

# On Finding Our Place: Christian Ethics in God's reality<sup>1</sup>

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Erwiderung auf *Singing the Ethos of God* hebt auf die Annahmen ab, die dem Buch als Ganzem unterliegen. Sie beginnt mit der Beobachtung, dass die Art des Kommentars, den Brock vorschlägt und modellhaft vorführt, mehr jüdischem Midrasch als traditionellem christlichem Kommentar ähnelt. Wie beim Midrasch ist das Ziel nicht eine endgültige Analyse oder Erklärung, sondern ein wachsendes Bewusstsein dafür, was einen angemessenen Kommentar zu einem biblischen Text konstituiert und was außerhalb der Grammatik steht, die er in seinen Lesern hervorruft.

Der Artikel untersucht danach, in welchem Sinne Brocks Projekt ein realistisches ist und kommt zu einem positiven Schluss, der auf Brocks Ansicht beruht, dass die göttliche Heilsordnung das passende Umfeld für menschliches Leben ist. Diese Beobachtung erklärt, dass der Buchtitel – insbesondere die Sprache vom „Ethos Gottes“ – als Benennung derjenigen Praxis interpretiert wird, die mit dem wachsenden Bewusstsein dafür assoziiert wird, dass man sich innerhalb des Lebensraumes der Werke Gottes bewegt. Dieses *aethos* ist die einzige Sphäre, in der man sich wahres Leben aneignen kann. Singen ist dann eine bestimmte Praxis einer Ethik nach dem *aethos* Gottes. Durch den begriff *aethos* positioniert, wird der Begriff „Ethik“ als diejenige Praxis definiert, die die Bedeutung des Lebens innerhalb dieses Kontextes explizit macht. Die Disziplin einer christlichen Ethik verweist auf die Verortung dieses Raumes und versucht anzudeuten, was es bedeuten könnte, sich im Einklang mit ihm

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article met en évidence certains présupposés qui sous-tendent l'ouvrage de Brock dans son ensemble. L'auteur note d'abord que le genre du commentaire proposé par Brock se rapproche davantage du midrash juif que du commentaire chrétien traditionnel. Son but n'est en effet pas l'analyse et l'explication du sens, mais une meilleure appréhension de ce qui constitue un commentaire approprié d'un texte biblique et de ce qui se situe en dehors de la grammaire à laquelle le texte invite ses lecteurs.

zu bewegen. Der Titel artikuliert daher eine Umkehrung der üblichen Weisen, über „den Gebrauch der Schrift in der Ethik“ oder „den Platz der Schrift in der Ethik“ zu sprechen, eine umgedrehte Formulierung, die genau auf das hinweist, was „Ethos“ bedeutet. Nach der Verortung von „Ethik“ innerhalb der „Schrift“ zu fragen heißt, die übliche Annahme umzudrehen, dass der angemessene Ort der Schrift innerhalb unserer ethischen Praktiken ist. Christliche Ethik wird neu verortet in der Ausrichtung auf die Frage, wie man mit Gott lebt, was wiederum ein Reflex des Bekenntnisses ist, dass Gott mit den Menschen leben will. Innerhalb dieser Darstellung wird die Schrift im Sinne des Konzeptes der Tora verstanden, der „zweiten Schöpfung“, in der zu leben und zu atmen die Menschen berufen sind. Auch dem Glauben wird eine zentrale Rolle eingeräumt, und er wird als Vertrauen in Gottes Wort und Verheißungen definiert, die daher ein *verbum externum* bleiben müssen, ein Objekt für das Vertrauen und die Hoffnung, das sich der Gläubige niemals als eigenen Besitz einverleiben kann.

Eine abschließende Diskussion betont, dass die zentrale Stellung der Anbetung und Doxologie im Buch *Singing* eine Form von politischer Koexistenz und Interaktion von Menschen benennt, die von Gottes Werk angestoßen wird. Weil der theologische Ort von Gebet und Lob der Ort der betenden Gemeinschaft vor Gott ist, wird das Zusammensein durch eine facettenreiche Praxis erzeugt, die als erlösender Prozess beschrieben werden kann, ein eschatologisch offener und daher dynamischer Zustand des Wandels mit Gott. Eine Ethik der Doxologie ist daher von Anfang an sowohl politisch als auch dynamisch.

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L'auteur cherche à déterminer dans quelle mesure le projet de Brock est réaliste et il conclut par l'affirmative, en s'appuyant sur l'idée selon laquelle l'économie divine est l'environnement approprié pour la vie humaine. Ainsi, la référence à l'ethos de Dieu dans le titre du livre est comprise comme se référant à la pratique qui découle d'une conscience grandissante de se mouvoir dans le monde où Dieu agit. C'est là le seul lieu où l'on peut recevoir la vie véritable. Le chant est la pratique particulière d'une éthique conforme à l'ethos de Dieu. Le terme d'éthique est ici défini comme la pratique de rendre explicite ce que vivre dans ce contexte signifie. L'éthique

chrétienne doit indiquer où se trouve ce lieu et ce que signifie se mouvoir selon ce lieu. Il ne s'agit donc plus de parler du rôle de l'Écriture dans l'éthique, mais de celui de l'éthique dans l'Écriture. L'éthique chrétienne est ainsi réorientée vers la question de savoir comment vivre avec Dieu, ce qui découle de la confession de la volonté de Dieu de vivre avec les humains. L'Écriture est alors comprise en terme de Torah et de seconde création au sein de laquelle les humains sont invités à vivre et à respirer. La foi joue là un rôle central : elle se définit comme la confiance en la parole et la promesse de Dieu qui doit demeurer une parole extérieure à l'homme, objet de foi

et d'espérance qui ne peut jamais devenir la possession du croyant.

L'auteur conclut en soulignant que le caractère central du culte et de la doxologie dans le livre conduit à une forme de coexistence politique humaine et à une interaction suscitée par l'œuvre divine. Puisque le lieu de la prière et de la louange se situe devant Dieu et au sein de la communauté de prière, une unité se crée par la pratique variée qui peut se décrire comme le processus rédempteur, eschatologiquement ouvert et donc dynamique, qu'est la marche avec Dieu.

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### SUMMARY

This response to *Singing the Ethos of God* draws out some of the assumptions that underlie the book as a whole. It begins by noting that the form of commentary Brock proposes and models functions more like Jewish midrash than traditional Christian commentary. Like midrash, the aim is not final analysis or explanation, but a growing awareness of what constitutes an appropriate comment on a biblical text, and what stands outside the grammar it calls forth from its readers.

The paper then examines the sense in which Brock's project is realist, concluding in the affirmative, based on Brock's affirmation that the proper environment of human life is the divine economy. This observation explicates that the book's title, specifically the language of the 'ethos of God', is interpreted as naming the praxis associated with becoming more explicitly aware of moving within the habitat of God's works. This *aethos* is the only sphere in which true life is appropriated. Singing then is the particular praxis of an ethics according to the *aethos* of God. As situated by the term *aethos*, the term 'ethics' is defined as the praxis of making what it means to live within that context explicit. The discipline of Christian ethics indicates the location of this place and space, and attempts to indicate what it might mean to move according to it. The title thus articulates an inversion of

the usual ways of talking about 'the use of Scripture in ethics' or 'the place of Scripture in ethics', an inverse formulation that points exactly to what 'ethos' means. To ask about the location of 'ethics' within 'Scripture' is to invert the common assumption that the proper location for Scripture is within our ethical practices. Christian ethics is resituated as directed to the question of how to live with God, a reflex of the confession that God wants to live with humans. Within this account, Scripture is understood in terms of the concept of torah, the 'second creation' in which human beings are called to live and breathe. Faith is also granted a central role, defined as trust in God's Word and promise which must therefore remain a *verbum externum*, an object of trust and hope that can never be incorporated as a possession of the believer.

A concluding discussion emphasises that the centrality of worship and doxology in *Singing* names a form of human political coexistence and interaction initiated by God's work. Because the theological location of prayer and praise is before God with the community of prayer, togetherness is created through a multifaceted practice that can be described as the redemptive process, an eschatologically open and thus dynamic state of walking with God. An ethic of doxology is therefore both political and dynamic from its inception.

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The following considerations deal with a book<sup>2</sup> with which my own work is very much connected. As a result, it is tempting not to press forward from it into new questions, but to assess the extent to which its details are more or less well done. To do so, however, would be contrary to the explicit programme of the book. One of the leading proposals of the book is that the task of ethics and theology is *explorative*. Its task is an ongoing exploration of the 'given' reality offered and opened to us by the Word of God. This Word must be tested, in order

to grasp how to live with this Word and how this Word can be articulated in our human words, and therefore also be in a written book. Exploration implies also a critical task, because as soon as new insights or perspectives are formulated they wipe out and rewrite existing texts. Both Brock's work and my own may be seen as variations of midrash,<sup>3</sup> in which interpretation shows something new or even contradictory to the text in question. When taken together, both interpretations, including the contradictions between them, give fresh meaning

to the original text. This does not imply that every issue that is raised is integrated in the end. On the contrary, the profile of the midrash is also generated by the decisions taken about what is understood to be legitimately part of the discourse and what adjudged to be beyond its logic or grammar. All this stands in stark, but not absolute distinction from the praxis of *commentary* that characterises our common tradition of Christian biblical exegesis. It is an exegesis that includes quite diverse operations, and does not move toward a final analysis or explanation, while daring to articulate the state of affairs that calls for the next urgent comment.

The title 'Singing the Ethos of God' immediately raises a question about the meaning of the phrase 'ethos of God'. The question is whether God has an ethos or God offers an Ethos – or both, or even something different. What could this phrase mean? Of course, 'ethos' is not a literal biblical term and an equivalent term is not easily found, although it is tempting to take 'law' (Torah<sup>4</sup>) for that purpose. My surprise turned into full agreement on reading the subtitle 'On the *Place* of Christian Ethics in Scripture'. This title articulates an inversion of the usual ways of talking about 'the use of Scripture in ethics' or 'the place of Scripture in ethics', an inverse formulation that points exactly to what 'ethos' means. To ask about the location of 'ethics' within 'Scripture' is to invert the common assumption that the proper location for Scripture is within our ethical practices.

### Ethos – the place and space of living

We can take the title, then, as articulating precisely what the term 'ethos' indicates. It designates that 'ethos' will be theologically defined. The Greek term 'ethos' has *two different meanings* (neither of which, by the way, are found in biblical texts, and there are only a few occurrences in some apocryphal scriptures). One term (*ethos*) stands for 'what is undoubtedly obligatory for everybody' and the other one (*aethos*) stands for 'the context associated with us, or to which we belong'.<sup>5</sup> The latter meaning suggests that *ethos* designates the 'context' within which people can live, the familiar and nurturing *place* of living, the *habitat* – not simply the context of customs, but the necessary environment in which people belong. Martin Heidegger has preserved the Greek grammar of the term, translating *ethos* as 'the place of dwelling', the place where people are at home.<sup>6</sup> This reflection about the term *ethos* should not be seen as a linguistic sophism, but

as a hint about the emphasis of Brock's descriptions and explorations of the biblical *ethos*. They are focused on this 'place' in which people and their (Christian) ethics truly belong. We, human beings, are called to live not anywhere, but there, in God's 'place', in God's *ethos*. Brock has characterised this *ethos* as 'the *tonality* of faith depicted in the psalms',<sup>7</sup> a usage of 'tonality' that is close to the term 'atmosphere', the air in which we can breathe and live.

As situated by the term *aethos* the term *ethics* means then the praxis of making what it means to live within that context explicit, so facilitating the praxis of becoming more explicit about moving within that habitat. Whatever we do in ethics has to be situated in this place and space, and it has to move according to it. This *aethos* is the only sphere in which true life is appropriated. Singing then is the particular praxis of an ethics according to the *aethos* of God.

Brock follows out this logic in complex variations and at different levels of reflection. In view of its differentiated explorations and given that it is already punctuated with clear summaries of its content, the book – and its stimulating title – may provoke several important questions: What is the 'ethos of God' about? What is the focus of this endeavour, what is its theological focus, and in what sense is it indicated by that title? Is its problematic focused on our human homelessness, an *existential* point, as it was for Martin Heidegger, and for Friedrich Nietzsche who put this point succinctly: 'Happy is he who yet – has a home!... Woe betide he who has no home!'<sup>8</sup> Is its focus this existential question about the human condition, or is it perhaps about what Charles Taylor's has suggested is the paradigmatic ethical question of the Platonic and Augustinian ethical tradition: 'What is my substantial moral identity and how will I inhabit that moral existence?'<sup>9</sup>

I take it that the title of Brock's book does indeed indicate the focus of the book, yet in a *different direction* and logic from this Platonic and Augustinian tradition. It does so by describing in general what ethics is about, and what has to be seen as the focus of ethics: Ethics is concerned with the question about *the place we, human beings, belong to*, what is our place to live, the habitat, the place where we find conditions for a 'human' life, which *constitute* the form of our life according to what we are promised to be, and according to what we are called to be, what God wants our human existence to be. But this is not a theological 'humanism'

because it points to God himself; it indicates the primacy of God's will. Ethics is about God's will, about what and who he wants to exist. Ethics is about God's creation, it is about God's reality and presence, and in this sense it is about God, about the ethos of God.<sup>10</sup> Ethics is about how to live with God, because God wants to live with us human beings. The end-point of these considerations is that Christian ethics finds its central praxis (as we see particularly in the last chapter of the book) in *doxology*: the praise of God in his identity. 'Let God be God' is the appropriate formula for that logic, particularly as understood in Luther's theology.<sup>11</sup>

This perspective induces an inversion of any theory of morality that suggests that moral theories are about the constitution of a 'moral' realm<sup>12</sup> be it the universal realm of an 'ethos' or the context of an 'aethos'. Ethics according to this (theological) inversion is about our living with God, his work on us and address to us, his story with us and with his creation as the external context in which we can find the conditions of living. In this sense we are talking about the 'place' of living, the external context of all human life.

Using the term 'context,' we are close to saying that this context is the 'Word' of God, the *verbum externum*. This place of living is the Word of God as it is present in Scripture. Where Christian 'ethics' then finds its context is the ethos (*aethos*) as it is depicted in Scripture. To do ethics then means to reflect, to talk and think according to that context, and to sing according to that context, in the same way that we 'live' in a certain language, an articulated talk, a 'grammar'. This term is not only a comparison or a metaphor, but refers to a language which is articulated ethos (*aethos*). This is the reality as it is present to us, in which God's will is realised. Brock shows the sense in which Luther is going beyond Wittgenstein and the communitarians in referring to praise and prayer as a specific form of talk within a language:

If God is a speaking God, then we are always in the midst of learning from him what our grammar is about. Language is not simply 'there', but we are learning what it means, and thus what it is, by listening in the form of prayer. Language is the place God has given so that he can use it to claim us. In prayer and praise we take up God's words to expose our language and lives to divine remaking. Thus prayer is the dialogical relationship with God in which the regeneration of human life originates and is sustained. Because

the theological location of prayer and praise is before God with the community of prayer, a togetherness is created through a multifaceted practice that we can describe (as Luther himself does not explicitly do) as the redemptive process. In Luther's final analysis, these verses' main function is to give access to an eschatologically open and thus dynamic state of walking with God. Luther calls this state of openness the 'art of forgetting the self'.<sup>13</sup>

This 'model' is not a further version of a moral theory reflecting the moral constitution of our Christian existence; rather, it is the contradiction of moral theories that aim to assure our human existence as 'good life'. The search for the 'good life' as it forms the human 'self' is the core of the Greek version of moral theories and their reception in modern times as displayed in Charles Taylor's definition of ethics.

### The word as context of living

We can and should pursue this thought more deeply by linking it with a theology of language lying behind the concept of the *verbum externum*. Brock encourages this further exploration with his reference to George Lindbeck's groundbreaking work.<sup>14</sup> But we must concentrate here on the meaning of 'ethics' within this context. 'The place of Christian ethics within Scripture' must – for the reasons we have indicated – be considered the formula for the basic logic of doing theological ethics that is being proposed, of practicing ethics *within* an *aethos*, attuned to the context of human life, and so shaping all our particular practices, thoughts, habits. This account is not concerned with specifying human existence in terms of a moral form, in whatever terms it is proposed, but is sharply focused on the will of God, to be fulfilled in its particular logic and richness, and which cannot be confined by a substantial morality or 'ethos' defined in human terms.

In terms of the technical theories of ethics that Brock draws on here, we are closest to an Aristotelian tradition insofar as this tradition asks after the 'good life' conceived in terms of the life of human beings lived in accordance with a commonly lived 'reality' constitutive of the human condition. This reality is not equivalent to a moral realm, but it is realised by political practices, practices of coexistence and interaction.

### **Ethos of consoling doxology (Luther)**

From here the link to biblical ethics is that the Scriptures are taken as the *presentation* (not 'representation') of that 'reality', which we can call our 'ethos' (*aethos*). The scripture appears to be the 'Torah', the spoken word addressed to its listeners as the Word of God. The Torah is, according to Psalm 19 and the tradition of its interpretation, the 'second creation', the 'reality' in which we human beings are called to live.

This concept is to be found within Scripture itself, as in Psalms 1, 19, 119 and elsewhere. Brock deals with Psalm 1 in the chapter on 'Luther's ethos of consoling doxology'. This chapter is particularly central for the whole project as it sets out Luther's account of the Psalms as *consoling* doxologies, that is, as the praxis of praise as presenting God's work, in which we human beings can trust. The English word 'trust' (German *Vertrauen*) is close to the German word *Trost*, i.e. 'consolation', 'comfort'. This is – as Brock shows – the core issue of Luther's reading of the Psalms as it is the core of his theology. The link to that meaning can be found in Psalm 23: 'He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake'. 'He restores' in Hebrew is literally 'He brings back'. In a similar way says Psalm 19:8: 'the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart' – literally 'the return of the soul' – to that place in which it can live. As it is the core of moral reflection, *consolation*, understood as God's own work, stands in contrast to the self-confidence, self-assurance and fulfilling of one's own life. In this sense 'consolation' is again a practice constitutive of that ethos. Ethics then is not concerned with the avoidance of the morally wrong (and leaving everything else open to free choice), nor is it about seeking 'the good', but is about exploring the *work* of God, which sustains and forms human lives, and *living with this work*. This is what it means that ethics is rooted in the praise of God's work. Ethics is not about our human moral identity, but about God's identity, God's *aethos*.

The discipline of Christian ethics is devoted to presenting this ethos. In this pursuit, Brock suggests, Luther goes beyond the formal (functional) description of language-practices by stressing the particular praxis of praising God and prayer. This is to characterise the specific 'location' of our God-talk: it is addressed to God and it is about God, praising God's work. This type of talk marks the very centre of the Christian ethos called the 'for-

getting of the self'. It is characterised by a proper forgetfulness of the question of our own moral existence as humans confess they are 'dwelling in another place, dwelling in God's work' – in God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

Singing about God's power is thus the proper creaturely response to the experience of God's salvation and thus the salvation itself, the earthly form of eternal life. This means that prayer begins with the acknowledgment that we are unprepared to pray. Faith must flee to Christ's prayer and allow Christ to pray through it as it clings to God, as he has given himself in the content of the church's prayers. We can and must prepare to pray by learning how to begin, but this beginning is not by way of method, but by way of this particular performative clinging. We learn the grammar of life with God by taking these poems on our lips before God; that is, we learn this language by using it.<sup>15</sup>

This describes also the meaning of 'faith' and its central role in Luther's theology. Faith, from this perspective, is trust in God's Word and promise. Faith is trust in that 'external Word' (*verbum externum*) which is the 'place' where God's creatures find their context and grounding of living – their *aethos*. With respect to ethical theory we can say that this trust in God's Word is the Christian way of being incorporated into an *aethos*, so again paralleling Aristotle's ethics, which is centrally concerned with the incorporation of individuals into the *polis*. This is to indicate the political meaning of *aethos*. God's Word is concerned with the realisation of God's will, what he wants to be for us *and* what he wants to be our living *with him*. The difference from Aristotle, however, is that incorporation into God's *aethos* means salvation and receiving a new form of life. Again Brock follows this logic very clearly throughout the book. Ethics is – according to this logic – about that dramatic and eschatological metamorphosis (Romans 12:2) in its encounter with this specific set of insights from the Greek tradition of ethical theory.

### **The ethos of God, our new form of life**

This again is what we find particularly articulated in the Psalms. Luther's central theological discovery happened concurrently with his exegesis of the Psalms (1519-1521). Because in the Psalms we find this praxis of forgetting the self, they serve as a particular context for our ethical (moral) exist-

ence. The ethical existence implied in this praxis not grounded in a 'self' nurtured by its (religious) 'sources',<sup>16</sup> but is the home where the 'soul' can stay, this soul which God wants to remain with him. The concern of Christian ethics is this fulfilment of God's will, this particular fulfilment of God's *aethos*. Through this fulfilment the soul will be brought back to this living with God, when it has lost its awareness of its proper context. This is the definition of salvation in biblical terms and in Luther's theology. It is a definition oriented to God's justice, that is, his loyalty to judging his creatures.

We see how this practiced *aethos* differs from theories of morality, at least from those that try to solidify a moral self in its 'given' form, and also from those which aim at the nurturing of the moral self (in the way that Charles Taylor has, drawing on Augustine). Ethics following the language of the Psalms is not concerned with the genesis and grounding of morality, which sets the contours and limits of life, but with the form of life as it is incorporated in that living with God and the explicit practices associated with it. This *form of life* replaces morality and its interest in its genesis. Morality cannot be replaced by any form of life but only by this living with God, because this form allows and provides that salutary forgetting of the self and the pursuit of fulfilment of one's own moral existence. Brian Brock draws clear attention to the question of the genesis of our moral existence – the question of 'transformation' into that existence.

Here we note the distinction between different logics indicated in Brock's analysis and descriptions: the difference between 'transformation' and discovering a 'form of life', which is external, which becomes 'our' form by being 'transfigured' (Romans 12:2). Whereas theories of morality are about the forming of our own moral existence or the fulfilment of our moral lives, what is being indicated here is a practiced *aethos* of trusting the works of God that have been provided for us to live in, so that God's *work* will be *fulfilled*, that his will reaches its end (*telos*).

### Ethos of worship – its pneumatological reality

Theological ethics then is about God's very own work, where God's creatures find their place and form of living and where they experience God's *sanctifying* work. Brock doggedly elaborates the implications of this claim, drawing it into critical

dialogue with other concepts. This is marked by his continual insistence on recalling the *pneumatological* context for ethics. This insistence indicates the inner core of his theological reflection of ethics, as long as we understand 'pneumatological' to relate to God's present work on us, human beings, that is, to relate to us as his creatures. In his critique of the 'liberal' presuppositions of the work of Birch and Rasmussen for example, what draws his comment is their lack of pneumatological explanation. The same deficit is detected in several other representatives of the contemporary Bible-and-ethics discussion.

This emphasis is a necessary theological framework indicating what 'context' or 'scriptural context' means. This basic context is God's work on us human beings, his work of liberation, justification and sanctification. This makes the *aethos* of God the place of *pathos*, the place of 'suffering divine things'.<sup>17</sup> It is only within this logic that scripture becomes the Word of God, with which God works on us. The quest here is not for a 'spirit' in us, which enables us to read and understand, but to know God's Spirit as we encounter it within the scriptural word. To talk about pneumatology in this way is to talk about God's present work as it is addressed to us human beings.

There are, Brock suggests, *practices* which correspond to this work: our listening, singing, praying and so on. This gives precise definition to the 'place' of our living: we live in this worship. Therefore worship is the place of that ethos, where we encounter God's Word, and vice versa. It is neither an ethos of communion nor an ethos of character nor an ethos of a common story nor an ethos of any 'reality' other than this reality of worship.

### God's work – and political worship

This worship is – given the meaning of ethos – a political worship.<sup>18</sup> Christian ethics is concerned with being brought back home to this worship. Ethics finds its place in Scripture and Scripture has its proper place only in that worship. This is not a question about what comes first, but a question about different paradigms. One is the paradigm of an ethos and *aethos*, which is per se political, because it stands for a living and acting together, for coexistence and interaction initiated by God's work. Here the *work* of God itself appears in its political meaning. God's work on us human beings is the paradigmatic political relation, because of the form of coexistence it includes within it: God's

forgiveness<sup>19</sup> (Psalm 130), God's judgment, God's fulfilling justice and God's Word, with which He rules human hearts. *Worship* – as Brock unfolds it in the last chapter – stands for the ethos of God. This is the paradigmatic place where human beings find their form of life. They find there also, not least, the form of their political existence in singing and praise.

The psalms are divine words given to facilitate our finding our place in the divine-human economy. The foreignness of Scripture is thus a marker of our alienation from the social existence it indicates. The divine gift is the realization that I am part of a 'communion', not an 'assembly': communion is not just 'assembled' but is an ongoing and often painful process of being ordered. In the communion of praise I am born in an action (singing) in which I seek to get into rhythm – to find my place in the harmony. Singing praise thus reveals the notes we are singing to the tune of other gods, whose liturgies create friction in the body of Christ. Such singing makes us the instruments of God.<sup>20</sup>

'The psalms are divine words given to facilitate our finding our place in the divine-human economy.' We may read this as the summary of the book. It is important that the logic of the whole endeavour is given with the *psalms* not as texts or pieces of a tradition etc., but because of their *liturgical* meaning and setting. They are configured from this place to open up into all of God's works, his economy, so that it becomes present in our world in that worship and by that worship. Ethics is about finding our place in that worship, the reality of that worship.

### Ethics of God's reality – a different paradigm

One might say that the crucial problem of ethics is about the question of reality as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has articulated it (in accord with Martin Luther).<sup>21</sup> Ethics has to do with reality as it appears in God's work. Reality is only there where God's will is fulfilled as it is – eschatologically – fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Brock always focuses God's work christologically<sup>22</sup> – and this is the very theological reason for reading the Psalms christologically, as in Psalm 8. In Psalm 8 – according to Martin Luther – God's reality appears within the political existence of the church:

The church is that community unified in faith

and hope because it is gathered around Scripture as God's word guiding them in the present. It is a community that lives only in verbalised praise.<sup>23</sup>

Here we might open up a whole round of new and highly critical dialogues with contemporary moral theories and ethics, which on the one hand try to determine what has to be considered the 'real' fundament of our human existence, or the realisation of our human condition (also in terms of a political realisation), and which on the other hand refer to an 'ethos' (or *aethos*) focused on our human existence and reflect therefore our 'homeless' human situation. In these accounts the 'moral self' appears in its naked character, its isolation and loneliness. From this perspective ethics is concerned with the grounding of our human way of life. However, neither the attempt to affirm the context of our living nor this focusing on our 'humanity', on our 'human nature' (which causes the question about its obsolete standing) and its (moral) fulfilment, neither that kind of 'realism' nor this 'humanism' (also in its political form), can escape that quest for grounding our existence which characterises the moral paradigm.

Theological ethics as we find it in Brock's highly theologically-reflective interpretations and descriptions follows a different paradigm. It is neither about the grounding reality of our human existence nor about its fulfilment, but is concerned with that 'other' reality, God's reality addressed to us, given to us, in order that we may live it, sing it and explore it. This ethics will prove its power in all spheres of our human life, as Brock sometimes indicates by reference to its concrete implications.<sup>24</sup> Worship is the place where the form of life in all spheres is to be found, the form of a political citizen, the form of economic life, and the form of living with the word of God. This 'external reality' as it is articulated in the Psalms is what is disclosed in Brock's book. It discloses it in its very manner of articulating and writing in accordance with that task of disclosure: singing the Psalms, and also by writing this book.

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### Notes

1 This is an edited version of a paper presented at the

- Annual Book Colloquium of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE), Tyndale House, Cambridge, 3-4 September 2008.
- 2 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
  - 3 See for the method of midrash, William G. Braude, 'Introduction', in William G. Braude (ed.), *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven [u.a.], 1959) xi-xxxvi, especially xv-xvii. Brian Brock refers to this edition of the midrash tehillim.
  - 4 See the discussion below.
  - 5 See for that meaning particularly Charles Taylor's interpretation of the Greek tradition: *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, 2002).
  - 6 Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus* (Brief an Jean Beaufret, Paris) (1946) = Martin Heidegger, *Letter on 'Humanism'* (1946), in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 239-276: 'Æthos means whereabouts, where one lives. The word designates the exposed sphere in which man lives.'
  - 7 Brock points most directly to this environment with the language of "external constitution", see *Singing* 66-67, 142-143, 300-301.
  - 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Poems. The Free Spirit* (German text: Kritische Studienausgabe 11, Fall 1884, 28[64]; English text online: <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/npoem.htm>).
  - 9 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.
  - 10 Here we could discuss the distinction between a 'theological ethics' and an 'ethical theology'; the latter, however, points to a transformation of all theology into ethics.
  - 11 Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God! An interpretation of the theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949).
  - 12 See Brock's discussion of Taylor in *Singing the Ethos of God*, 125-132.
  - 13 Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 177.
  - 14 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984).
  - 15 Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 178.
  - 16 See Brock's discussion of Taylor in *Singing the Ethos of God*, 125-132. His critique of Taylor's connection of his moral theory to the phenomenon of 'desire' is at 131.
  - 17 See e.g. the interpretation of Hannah's song in *Singing the Ethos of God*, 119-120. For further implications see Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things. Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
  - 18 For an intensive exploration, see Bernd Wannensch, *Political worship. Ethics for Christian Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
  - 19 *Singing the Ethos of God*, 291-293 (on Psalm 130).
  - 20 *Singing the Ethos of God*, 328-329.
  - 21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM, 1960).
  - 22 See index: Psalms 'christological and ecclesiological hermeneutics'; referring to Psalm 8 (197-210).
  - 23 *Singing the Ethos of God*, 202. Note the contrast being drawn with Augustine.
  - 24 See e.g. Brock's remarks on ecology (334) and political power (288).

## NEW FROM PATERNOSTER

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Timothy Bradshaw is Tutor in Christian Doctrine, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

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