degenerating into the image of "a purely opportunistic theologian, who … adapts the gospel to whatever the … situation demands" (1988:367-68).

According to Lauri Thurén's dissertation, *Derhetorizing Paul*, the objective of Galatians, for example, is "not theoretical, to educate the addressees, but pragmatic: to persuade them to make a decision to follow Paul ... The explicit theology in Gal is therefore simplistic and polarized. Paul hardly records all his thoughts ... his presentation is one-sided". Thurén therefore pleads for derhetorizing the text and for reconstructing a "possible theology beyond the text" (Thurén 2000:92-93; cf. 17, 26, 28,

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invention and argumentation as additional aspects of classical rhetoric.

2   In this view, *logos* solely belongs to the "convictional basis." Vos (2010:164 n. 7), however, rightly objects that *logos* also is a rhetorical category, questioning the strict distinction between core and contingent expression.

181), which represents a coherent theoretical system of thought and can be found not only by comparing Paul's letters, but also by identifying "the persuasive devices in the text[s] and to filter out their effect on the ideas expressed" (28). Thurén thus differentiates between the purpose of *persuading*, which leads to biased and even sometimes contradictory texts, on the one hand, and the goal of *educating* an audience on the other, which results in theoretically "well-balanced, neutral descriptions of reality" (88; cf. 25). The first texts are rhetorical, the second allegedly not. According to Thurén, the theoretical theological system that Paul has in his mind is only "partly reflected in his texts" (17; cf. 13).

Two objections come to mind immediately:

(1) It seems audacious to claim that we can *re*construct the content of *Paul's* thought world as a theoretical system *beyond* the text, while the text is the one and only source material. At best, we can construct such a system without any guarantee, however, that it will be congruent with what Paul himself had in mind. In secular studies of literature, asking what the intentions of an author were has been an obsolete question for almost a century now.

(2) Second, Thurén's distinction between persuasive rhetorical texts – with one-sidedness and exaggerations – on the one hand and theoretical, neutral, and non-rhetorical ones on the other seems to be theoretically unsound. "Purely" theoretical and well-balanced theoretical texts also want to *persuade* an audience of their truth; even *they* are persuasive and challenge the addressees to make a decision, that is, to accept their content or to reject it as truth. This holds especially for theoretical *theological* texts. They can be highly theoretical, but still affect the readers and influence their thoughts, possibly even their actions. They are rhetorical, too. We will have to return to this thought later.

(3) A third objection concerns the coherence of Thurén's own thinking. At one point his deliberations become blurry when he states: "Yet Paul's theology is not a solid, tension-free theology, which is only expressed in different ways. Obviously the often overstated and exaggerated way of speech has its equivalent in his thinking … I would go so far as to suggest that theology is always rhetorical by nature. Theology … means that concepts must be simplified … in order to facilitate their understanding in both theory and communication" (Thurén 2000:181-182). Thurén suddenly seems to distinguish three levels instead of two: the "exaggerated way of speech," second a simplified "theology" "beyond the text," which is rhetorical and not devoid of inner tension,

and third, as shown above, a complex but coherent, "well-balanced" theoretical theology, which is not rhetorical.

For the Lutheran theologian Hans Hübner (1992:165-179; 1993:26-28 *et al*.), as a fourth representative of the second model, there is a "fundamental religious conviction" (*theologische Grundüberzeugung*) behind and beyond all rhetoric, which – inter alia – comprises the proclamation of the justification by faith alone. However, this basic conviction is unfolded in a dynamic, developing argumentation process, evolving from letter to letter, specifically from Galatians to Romans. In Romans, for example, Paul does away with the antinominian aspect of Galatians. Hübner, thus, diagnoses contradictory theologies in Paul's letters; the Pauline system of thought changes – except for its center, the proclamation of the justification solely by faith.

Paul shows rhetorical competence in his developing argumentation process.[3] Hübner, therefore, consistently uses rhetorical analysis when describing Paul's theology; his New Testament theology, in fact, is the only one to do so. Thus, for Hübner, theology is a process of developing convincing arguments in a specific rhetorical situation in which content of theological thought and contingent rhetoric are intertwined. Only the convictional core – the *proclamation* of the gospel of justification, for example – is not touched by rhetoric. It is faith-based and derives from something inaccessible to human argumentation and rhetoric. The *theology* of justification, however, is a rhetorically moulded argumentation process, which allows for modifications. One might wonder, however, whether or not the distinction between "proclamation" or *kerygma* on the one hand and "theology" on the other can be theoretically maintained. Is "proclamation" not rhetorical?

Finally, Paul W. Meyer (1997:140-160) tackles the coherence-contingency problem in Paul's thinking by summarizing some of the work of the SBL Pauline Theology Group. In his overview of the studies that he scrutinizes, he discovers that, for the authors of these works, a relatively coherent theological system has always been "the starting point … the repertoire … *out of which* Paul addresses … the particular crises he confronts" (148). Meyer himself, however, proposes looking at the *outcome* of Paul's argumentation. Pauline theology is a product of a historical process; it is contingent itself. Therefore, one line of Paul's theologizing can be logically *in*compatible with that of another. There is no "non-contingent bedrock of Pauline theological convictions;" every "conviction" in Paul's letters is shaped by historical context (156). Consequently, Meyer asserts that "no

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3   For Hübner (1992:168f.), Romans is "a rhetorical masterpiece of theological argumentation."

clear line can be drawn in Paul's letters between argument, rhetoric … and theology" (150), nor between proclamation and theology (153).

Having arrived at this relatively radical conclusion that diagnoses a completely rhetorical character of Paul's theology, Meyer nonetheless feels compelled to look for something beyond Paul's contingent theology. Meyer asserts that the foundational Christian conviction, the belief in Jesus' resurrection, was brought into existence and authorized by a "compelling datum" beyond all human rhetoric, that is, by something that God has done. God's act is the "bedrock" that lays the foundation for human "convictions" (Meyer 1997:156-157). Furthermore, God's Spirit is at work in the process of human persuasion (160).

It is apparent that these statements by Meyer represent a legitimate Christian belief, which most Christians, including the author of this article, share. But like any faith, Meyer's conviction is not a scholarly controllable statement. It is located on a meta-analytical level, and therefore not helpful in the academic setting. In the latter, we have to state that the belief in Jesus' resurrection is a conviction that Meyer tries to withhold from the influence of rhetoric: a non-rhetorical core beyond all of Paul's contingent and rhetorical theologizing.

The representatives of the second model have in common that they always look for some bedrock that is kept back from the influence of rhetoric; but *all* texts are rhetorical in one way or another. The advocates of the model look for an absolute *res* held back from contextual contingency of the *verba*. Johan Vos (2010:172) rightly labels this approach as Platonic, marked by binary oppositions such as reality/appearance, essential/peripheral, or things/words; the *verba,* rhetoric, "are the contingent representations of the *res*." Platonists hold that truth exists independently of human perceptions about it and of the variety of words in which these perceptions are expressed. This Platonic axiom underlies both the first *and* the second models.

1.3   Third model

The third model turns the relationship upside down. It holds that the *verba* construct the *res*. Clothes make the man – or the woman. According to Andrew T. Lincoln, in his study of Ephesians (Lincoln and Wedderburn 1993:76), the *verba* construct a symbolic universe, which serves the writer's pastoral purposes. Theology and rhetoric do not relate to each other like content and form. Rather, the theological content as a whole is part of the rhetorical means in attaining a practical goal, which Lincoln

(1993:91) defines as "strengthening the self-understanding" of the readers and promoting a "distinctive behavior."

Lincoln does not go into any theoretical deliberations. Nor does Johan Vos, who himself adheres to the third model. Vos (2010:172) labels the model "(neo-) sophistic" or "social-constructivist" without deeper theoretical underpinning.[4] Truth itself is contingent, Vos (2010:172) asserts, "created moment by moment in the circumstances" in which persons find themselves and with which they have to cope.[5]

When discussing several applications of the third model to exegetical material, Vos is adamant that Paul's "theological arguments are always a means to an end. Depending on his goal, he creates realities" (174). Examples: (1) Paul attributes four different functions to the law. According to Rom 1:18-3:21; 7:10-11, the law brings about death as the consequence of transgressing the law. According to Rom 5:13, because of Adam's trespass, sin and death were in the world before the law was introduced. The law only makes sure that sin is accounted; before the Sinai, sin was not accounted. According to 1 Cor. 15:56, the law triggers and provokes sinful behaviour. According to Philippians 3:2-11, there is a human righteousness coming from the law and a divine one coming through faith in Christ. The aim of all four different constructions is to "convince the readers that salvation is only possible through Christ. It seems as though the apostle has a bag of arguments and chooses whatever he needs to that end. He is *creating theological realities as rhetorical means* [of persuasion] *with a rhetorical aim*" (175, italics by me). (2) Hübner's "fundamental conviction" of the *justificatio impii* is itself a rhetorical means for the practical higher end of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full heirs to the promise of God (175, citing Krister Stendahl). (3) Paul's *theologia crucis* in 1 Corinthians 1-4 is a rhetorical strategy toward the practical goal of defending his authority, according to Vos (176). However, while this is true for 2 Corinthians, it is not for 1 Corinthians 1-4, where Paul's goal is to destruct the haughtiness of the apostolic parties, who are puffed up against each other by being cocky about the wisdom of their respective apostles. (Cf. Lampe 1990:117-131.) (4) Paul's different Christological conceptions are simply means toward

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4   Vos refers to several pages in G. A. Olson (2002:85-113, esp. 85-87, 94-96) where Olson discusses Stanley Fish. Fish, however, is an outspoken anti-theorist (Olson 2002:86). In other words, the lack of theoretical underpinning seems programmatic. Fish himself confesses: "I myself have not made elaborate arguments for a social constructionist view – though I have used such arguments ..." (Olson 2002:94).

5   R. I. Scott (1967:17); cf. T. Enos and S. C. Brown (1993:126 *et al.*).

the higher end of confirming the supremacy of Jesus as Lord (Vos 2010:176-177, following Wilfred Knox).

The ultimate goal of Paul's symbolic theological world, however, is non-theological, as Vos asserts, embracing an ideology-critical "rhetoric of power" by searching for systems of power in systems of thought (177). For him, the confession "Jesus is Lord of both the Jews and the Gentiles" is driven by the goal of expanding power, reflected in the symbol of a national deity conquering the world; Israel's God is supposed to dominate the world (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Rom. 1:5; 15:18; 2 Cor. 10:4-5). In my opinion, however, Vos falls short of proving that this represents a non-theological goal. Or does Paul want the social entity of the people of Israel to dominate the world? Hardly. The proclamation of universal sovereignty of Israel's God represents a "power struggle" within the pantheon of the Roman world, that is, within the realm of theological thought worlds. The next question would be which *social group* could profit from Paul's universalistic-monotheistic thought world. If not Israel, the church? Vos does not ask this question.

Similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1999: esp. 93, 177) holds that language creates and shapes symbolic worlds, constructing reality instead of reflecting it. Language, therefore, is performative, not descriptive, "articulated in specific situations" with certain "interests in mind" (93).

I go even further: Language is performative even without the speaker having particular "*interests* in mind." If Mrs. Obama – hypothecally speaking – baptizes an aircraft carrier in Norfolk in the name of "Sarah Palin," she uses performative language, saying "I baptize you in the name of …" when smashing a champagne bottle on the ship's hull. A journalist of the local radio station reporting the event uses descriptive words – according to J. L. Austin's language model. However, is the reporter's language merely descriptive? It is also performative in the sense that it shapes the minds of the radio listeners. They get the impression that the Obamas not only care about health care reform, but also about the military; that they are open to conciliatory bipartisanship because they agree to name the warship "Sarah Palin," etc. The reporter himself only wants to inform about the event, but his language may be performative even beyond his own interests. Informing always also implies forming and shaping – whether the speaker wants it or not. Language is never merely descriptive.

In the same way, theological texts – no matter how theoretical or abstract or purely educational they might be (see Thurén above) – are always *persuasive*, whether this is intended by the author or not, because they *always* challenge the reader to make a decision. "Can I,

as a reader, agree with this text or not?" This question hovers between the lines of all theological texts – actually all texts, even dry reports ("Do I believe this or not?"). Even doxologies carry this challenge, because the readers or listeners need to decide whether or not they can join in with this praise of God. Furthermore, often independently from or against authorial intent, theological texts as rhetorical, persuasive language events not only appeal to the readers' rational mind but inevitably also to their emotions, which either further or impede the persuasion. Neuroscience in recent years has shown that emotions are far more influential in our decision-making processes than we previously thought (cf., e.g., Gigerenzer 2008).

Schüssler Fiorenza, similarly to Vos, proceeds to expand the third model with a political spin. When meaning is constructed, she contends, interests of certain people are served and power dynamics are at work. Thus, one of the main tasks of Biblical theological and rhetorical studies is to detect *structures of domination and exclusion* encoded in both the historical texts *and* the discourses of modern Biblical scholars. Schüssler Fiorenza redefines the discipline of Biblical theology as a "critical theo-ethical rhetoric" (1999:27, 93, 176-179).

2. *VERBA* PRODUCE *RES*: CONSTRUCTIVISM

Without questioning Schüssler Fiorenza's legitimate agenda, this article, however, will take a different direction by dragging the discussion to a more fundamental theoretical level. Two steps need to be taken.

2.1 First step

The content of a linguistic message and its formulation, *res* and *verba*, are intertwined, inseparably depending on each other. The way you word phrases influences the content of your message. Even if the logical content of the phrase did not change once you altered the words, the content would change anyway, because the form always carries unspoken semantic content as well. An optimist at a party describing a glass of wine as half-full tacitly also conveys, "Oh, there is still some time to enjoy together;" the pessimist with his half-empty glass implies, "Oh, the glass will be empty soon; before long, I will be leaving" – and the economist says, "You have 50% more glass than you really need." A more serious example, researched by psychologists a few years ago, is the doctor telling the patient that he has a 90% chance of surviving an operation. Between the lines, this message conveys that an operation is the best option for the patient. In an experiment, patients informed in this way chose surgery more frequently

than patients who were told that there is a 10% chance of dying during the operation (Edwards et al. 2001:61-82). In another experiment, a full glass of water and an empty one were put on the table. The participants were asked to pour half of the water into the other glass and to place the half-*empty* glass at the edge of the table. Most decided to move the glass that had been full before. Then other participants were asked to move the half-*full* glass. Most chose the one that had been empty before (Sher & McKenzie 2006:467-494; McKenzie & Nelson 2003:596-602). Psycholgists dub the way sentences are worded "framing." The last experiment confirms again that the liguistic framing, that is, rhetoric, contains information between the lines. In this case, the dynamics of the situation are encoded in the framing. Even physicists, for example, Richard P. Feynman (1990:69f.), emphasize the importance of verbally formulating one and the same physical law in different ways. With this method, the researcher increases the chance of making new discoveries. Although mathematically identical, the framings are psychologically different, he insists.

What do empirical studies such as these mean for New Testament exegesis? A few examples might serve as illustrations. If you take away the parable framings from Jesus' teaching, important unspoken signals will be lost. By confronting his audiences with parables, Jesus asks them to figure out on their own what these stories mean. Thus, he grants them the mature status of interpreters and trusts them with finding the sense of his speech, making them co-creators of sense. This is different from plainly telling them with imperatives: "Listen, don't look down on Samaritans, because they can be as loving and considerate as our religious elite, sometimes even more so."[6]

In the first chapters of Acts, Luke puts an archaic Septuagint Bible language in the mouth of the apostle Peter. This patina conveys unspoken content: the first years of the church are portrayed as a distinctly past time of salvation history, deliberately set apart from the present time of Luke's church in the last quarter of the first century. In addition, the Septuagint patina conveys the impression of continuity with Israel's history.

The text of 1 Corinthians 3, dealing exclusively with Apollos and Paul, although Peter also is a "hero" of a Corinthian faction, implies as unspoken content that Paul, after the clash in Antioch, does not want another fight

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6   Furthermore, by leaving a literary *Leerstelle* (gap) for the readers to fill, the text becomes more convincing, as Quintilian asserts: the hearers accept as true what they have found out for themselves, taking pleasure in detecting a meaning on their own and applauding their own cleverness, whereas they might not accept a message if it were told to them directly (*Inst*. 9.2.78). Also this element would be lost if the form were abandoned.

with Peter, that he wishes to remain at peace with him. He therefore only relativises the authority of Apollos and Paul directly, thereby handling Peter with velvet gloves, that is, with a rhetorical *shema* that leaves his name unmentioned.[7] The form of the *shema* conveys content tacitly. If it were not delivered between the lines, the message, "Also Peter's authority is only relative, but I want to stay at peace with him," (1) would not fit into the flow of the context; (2) it would raise unnecessary questions by the Corinthians who did not necessarily know about the strife between Peter and Paul in Antioch ("What happened? Did they have a fight?"), and (3) it might contra-productively have scratched old scars, if not wounds. In 1 Corinthians 1-2, Paul's rhetorical *shema* similarly implies that he does not want to criticize the wisdom of Apollos directly – because then he would sink to the level of the Pauline faction and be part of the interparty strife.[8]

Furthermore, if Revelation clothes an economic-political protest against the dominating powers of its time in veiled images – the emperor, for example, is symbolized by an animal – then it conveys either that (1) someone is afraid of being persecuted (but also a coward) or, more importantly, (2) that only insiders can understand this protesting outcry ("who has ears, listen!"). Thus, a sort of conspiracy group of esoteric, "understanding" insiders was created by the text. The veiled form strengthened the cohesion of the Christian groups. This cohesion was important when getting ready for a major confrontation with the Roman authorities that the author – albeit incorrectly – saw as imminent. If we changed the veiled form into "direct" speech, this content between the lines would be lost.

In Isaiah 42:13-14, as a last example, Yahweh is compared to a "man of war" and a "woman in labour." Placing these rhetorical similes side by side neutralizes any gender specificity of God. God embraces both "male" and "female" aspects. Drop one of these two rhetorical expressions, and the content will have a different slant.

2.2   Second step

The second step takes us a little further by building on the third model discussed above: *verba* create reality (*res*). The present article tries to undergird this model with more intense theoretical discussion and afterwards applies the results to an example of Pauline theology, his concept

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7   For this *shema*, see further Lampe (1990:130).
8   See further Lampe (1990:130).

of καινὴ κτίσις, "new creation." Looking for a viable linguistic-philosophical undergirding of the third model, the road leads to constructivism. Why?[9]

The so-called "postmodern" intellectual situation of today is still characterized by the shock caused by the collapse of logical empiricism in the 1970s. What brought about the downfall of logical empiricism in the 1970s at the latest was its understanding of sense data statements as an allegedly *unchanging* foundation of the structures of knowledge, above which theoretical propositions are in flux – the latter come and go and are replaced with better ones. By contrast, sense data statements are purportedly independent from these theoretical propositions.[10] But this was a fundamental error, as Mary Hesse (1970:36-77), for example, showed once again in 1970.[11] There is no observational language independent from theory. Theory shapes perception; observation statements are not immune from theory.

Since the collapse of logical empiricism, the epistemological cards have been shuffled again. We had to discuss afresh not only whether and how we can arrive at an assured knowledge of reality, but also – on an even much more elementary level – what we mean when we say "reality." That which is called reality is neither located in the world outside alone, as naive realism would have it, nor is it purely mental, as for example George Berkeley (1685-1753) thought. The solution of the puzzle lies somewhere between the extreme poles of naive realism and ontological idealism. But where in between?

From the spectrum of the attempts to answer this question, this article focuses on constructivism, which, in interdisciplinary fashion, has been expressed in different forms since the 1980s. Building on the painful realization, brought about by the collapse of logical empricism, that there is no guarantee that our perception and knowledge accurately represent

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9   For the following, see further Lampe (2012: Chapter 2).

10   On the basis of the logic of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, it seemed possible to describe science as a system of logical relations between empirical foundations and theoretical superstructures, between particular cases and general laws. For logical empiricism, propositions that are not purely logical definitions ultimately always have to rely on sense data statements for their verification – sense data statements to which they have to stand in a correct logical relation. P. Churchland (1988: e.g., 271), offers a critical assessment of rational empiricism since Bertrand Russel (Russel 1956 [1924]:321-343) and Rudolf Carnap (1966).

11   Much earlier, arguing against Carnap, already O. Neurath (1932/33:204-214). Also Paul K. Feyerabend (1963:3-39; or 1981), for example, tore down the allegedly absolute barrier between theory and observation, between fact and interpretation.

the ontic reality, the principal constructivist thesis holds that humans manufacture their own reality. They construct it. Reality is a construct of the brain. Alongside the traditional philosophical-epistemological reasons, neurobiological grounds speak for this.[12] Constructivists thus differentiate between the external ontic reality, to which our cognition has no reliably guaranteed access, on the one hand and our brain-constructed reality on the other. However, if reality is a construct of the brain, then the relationship between *res* and *verba*, between "things" and "words," is no longer that of representation or description – in the sense that our *verba* describe the ontic reality existing beyond the words – but rather the *verba* of our brain create the *res*, language creates reality, i.e., brain-constructed reality, and this then is *res*.

Nonetheless, if reality is a construct of the brain, this does not mean that constructivists are thinking of slipping into solipsism, according to which the world for human beings consists only of their imaginations – in the sense of "only I exist, and everything else is my fantasy." No, ontic reality exists independently from us and our consciousness. Parts of it can even be *experienced*, but they cannot be cognized in reliable ways. The ontic world is experienced to the extent that again and again it sets up barriers to our actions. These resistances are a decisive argument for the existence of the external ontic reality. Only, for the constructivists, this "world of objective obstacles, of ontic barriers among which we act ... [remains] … fundamentally inaccessible [for the human brain] and indescribable" (Von Glasersfeld 1985:19). Allegorically speaking, our epistemological situation is comparable to us moving around in an unknown dark attic, that is, in the ontic reality, bumping our knees and head. Gradually our brain makes up an image of this room although our only sensual perception is the sense of touch. We can never be sure that our brain's image of the room really corresponds to what the room will look like when we turn on the light. Actually, there will be surprises when the light is switched on. Even if we gradually learn to move around in this room better with fewer bruises, this only means that our mental image of the room is *viable* to a certain degree, but the viability does not guarantee that the image of our brain is "objective" in the sense that it faithfully reflects the ontic reality of the room. Assuming this would be presumptuous, because our mental image of the unknown attic is influenced, for example, by our memory of other rooms that we experienced in the past and to which we draw *analogies* in order to attain a picture without seeing.

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12 For philosophical as well as neurobiological reasons, see further, e.g., Lampe (2012: Chapters 2-3); for neurobiology, see Roth (2001).

In the framework of such a theory, has the concept of objectivity finished its tour of duty? For constructivists, "objectivity" needs to be redefined. A constructed reality is "objective" only in the sense that it describes an inter-subjective, social reality shared by more than one person. Such knowledge is objective in the sense "that it proves to be useful…in inter-subjective, supra-individual, institutionalized contexts" (Stenger & Geißlinger 1991:250). Collectively useful knowledge, reinforced by communal and culturally specific institutions, appears to the individual person as a preset "objective" reality "outside" of one's own subjectivity.

How does inter-subjective reality come into being? How do several people come to an agreement about what is real and what is not? What factors play a role in the process of construction? What makes it certain to these people that a constructed reality is not arbitrary? What sources of evidence make it plausible? Answers to these questions have been attempted with the help of experimental sociology of knowledge.[13] To sum up the most important results, a first source of evidence is *empirical experience*, the *perception of the senses.* This empirical evidence is increased the more certain experiences are repeated and, in addition, spread to other subjects of experience. Repetition and dissemination played a role, for instance, in the sensory experience of the Easter visions, as can be apprehended from 1 Corinthians 15:5-8. First, Peter saw, then the twelve, then more than 500 followers – all together six visual experiences.[14] Their repetition and dissemination, for the earliest Christians, enhanced the plausibility of the proposition "God raised Jesus from the dead" (Rom. 4:24; 8:11; Gal. 1:1).

A second source of evidence is *cognitive construction*. During the production of reality, we associate various elements of knowledge with each other, connecting the dots. We manufacture connections, for example, causal connections. These are connections that our brain makes, but we never can be sure, as already David Hume noted, that two events following one another are necessarily bound together as cause and effect.[15] Nonetheless, these associations become evident to us primarily on the basis of two principles of construction: evidence presents itself

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13   See, e.g., the experimental study by Stenger and Geißlinger (1991).

14   The historicity of the ὤφθη ("appeared") is not to be doubted, no matter how one chooses to explain the coming about of these visions.

15   D. Hume (1972:63) wrote: "When we … consider the operation of causes, we are never able … to discover any … necessary connection, any quality, which binds the effect to the cause and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find that the one does actually … follow the other … there is not … anything which can suggest the idea of … necessary connection". See further Lampe (2012:9f.).

by means of *coincidence* and *congruence*. Our brain makes connections when two elements of knowledge coincide or when they are similar. When it rains, and at the same time I develop a headache, this coincidence may lead me to connect the two units causally. By contrast, evidence by *congruence* presents itself when similarity is discovered. A large number of propositions in history books rest on this principle. Historians cannot get by without conclusions based on analogy. "Since Roman senators usually had farming estates out in the country, also Senator Valerius must have had one," although we have no documentation of this. Historians undertake this kind of reasoning every day, thus constructing history.

The third source of evidence is *social confirmation*, which is turning oneself over to the judgment of others, above all to experts. Very few among us have been in space and seen the earth as a sphere in the universe; we have relied on experts who had told us that the earth is round long before photography was invented.

A fourth source of evidence is *feelings*. Expectations directed toward the future, retrospective interpretations, or statements about the present world evoke emotions. If they are of a positive sort, plausibility is more likely to present itself. Neuroscience has shown that emotions are far more influential in our decision-making processes than previously thought in our modern rationalistic culture.[16] In antiquity, the message that God acted on a cross and brought about salvation at such a despicable place evoked disgust. Such a doctrine was therefore implausible for many people and did not become an element of *their* construction of reality (1 Cor. 1:18ff.). By contrast, the Christian message in the synagogues that Gentile God-fearers, who liked the idea of monotheism but did not want to fulfil the entire Torah, should no longer be second class believers but completely valid members of the community without the price of circumcision evoked positive emotions, thereby facilitating Christian mission to pagan sympathizers on the fringes of the synagogues. The role of emotions in the construction of reality is not to be underestimated.

3. *VERBA* GENERATE *RES*: THE EXAMPLE OF THE "NEW CREATION"

In a next step, an example of the process of constructing reality in early Christianity will be investigated with the help of the four categories made available.[17] In this way, writing a history of theology also takes into account

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16   See the discussion above at the end of Section I.
17   For this as well as other examples, see in more detail Lampe (2012: Chapter 7).

- the empirical experiences,

- the social networks (evidence through "social confirmation"), and

- the emotional states

of human subjects who constructed reality, thus also that which often is designated as the "situation" of theologizing subjects. Instead of being reduced to a mere analysis of cognitive construction, written only as a "history of ideas" or "traditions," a constructivist history of theology is multidimensional.

The concept of a "new creation" ($καινὴ\ κτίσις$) posited that, in baptism, Christians are created anew. "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15; Rom. 6:4). How "realistically" is this language to be understood? What is the ontological character of the new creation that – so early Christians claimed – takes place in the personality of the baptized? According to Peter Stuhlmacher (1967:1-35), who takes an emic perspective, the Creator calls the baptism candidates and with this creative word "really" alters their pre-baptismal existences into "new creations" during the sacrament. Pre-Pauline and Pauline Christianity understood baptism as entering a process of "actual" transformation of the human person. From an etic perspective, was this an "illusion"? Not at all. On the one hand, from a constructivist perspective, the early Christians' *words* – "we are a new creation" – *constructed* the reality that in becoming a Christian, a radical alteration of personality begins. The *verba* constructed this *res*. On the other hand, for a constructivist, the question about whether or not this constructed anthropological model corresponded to the *ontic* reality can *in principle* never be answered – because constructivists do not see any epistemological basis for humans to make confident statements about the ontic reality. Exegetes should therefore no longer chase after such answers. They are void, because *res* is defined as constructed and intersubjectively shared reality, not as ontic reality. Rather, for construtivists, a more pressing question is, what *sources of evidence* did this early Christian image of the self feed on, and what consequences for behaviour did it set free? What allowed this anthropological model to appear *plausible* to early Christian constructors, so that it became valid and effective in early Christian communities?

Evidence through cognitive construction: The early Christians' cognitive construction started at the point where similarity was discovered between the baptismal ritual of being immersed and surfacing from the water on the one hand and the death and resurrection of Christ on the other. Connecting the two events created a new meaning – in the sense that both events were

considered to be *simultaneous* during the sacrament. The death-and-resurrection destiny of Christ was conceived of as being made present in baptism. Thus, it was concluded that, in their immersion and surfacing, the candidates for baptism *participated* in Christ's destiny: In baptism, they died and were buried with him in order to rise with him into a new existence (Romans 6). Understood as such, the sacrament of baptism represented a cognitive construction that had solidified into a ritual, dramatized time and again in ritual praxis.

Evidence through experience: Empirical knowledge: A cognitive construction congealed into physical ritual opens up space for experience. During the submersion of the body in water, early Christians experienced *physically* that they were symbolically dying with Christ and were "buried with him" (Rom. 6:4; cf. Gal. 2:19b; Rom 7:4), baptized into his death (Rom. 6:3). In emerging again, early Christian enthusiasts experienced rising with Christ.[18] Paul himself modified this enthusiastic interpretation to the effect that in baptism Christians are gifted with a new life qualified *by new behaviour* (Rom. 6:4), with their eschatological resurrection remaining in the future (6:9).

Furthermore, in being immersed and emerging, those being baptized drank of one Spirit (1 Cor. 10:4; 12:13; cf. 6:17), which was considered identical with the risen Kyrios (2 Cor. 3:17); the Christians internalized Christ in this way. "It is not longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). When they came out of the water, they put on a new garment, being "clothed with Christ" (Gal. 3:27; cf. Rom 13:14). Sensual experience undergirded these theological constructions. The impressive initiation ritual produced evidence by experience.

In addition, subsequent charismatic experiences, above all speaking in tongues and prophecy, were perceived as the effects of being filled with the Spirit. These experiences, repeated time and again in institutionalized weekly meetings and rituals (1 Cor. 12-14), helped the early Christian self-image as a new creation to appear plausible.

Evidence through social confirmation: Alongside the evidence-producing reiterations of experiences in weekly meetings, there also was the broad dissemination of such experiences, because *each* Christian went through the ritual of baptism. In addition, the probability of being affected by the charismatic phenomena was high because, in the dynamic gatherings of these early Christians, there was little control of the pneumatic events. Their meetings could become chaotic, as can be

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18   A future resurrection therefore appeared to be superfluous to them (1 Cor. 15:12; 4:8).

inferred from 1 Corinthians 12; 14. Potentially, the dynamics could carry each person away. The Spirit "blows where it will" (John 3:8).

Thus, *all* of those who were baptized were more or less exposed to the events depicted, which allowed them to experience their newly created existence. Furthermore, because the empirical knowledge was shared by *all* of them, they mutually could confirm their newly created existence. Social confirmation was produced.

Evidence through positive emotions: Strong emotions triggered by the rituals provided evidence. The sacramental rituals and congregational meetings presented emotionally appealing celebrations of intimate fellowship: both with Christ and with other people who were devoted to one another. In the small groups of early Christian house churches, baptism meant initiation into a fellowship of people who, as a rule, were devoted to one another in a familial manner.

Furthermore, the Christian's fellowship with Christ implied an emotionally charged *self-identification* with the dying and rising Christ during baptism,[19] which enforced the perception of being created anew. Why? Seen from a psychological perspective, processes of identification with another person indeed bring about partial changes in the psyche: at least *emotions, motivations,* and *behaviour* are restructured, psychologists assert.[20] These changes heightened the self-perception of being created anew. From a psychological view, thus, the early Christian assertion of entering a new existence represents an ontological statement; something in the personality is "actually" altered. At this point, an early Christian reality and a psychologically formulated reality are nicely compatible. But both realities are constructed, because from the perspective of the constructivist meta-level, such affirmations are in principle impossible as statements about the ontic reality, no matter whether they are positioned in a psychological or a theological context. Each supposedly ontological proposition merely presents a building stone in a construct of reality. But there, within the constructed building of reality, the self-image of being created anew *"is"* then something real that effectively generates results in the Christians' behaviour (Rom 6:4).

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19 Rom 6:3f. Moreover, not only in baptism but also in the Christian's subsequent existence, Paul perceived himself as being crucified *with* Christ, "carrying around in our body the death of Jesus" (2 Cor. 4:10; see further, e.g., Phil. 3:10; Gal. 2:19b; 6:17; Rom. 8:17b; 2 Cor. 4:7-12,16-17; 11:23b-33; 1 Cor. 4:9-13).

20 See Lampe (1995:937-941), with recourse to psychoanalytical literature. In Rom. 6:4b, Paul detects changes in behaviour when speaking of the process of identification in 6:3-4.

Constructivism does not say that, in ontic reality, baptism does *not* initiate a change of personality. It only contends that we cannot make valid statements about ontic reality. The same holds for the existence of God, for instance. The constructivist does not assert that there is no God out there in the ontic reality. Neither this nor the opposite statement about the ontic reality is possible from a constructivist view. But this also means that, on the ontological level, a constructed reality in which God plays a role is in no way inferior to another constructed reality in which God does not occur. None of the constructing individuals has the right to look down arrogantly on another, as if their own knowledge allegedly were *ontologically of higher value*. Seen from an ontological point of view, all constructing subjects sit in the same boat*;* no one has a head start with his or her knowledge over another. Consequently, for representatives of the Christian tradition, the situation for discussion has improved in the intellectual scenario. Constructivism provides – inadvertently – apologetic services for theology. The situation for discussion has improved because a theocentric construct of reality enters with equal rights on the same level as other constructs. If the constructivist approach makes one thing possible for theology, it is this: that theology – as an advocate of present day Christian tradition, that is, of past constructs of reality to which we stand in continuity in our culture – remains capable of being communicated in a secularized intellectual environment.

4. CONCLUSION: COMPETITION

In constructivism, the question of truth is asked differently from what is conventional. One no longer asks about the connection of a verbal statement to ontic reality, because nothing certain can be said about this connection. Reality (*res*) is a construct of the brain, and such a construct stands as "true" when important sources of evidence flow convincingly.

Is it possible to leave behind the post-modern situation of subjective preferences in which there is only fragmentation, that is, disparity, the positioning of equally valid constructs side by side? Where everything is equally valid, indifference arises – and arbitrary preferences come up, which the author of this article is unwilling to accept as the ultimate result and therefore calls for a fair contest among those who are equally valid in regard to the ontological quality of their propositions and constructs – a competition between an atheist and a theocentric construct of reality, for example. In such a competition, the contenders have to let the four sources of evidence flow more abundantly than the others.

The ontological equality of constructs not only brings down a possibly haughty atheist from a world view of supposedly ontologically higher value, requiring humility, but it also demands humility of a representative of the Christian design of reality – exactly because all competing designs of reality are equally positioned in regard to ontological quality. Our thinking will only be able to come along unassumingly, not in the magnificent vestments of claims to absoluteness. Christians have to put on work clothes and make an effort to supply the better reasons in the postmodern competition of constructed world views. That is, Christians have to let the sources of evidence flow into the world more abundantly than others. This is their challenge.

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